



FROM MARGINS TO MAINSTREAM: ANANDA SHIKSHAYATAN'S EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR PRIMARY LEVEL EDUCATION

Paromita Roy¹  & Dr. Subhankar Ghosh¹ 

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details:

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Education, The University of Burdwan, Golapbag, Purba Bardhaman, West Bengal, India;

² Assistant Professor, Department of Education, The University of Burdwan, Golapbag, Purba Bardhaman, West Bengal, India.

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Subhankar Ghosh

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Abstract

“Education is the manifestation of perfection already in man” (Swami Vivekananda). Keeping the fact in view, our government endeavors are aimed to impart education to every individual. But the effort is not so successful to remove the phrase ‘first-generation learner’. In this paper, the researcher has highlighted a small initiative named ‘Ananda Sikhshayatan’, a primary level educational institution that is constantly striving to bring the marginalized children to the mainstream education. The researcher has put emphasis on the comprehensive strategies taken by this institution to address the socio-economic and academic problems of those learners. This model has already earned reputation in the Birbhum District, of West Bengal. The study findings may help to address socioeconomic and educational problems of the ‘first-generation learner’ who belong to marginalized community of society.

Keywords: Ananda Sikhshayatan, Primary Level Educational Institution, Comprehensive Strategies, Marginalized Community & First-Generation Learner

Introduction

Eliminating poverty along with related difficulties is one of the long-term benefits of schooling, thus rendering it to be a highly impactful driver of development. So, to ensure India's foremost position in the global assembly, lot of efforts have been taken by our government in the post-independence period, to achieve the target of ‘Education for all’. In the year 1993-1994, ‘District Primary Education Programme’ (DPEP) has taken the agenda for equalization of education from class I to V. Then ‘Sarba Siksha Abhiyan’ came in 2000-2001 when this equalization of education increased from class I to VIII. The ‘86th Amendment Act’, 2002 launched the ‘Article 21-A’ of the Indian Constitution which ensures “to provide free and compulsory education to all children in the age group between 6 to 14 years”, is a Fundamental Right. After that, for expanding access of schooling for all children, regardless of class, caste, social background, and financial situation in 2009, the Indian government enacted the ‘Right to Education Act 2009’.

When the Indian government passed this Act, it acknowledged that many children in Indian society were not able to pursue their educational goals because of several circumstances. And most of them belong to scheduled tribes (ST) and scheduled caste (SC) communities (Malkani, R., & Rose, R., 2018). Subsequently, to achieve the primary target of bringing each and every child under school education, the ‘no-detention policy’ (NDP) came under the ‘Right to Education Act 2009’, to abolish the pass-fail system from class I-VIII.

Then it is seen that the number of school enrolments were increased year on year basis. But SC and ST students still lag behind in terms of enrolment compared to general caste students. In 2021-22 while the total number of general caste students’ enrolment in school is approximately 6.75 crore, the SC & ST students enrolment numbers are 4.82 & 2.51 crore respectively (UDISE+ report, 2021-22). Nonetheless, it's been noted that pupils are not keeping up with their age-appropriate learning. In rural India, the children (between 6-14 years age group) enrolment rate is 98.4% in 2022 (ASER, 2022). But only 25% of Grade III students met "grade level" in arithmetic, and only 20% in reading. 38.5% of fifth-graders who can read texts at least at the Grade II level in rural India (ASER, 2022). Supportive home environment and parental guidance is one of the factors contributing to the pupils' age-specific learning (Government of India, 2021). But due to lack of these supports subsequently they are falling behind in age-specific education. Only 56% of Indian rural parents are aware of school-related procedures like registration and parent-teacher conferences (ASER, 2018). Therefore unfortunately, after 78 years of independence, the term ‘first-generation learner’ still exists

in our country. The majority of children who have left school are classified as first-generation learners (Dreze & Sen, 2003). Since they were unable to cope up with the system for not having support from home and involved in domestic responsibilities, which resulted in their feeling helpless and indifferent. So, additional educational support for the first-generation learners should be provided by India's education policy (Joshi, A., 2019) and the approach in teaching should be pleasurable in order to reintegrate them into the mainstream of learning. Not only on Government of India, but these responsibilities rests also on us, the citizens of India for extermination of societal illness from our country.

In this paper researcher has tried to portray a tribal village named '*Kalikapur*' situated under the '*Labpur block*' in '*Birbhum district*', of West Bengal where most of children are the first-generation learners and highlighted in such way, so that a primary level educational institution named '*Ananda Sikhshayatan*' is constantly providing quality education and make them eager for education through joyful learning in the lap of nature.

'*Ananda Sikhshayatan*', such a unique educational institution by following this model, the District Administration of Birbhum started 54 village education centers, named '*Anandapath*' on 2022 to enrich primary level of education for the marginalized children in the under developed areas of the 19 blocks of Birbhum district which brings prestigious '*SKOCH*' award on 2023 for Birbhum District Administration (The Statesman, 2023).

In order to break the cycle of social marginalization and educational deprivation, this case study examines how '*Ananda Sikhshayatan*' has enabled educational and social upliftment among tribal students who are known as first-generation learners through its unique pedagogy.

Backlog of '*Ananda Sikhshayatan*'

'*Ananda Sikhshayatan*' is located at '*Kalikapur*' village in Birbhum, West Bengal which is also known as the "land of red soil" and rich in the historical customs of the area. Since the majority of the tribal residents of '*Kalikapur*' village are first-generation students and the COVID-19 has a significant impact for mainstreaming those children in school education. Given these challenging circumstances, '*Ananda Sikhshayatan*' was founded in 2021 by a renowned drama troupe of Birbhum District named '*Birbhum Sanskriti Bahini*', to offer primary level education among children within a joyful and nurturing atmosphere for holistic development amidst the magnificence of nature.

It's important to emphasize that '*Ananda Sikhshayatan*' offers flexible activities to support the children for their primary education like government primary school.



Figure 1. '*Ananda Sikhshayatan*' with Unprecedented Beauty

Figure no. 1 shows that the '*Ananda Sikhshayatan*' is positioned within a nature-rich rural landscape, which supports a conducive environment for experiential and life-oriented learning.

Local community teachers have given their time and knowledge to accomplish the organization's educational objective and the financial help came from the '*Kzarvani Foundation*'. This cooperative endeavour demonstrates the organization's dedication to reinstate the tribal children into the main stream education via additional educational support that values and incorporates their cultural identities.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the process used in '*Ananda Sikhshayatan*' for identifying the actual levels of learning of these tribal children.
2. To study the educational strategies implemented in '*Ananda Sikhshayatan*' for instilling confidence among those children.
3. To explore the activities of '*Ananda Sikhshayatan*' for facilitating better economic sustenance and healthcare for family members of the tribal children.

Research Questions

1. How does '*Ananda Sikhshayatan*' identify the actual learning levels of the tribal children?

2. What are the educational strategies implemented in 'Ananda Sikhshyatan' for instilling confidence among those children?
3. How does 'Ananda Sikhshyatan' facilitate better economic sustenance and healthcare for family members of the tribal children?

Delimitations of the Study

Space: The research will mostly concentrate on the programs carried out by 'Ananda Sikhshayatan' in the village of 'Kalikapur', Birbhum, West Bengal a particular geographic location.

Time Frame: The study will be limited to a specific time frame, which may omit events from the past or future that have affected or influence the activities of 'Ananda Sikhshayatan'.

Organizational Focus: Hence 'Ananda Sikhshayatan' will be the primary case study for this research, it may overlook the challenges and contributions of other organizations or stakeholders working to improve the social and educational status of tribal children in the same region.

Methodology

Area of the Study: This institution is located at 'Kalikapur' village in 'Labpur' block under the Birbhum district, of West Bengal.

Design of the Study: Case study method was used by the researcher.

Participant: Stakeholders of 'Ananda Sikhshayatan' are included in this regard-

Students: A range of age groups (5-10 years) and academic abilities are represented by the tribal students who are enrolled in this institution.

Teachers: Instructors and field personnel who are directly engaged in the learning paradigm into practice.

Data Collection Procedures: The research was conducted based on first-hand primary data. Unstructured Interviews, Participant Observation, and Visual Methods are used by researcher to collect the data.

Method for Data Analysis: Thematic analysis is used to examine, evaluate and analysis the data.

Discussion

Objective 1: To study the process used in 'Ananda Sikhshayatan' for identifying the actual levels of learning of the tribal children.

RQ 1: How does 'Ananda Sikhshayatan' identify the actual levels of learning of tribal children?

'Ananda Sikhshayatan' was founded by 'Birbhum Sanskriti Bahini' on 1st August, 2021, with the goal of closing the learning gap of children (aged 5 to 10 years) from the most deprived tribal households at 'Kalikapur village'. This institution places a strong emphasis on primary level of education. With this aim in mind, they tried to establish a good rapport with the villager and conducted a baseline survey to know the actual level of learning of the children.

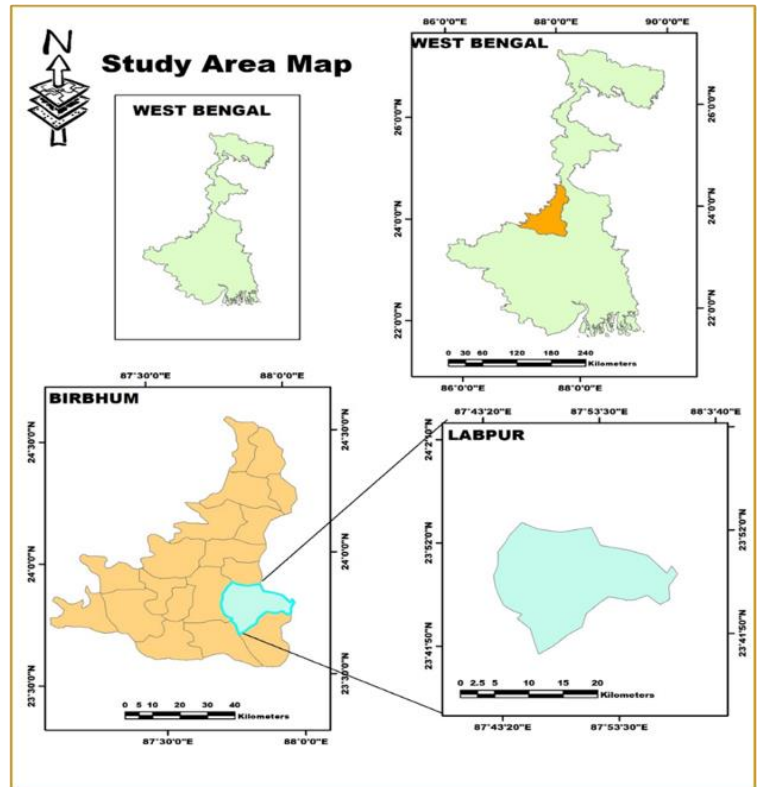


Figure 2. Location Map



Figure 3. Attempt to establish Contact with Villagers



Figure 4. During the Conduct of Baseline Survey

Figures 3 and 4 depict that the members of 'Ananda Sikhshayatan' first interact with the villagers to build trust by clearly explaining their objectives. After gaining their cooperation, they distribute forms to young children to carry out a baseline survey, which helps them understand the children's actual levels of learning.

At the very first stage, this baseline survey pointed out the size and population of the village communities within this area. In the 2nd phase this survey tried to recognize the actual levels of learning of tribal children based on these categorizes-

সমীক্ষা পত্র

পর্ব-১

গ্রাম - বালিনিকুপুড় - নাটোর জেলা - বীরভূম
 পাঠশালার নাম - বালিনিকুপুড় প্রকৌল নটী গোল্ডেন
 গ্রাম মোট পরিবার - ২৫৯
 মোট শিশুর সংখ্যা - ৭০

পর্ব-২

বর্ণপরিচয় আছে এমন শিশুর সংখ্যা - ৯৯
 বর্ণপরিচয় নেই এমন শিশুর সংখ্যা - ৩৫
 বিশেষ চাহিদা বা অন্য কোন সমস্যা আছে এমন শিশুর সংখ্যা - ০৯
 শব্দ গঠন করতে পারে কিন্তু বাক্য গঠন করতে পারে না এমন শিশুর সংখ্যা - ০৯
 বাক্য গঠন করতে পারে কিন্তু স্বতঃস্ফূর্তভাবে রিডিং পড়তে পারে না এমন শিশুর সংখ্যা - ০৬

পর্ব-৩

আলন্দ শিক্ষামতাল অর্ন্তর্ভুক্ত শিশুর পরিসংখ্যাল

কোপাই - ৬৪
 বক্রেশ্বর - ০৬

পর্ব-৪

খোমাই - ৯৩
 মিলনপুর - ০৭
 কোপাই - ৯৮
 বক্রেশ্বর - ৬৬

Figure 5. Format of Baseline Studies

Table 1. Actual Literacy Levels Among Tribal Children

Actual Learning Levels of Tribal Children	Number of Tribal Children
Children familiar with the alphabet	19
Children unaware of the alphabet	35
Children who can form words but cannot form sentences	9
Children who can form sentences but cannot read fluently	6
Children who have special needs	1
Total no of Children= 70	

This metric categorizes children by their learning levels—ranging from inability to recognize basic letters, to limited vocabulary and sentence formation difficulties, to lack of reading fluency—and indicates that over 90% were unable to recognize and comprehend the alphabet.

In the 3rd phase based on this metric they divided the children into two groups not by classifying on the basis of social class or age, but according to their mental and psychological levels. The names of these groups are 'Kopai' & 'Bakreshwar'.

- 'Kopai'- Those who don't have alphanumeric knowledge or some of them may able to recognize.
- 'Bakreshwar'- Those who can recognize letter and number and also some of them are able to form words, do small addition etc.

The division was done but the children did not want to co-ordinate and talk with the teachers. In these circumstances this institution started program of having meal with all on the ground and many other activities to prove that they are all very close to each other.



Figure 6. Eating together in the Field to Make Friendship with Children and Teachers

Figure 6 illustrates teachers serving food to children, symbolizing care, empathy, and community engagement. This process played a significant role in breaking initial barriers and building trust, helping children feel included rather than neglected. Over time, however, it became evident to the teachers that children differ considerably in their learning abilities, retention levels, and cognitive capacities. As a result of this, they opened two more levels below the 'Kopai', which are 'Khoai' & 'Milonpur'

Table 2. Levels based on Skill Proficiency

Levels	Skills
Khoai	Those who don't have alphanumeric knowledge
Milonpur	Those who have letter recognition but cannot form words
Kopai	Those who have knowledge of forming words, reading, adding-subtracting numbers.
Bakreshwar	Those who have knowledge of reading, writing, doing small addition, subtraction, multiplication and division.

In this way 'Ananda Shikshayatan' is comprehensive and culturally identifying and responsively categorizing the learning levels of tribal children.

Objective 2: To study the educational strategies implemented in 'Ananda Sikshayatan' for instilling confidence among the children.

RQ 2: What are the strategies implemented in 'Ananda Sikshayatan' for instilling confidence among the children?

Interactive and Engaging Teaching Methods

- **Student-Centered Learning:** As education should be learner centric, learning methods also should be child centric. Based on this idea, the rhymes of the river are taught by taking them to the banks of river. Children are asked to make the structure of 'অ', 'আ', 'A', 'B' by collecting pebbles from the bank of river. They also learn to count using the pebbles. Actually, through this strategy they learn to visualize that picture in their brain.



Figure 7. Learning to Write with Stone



Figure 8. Standing on the Side of Pond to Recite "নাম তার মোতিবিল, বহু দূর জল"

Figure no. 7 and 8 illustrate that the institution integrates environmental resources into its pedagogical practices, facilitating experiential and context-based learning among students.

- **Use of Local Language:** If there is a difference between the language we speak at home and the language through which education is imparted at school, then a gap is created in the acquisition of learning. This is a common problem for the first-generation learners. Kaviguru Rabindranath Tagore already said that “*মাতৃভাষা মাতৃদুগ্ধ সম*” which means *mother tongue nourishes as mother’s milk* to a child. Education in the mother tongue is a fundamental right of every child. Therefore, a tribal teacher has been appointed to support children who face difficulties in understanding the Bengali language, by teaching them in Santali. Again, the ‘Sahaj Path’ book was translated into ‘Santali’ language.

Holistic Education

- **Incorporation of Fine Arts and Performing Arts:** Tribal children are exposed to rhythm from a very early age through their cultural environment. They love to draw, dance, sing etc. They can easily blend with nature. Keeping this thought in mind, two classes are held here every day from the discipline of music, poetry, drama etc. which enables them to discover their abilities, skills and build self-confidence.

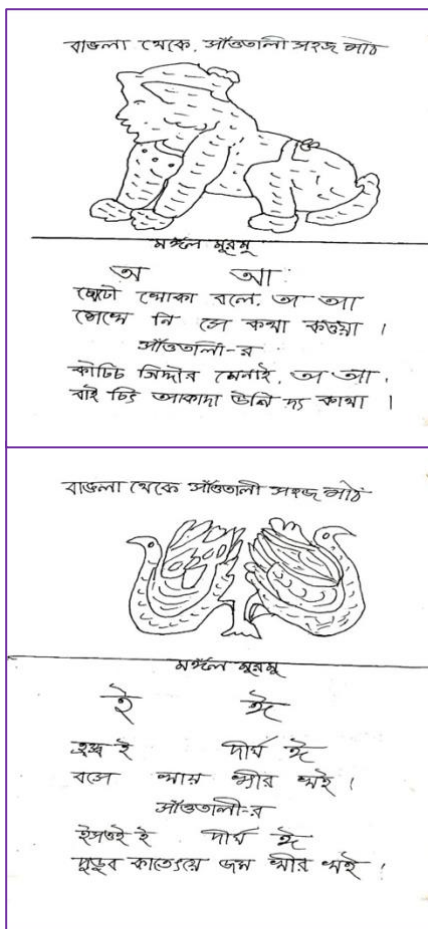


Figure 9. The ‘Sahaj Path’ book translation in ‘Santali’ language

Figure 10. At the moment of Singing and Drawing Lessons

Figure no. 10 shows that the co-curricular activities like singing and dancing are being conducted in an open natural environment, where students are actively engaged in the learning process.

- **Emphasis on Moral and Social Values:** This institution is constantly trying to teach social and moral principles through celebrating various programs like- Independence Day, World Environment Day, Tree Plantation, Birthdays of various thinkers which encourage the development of a supportive learning environment with the sense of community and self-worth.



Figure 11. World Environment Day Celebration



Figure 12. Independence Day Celebration

Figure no. 11 and 12 show that the institution integrates the celebration of World Environment Day and Independence Day into its educational practices, fostering environmental awareness alongside a sense of national identity among students.

Supportive Learning Environment

- **Mentoring and Counseling:** The syllabus developed in this institution emphasizes ability-based education rather than age-based progression. This approach enables children to learn at their own pace, making the content more accessible and easier to master, which in turn strengthens their confidence and cognitive development. Through this process, children are gradually reintegrated into the mainstream education system.

Innovative Assessment Methods

- **Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation:** Instead of associating education to the criteria of marks, the teacher themselves are constantly observing the progress of the student and creating student's portfolio and decide that, in which group they will be placed. It helps in evaluating a child's overall growth, eliminates the stress associated with examinations, and fosters confidence.

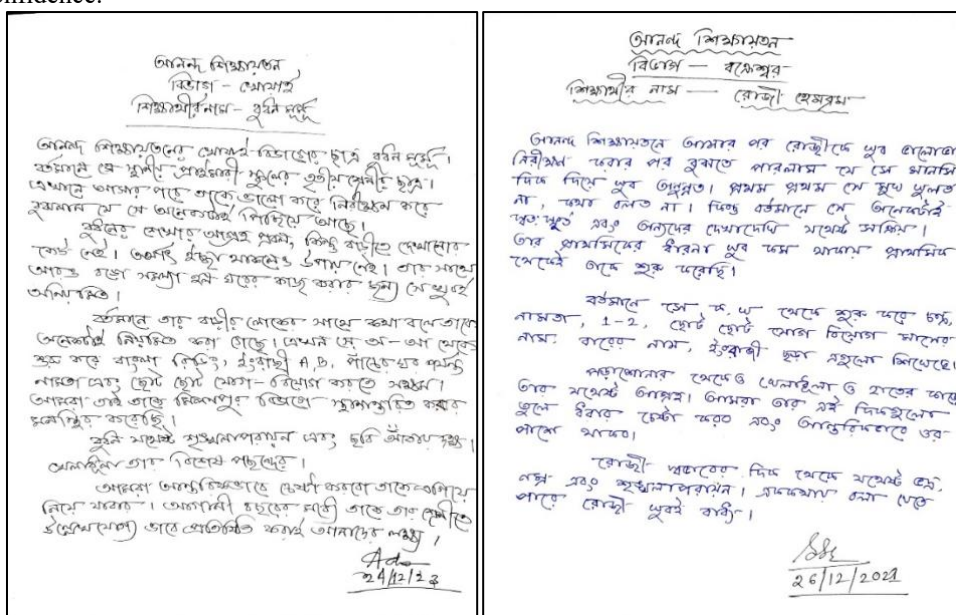


Figure 13. Student portfolio for Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation Source- Office of 'Ananda Sikhshayatan'

Life Skill Training

- **Education on Practical Skill:** The place where they are getting this education is the confluence of agriculture and culture. So, they are growing up with the education for life and livelihood, which is the path of their future.



Figure 14. Life Skill Education through Joint Effort of Teacher-Student

Figure no. 14 vividly portray the institution's efforts to lay the foundation of life-skill education in children's minds from early childhood, alongside their academic learning.

Students who initially transition from this institution to the higher-secondary education system continue to rely on their former teachers for academic guidance. By seeking support in specific subjects, they receive sustained educational assistance, which minimizes their dependence on private tuition and promotes continuity in their learning process.

Objective 3: To explore the activities of 'Ananda Sikhshayatan' for facilitating better economic sustenance & healthcare for family members of the tribal children.

RQ 3: How does 'Ananda Sikhshyatan' facilitate better economic sustenance and healthcare for family members of the tribal children?

A child's early mental development begins in his/her home environment. A happy and healthy family environment is conducive for all round development of childhood. Socio-economic status plays a vital role in this matter. And it's not at all surprising that most first-generation learners come from impoverished socio-economic backgrounds. Keeping this objective in mind, 'Ananda Sikhshayatan' has taken several measures to maintain the economic sustainability of the tribal community at 'Kalikapur' village.

Economic Facilities

Arrangements of works for parents

- **Opportunity of Cultivation:** The 13 bigha of free land where this institution is based on, all the vegetables and crops have the touch of their parents. They have the chance of regular farming and fishing facilities here.
- **Arrangement of Loans:** District Social Welfare Officer, Birbhum came here and arranged a camp to encourage and educate the female self-help groups to avail loans.
- **Other Working Facilities:** A homestay has been established on 13 bighas of land, attracting visitors during weekends and various holidays. The entire responsibility for hospitality is managed by members of the tribal community of 'Kalikapur' village on a payment basis. This initiative serves as one of their key sources of income, facilitated through the institution.

Figures 15 and 16 illustrate that the homestay generates employment opportunities for local community members by involving them in hospitality services for visiting guests, as well as in the maintenance of the premises.



Figure 15. In This Homestay They Get Work Opportunities



Figure 16. Working Opportunities for Parents

Healthcare Facilities for Families

The institution provides health check-up facilities for both children and their parents. It also receives support from various organizations and NGOs. For example, on 12th March 2024, the Kolkata Menopause Society and Eastern Medical Clinic jointly organized a health camp within the institution. During this camp, eminent gynecologists and distinguished dermatologists conducted free medical tests. In addition, essential diagnostic services such as blood tests, glucose testing, and bone mineral density assessments were provided free of cost.



Figure 17: Providing Healthcare Facilities to Family Members

Figure no. 17 shows that the institution organizes health screening and consultation sessions for women, focusing on awareness and early detection of health issues. These activities of 'Ananda Sikhshayatan' support improved healthcare and economic sustainability, which promotes a healthier home environment for the family members of the first-generation learner of 'Kalikapur' village.

Findings

Identification of Learning Levels and Categorization

- ❖ **Baseline Assessment:** 'Ananda Sikhshayatan' identifies student's actual learning level through baseline assessments. These procedures are designed for assessing fundamental cognitive, numeracy, and literacy skills.
- ❖ **Categorization:** Children are divided into several groups based on their actual learning levels according to the assessment outcomes. This makes it possible to create individualized learning programs and focused interventions to meet the particular needs of every group.

Educational Strategies

- ❖ **'Teach at Right Level' (TRL) Method:** 'Ananda Sikhshayatan' is focused on TRL method in teaching the child. Here the emphasis is given on education based on intellectual ability of the child rather than education according to the age.
- ❖ **Education through Local Language:** The support of local language (Santali) is considered in teaching to the children. Also, the 'Sahaj Path' book has been translated into 'Santali' language.
- ❖ **Activity-Based Learning:** Learning is made relevant and engaging through the use of interactive teaching techniques and hands-on activities, which help sustain children's interest and enhance their active participation.
- ❖ **Joyful Learning:** This institution offers joyful learning opportunities in the middle of the natural world, which makes learning easier to grasp and apply.
- ❖ **Use of Low Cost or No Cost TLM:** Low cost or no cost TLM are used here to make education interesting.
- ❖ **Conduct Periodical Assessment:** Periodically evaluating students in each month to track their progress in studying. Teacher are constantly observing the progress of the student and creating student's portfolio and decide in which group they will be placed.

Economic Sustenance and Healthcare

- ❖ **Income-Generating Activities:** By linking underprivileged tribal families with Self-Help Groups (SHGs), 'Ananda Sikhshayatan' contributes to improving their economic conditions. It also creates various livelihood opportunities within the institution, thereby supporting their financial stability.
- ❖ **Healthcare Initiatives:** This institution organizes health checkup camp. A, lot of organizations and NGOs come here to provide free checkup facilities to the children and their families.

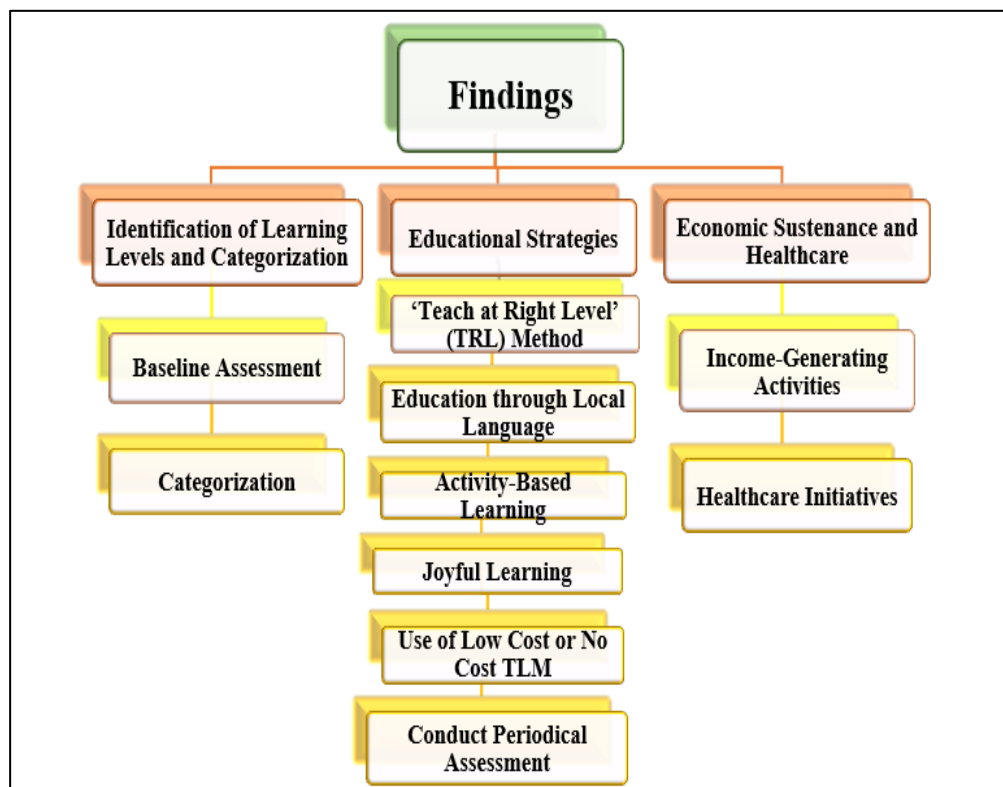


Figure 18: Findings at a Glance

These findings demonstrate how the comprehensive strategies of 'Ananda Sikhshayatan' help to address socioeconomic and educational problems of those children who are first-generation learners and as well as marginalized community of a society. And prepare a supportive learning environment for them to foster their entire growth and academic achievement.

Conclusion

'Ananda Sikhshayatan' is not a formal education system. This model of primary level school caters to those who have a gap between their dreams and capabilities, who have no one to guide them, who are forever known as first-generation learners. This institution aims to fill up the gap in which thousands of childhoods are lost. This gap is the space between child's physical age and mental age. This gap is the lag in the child's learning ability. India's education system will undergo liberty, equality, and economic progress which will result from the development of particular policy guidelines for the country's 121 million first-generation students (Joshi, A., 2019). This type of minor as well as primary steps need to be taken in many sections of our nation if the phrase "first-generation learners" is to be totally eliminated from our society.

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