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Strengthening Foundational Literacy

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Learning to Read is Reading to Learn

A Brief Journey of Ideas in Early Literacy Education in India

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India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (GoI, 2020) identifies Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) as one of the key goals of the policy. Following this, the government released the NIPUN Bharat document (GoI, 2021) identifying various aspects and learning outcomes related to these domains. The work of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) working in education has also understandably intensified or redirected itself towards these aims.

It goes without saying that literacy has the capacity to do much for societies and for individual lives. The caution is that it also has the danger of doing very little and of maintaining the status quo if we don't understand it well. Literacy, in itself, is nothing more or less than how we understand it, use it, or teach our children to use it. So, what *is* literacy? Broadly and intuitively, many educators assume that literacy is the 'ability to read and write'. 'With comprehension,' some will add hastily, 'with comprehension'.

But, what is this 'ability to read and write'? When pushed thus, it turns out that in popular imagination, 'to read and write' means to be able to handle scripts competently – that is, to be able to decipher or decode the script fluently and to spell accurately. Historically, this is called the 'simple view' of learning to read (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). When people decode the script accurately, they turn the script into oral language. Since they already (presumably) understand the oral language, they will automatically understand what they are reading. Thus, comprehension is the result of the script being turned back into oral language by the reader.

However, since the 1970s and 1980s, scholars have shown that reading and writing involve far more complex processes. Comprehension does not occur at the end of decoding, but in good comprehenders it happens *before, during, after* – and at all points of the reading and writing processes (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). How, you may wonder, can comprehension start *before* we start reading? Meaning-making enters the process when the reader understands the relevance of the task, sets appropriate goals and activates what she already knows about the topic.

For example, if I see a newspaper headline saying, "Maoists in talk with government in Chhattisgarh" – I would automatically bring to my reading my knowledge and opinions about Maoists, about Maoists in Chhattisgarh, about how the current government functions in Chhattisgarh, and how such talks have gone before. I would sub-consciously or consciously hold all this in my active attention even before I started reading the body of the article! Meaning-making processes would also interact continuously with my reading, rather than politely waiting in the sidelines until I had finished deciphering the script. What is true for adult readers, is true for younger readers, too. Comprehension interacts with and impacts the child's reading throughout.

Further, comprehension processes can be invoked in multiple ways, and at multiple levels. At a minimum, it includes the ability to read the lines, to read between the lines, and to read beyond the lines. This means, we need to comprehend what is stated (reading the lines); comprehend what is

left *unstated* or implied (read between the lines); and connect the reading with our lives and respond to it (read beyond the lines). Imagine that a child reads the sentence, "It is good to stand on hot tin roofs on summer afternoons". As educators, we would hope that a child would not just read this sentence with understanding, but also ask herself: *What evidence* has the author presented for this statement? What does *my experience* tell me about this? Readers must learn to read and respond to texts critically, not merely to understand what they are saying!

Now, if this is what we mean by the term 'early literacy', then it has enormous value to offer to any society in which children are being helped to become literate. In such a conceptualization, 'learning to read' is not dichotomized from 'reading to learn' – but includes higher order learning and meaning-making at every step of the process. But, if we mean teaching the script (without much of a vision of the relevance of the script to children's lives) – then more literacy by itself won't necessarily create a better society!

At the heart of the debate on how to teach children to read is an attempt to figure out how to teach children the relationships between *symbols, sounds* and *meaning*. Do we teach the symbols first, then sounds? Do we teach the symbol-sound combinations together, and will meaning then follow? Do we teach meaning-making first, and then symbol-sound recognition will follow? Do we teach them all together? This is, in essence the dance of early literacy – how much of which of these aspects? When? In which combinations?

Historically, it was presumed that the beginning reader understood the oral language of which she was trying to acquire the script. In Indian contexts the focus was then on teaching the child to read the *varnamala* and the *barakhadi*. Children would learn to read two and three *akshara* words, then sentences. Initially, the words

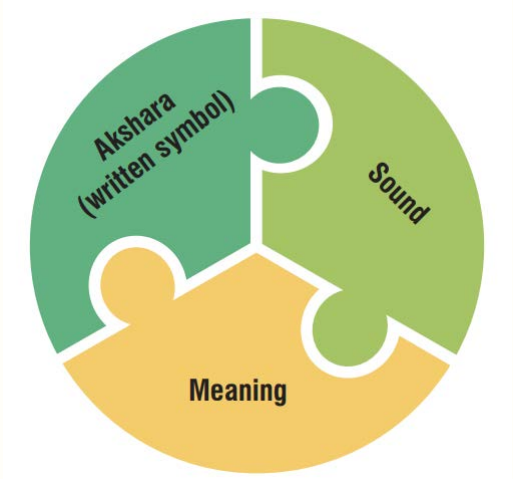


Figure 1: The dance of early literacy[1]

would be presented without *maatras,* but slowly the words would include *maatras* of increasing complexity. Only after the child had mastered the *varnamala*, would she be given little passages and poems to read, faithfully responding to the back-of-the-chapter questions and vocabulary exercises as instructed to by the teacher.

Even when children learned new words or answered the comprehension questions, they were *passive*. No one asked them what they were thinking, whether they had liked what they read, whether they were connecting it to anything in their lives or to other books, or whether they ever used the new words whose meanings they were learning by rote. No one actually asked children to *think*. In fact, thinking for themselves could get children into trouble. Because then, they might not faithfully reproduce what the teacher had made them write down in their notebooks from the board.

Why did we ever get into such a meaningless way of teaching reading and writing? Shobha Sinha (2012) referred to such a process as 'reading without meaning'? If we look historically for reasons, it is possible that prior to the 19th century, certain groups of children enrolled to learn reading and writing *for particular, well-defined purposes*. These goals included, for example, accessing the scriptures, or learning functional skills for some trade. The skills and capabilities that needed to be developed, and what they would

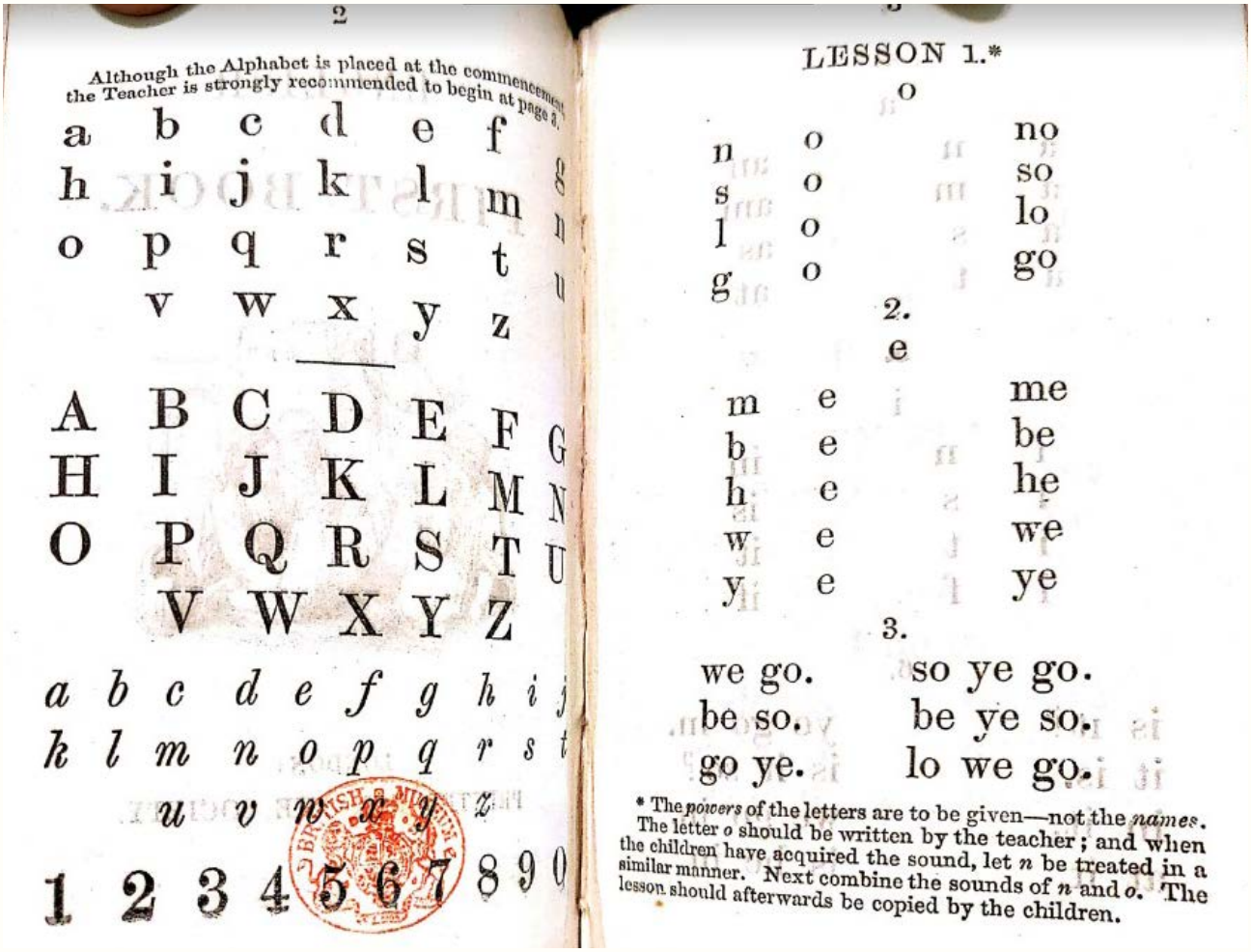
be used for, were presumably more readily accessible to the minds of both teacher and students.

However, as society transformed, at least two aspects of this equation shifted. First, the spheres in which literacy was used expanded rapidly. This led to a concurrent shrinkage in spaces where literate capabilities were not necessary. These processes resulted in some confusion about the wider range of capabilities that literate individuals now needed to have. Second, our vision of 'Education for All' meant that every single child needed to be brought into this sphere of widening, diffuse, rapidly transforming literate activities and capabilities. Our old (limited, but functional) understandings of literacy and old methods of instruction are simply not adequate to meet these new social and economic realities!

It is not that meaning-making was entirely disregarded in earlier methods of teaching reading. However, meaning-making itself was conceptualized in rather limited, lower-order ways. In early British primers for English from the late 19th century, for example, we see injunctions to teachers to introduce a few letters of the alphabet at a time and to quickly contextualize these letters in words. (See Box 1). Presumably, this was done in order to make the introduced letters meaningful to the child.

The text shown in Box 1 uses the 'phonics method,' which focuses on teaching the *sound* of letters explicitly and systematically, and contextualizing these letters and sounds into little words. Also evident during the colonial period was the 'Direct Instruction Method,' where children were immersed in the functional usages of language. Deriving

Box 1: Early English Language Teaching Textbook, Madras Presidency



2

Although the Alphabet is placed at the commencement, the Teacher is strongly recommended to begin at page 3.

a b c d e f g
h i j k l m n
o p q r s t u
v w x y z

A B C D E F G
H I J K L M N
O P Q R S T U
V W X Y Z

a b c d e f g h i j
k l m n o p q r s t
u v w x y z

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

LESSON 1.*

o

n o no
s o so
l o lo
g o go

2.

e

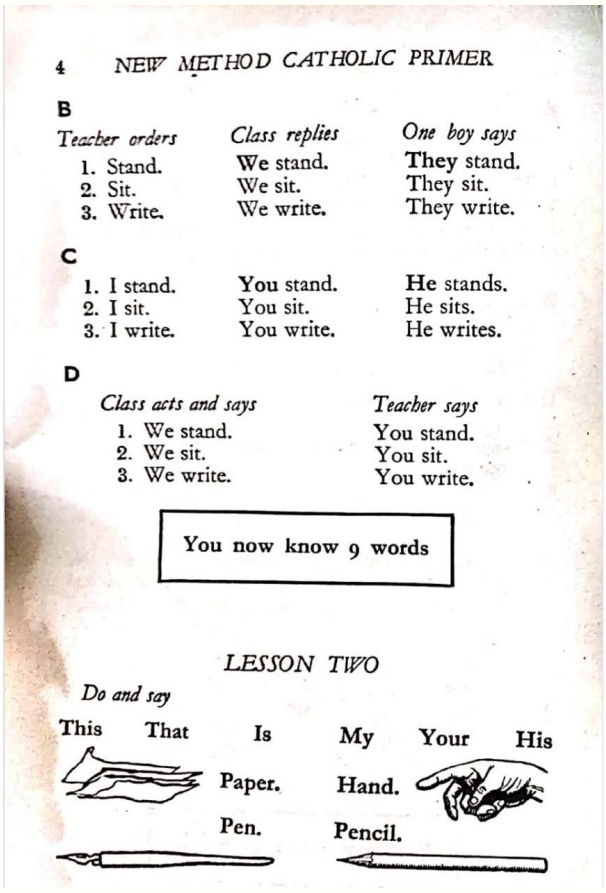
m e me
b e be
h e he
w e we
y e ye

3.

we go. so ye go.
be so. be ye so.
go ye. lo we go.

* The *powers* of the letters are to be given—not the *names*. The letter *o* should be written by the teacher; and when the children have acquired the sound, let *n* be treated in a similar manner. Next combine the sounds of *n* and *o*. The lesson should afterwards be copied by the children.

Box 2: Images of English Textbooks Modelling the Direct Instruction Method.



4 NEW METHOD CATHOLIC PRIMER

B

Teacher orders	*Class replies*	*One boy says*
1. Stand.	We stand.	They stand.
2. Sit.	We sit.	They sit.
3. Write.	We write.	They write.

C

1. I stand.	You stand.	He stands.
2. I sit.	You sit.	He sits.
3. I write.	You write.	He writes.

D

Class acts and says	*Teacher says*
1. We stand.	You stand.
2. We sit.	You sit.
3. We write.	You write.

You now know 9 words

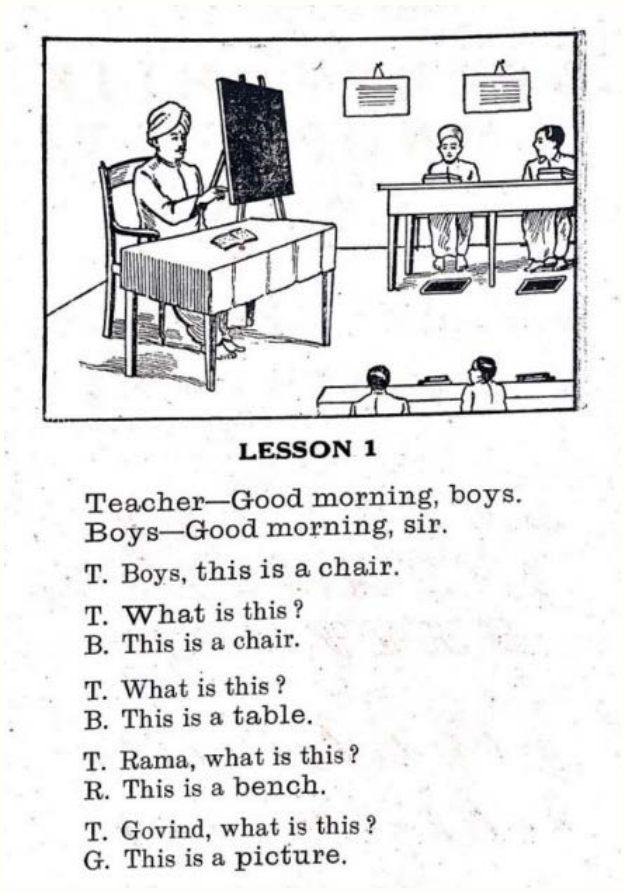
LESSON TWO

Do and say

This That Is My Your His

Paper. Hand.

Pen. Pencil.



LESSON 1

Teacher—Good morning, boys.
Boys—Good morning, sir.

T. Boys, this is a chair.

T. What is this?
B. This is a chair.

T. What is this?
B. This is a table.

T. Rama, what is this?
R. This is a bench.

T. Govind, what is this?
G. This is a picture.

from this, 'Do and Say' methods were in use, with, for example, the teacher saying 'Stand' and the pupils responding 'We stand', while actually standing (see Box 2).

These are a few examples of introducing meaning-making to early reading – albeit what might be considered as lower-order meaning today. These examples are drawn from English textbooks, where it was presumed that native children might need support with understanding the oral language. Hence, attempts to include functional oral language were present. While learning Indian scripts, on the other hand, it was assumed that since the child already understood the oral language, such functional immersion in the spoken language was not necessary.

In this context, the approach developed in the late 1960s and 1970s by Pragat Shikshan Sanstha (PSS) in Phaltan, Maharashtra under the leadership of Dr. Maxine Berntsen (see Berntsen, 2020) was very innovative, because it deviated significantly from traditional, script-based modes of instruction. Dr. Berntsen combined theoretical understandings from the Western world with the specific nature of Indian scripts to develop a method to teach early literacy to Marathi speaking children. Her method assumed the following:

- The linkage between letters and sounds does not happen automatically for many children. This must be fostered systematically, keeping in mind the specific characteristics of that script;
- It is important to approach 'meaning-making' in terms of *emotionally significant content for children* (Ashton-Warner, 1986). Thus, it is important to include references to people and things that are from the child's own context and have value and meaning for the child.

- A variety of planned opportunities and activities are needed for children to acquire the relationships amongst symbol, sound and meaning with fluency.

With this in mind, textbooks were developed that introduced children to a small set of *aksharas* at a time. These were placed in the contexts of sentences that were presumed to be meaningful to the child (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: A Text Using Contextually Familiar and Emotionally Significant Words

Even while Dr. Berntsen was experimenting with new approaches for teaching early reading and writing to Indian children, a revolutionary new paradigm for teaching reading to children had come into prominence in the West. Called the 'Whole Language Approach' (Goodman, 1967), this paradigm proposed that children learned to read and write naturally, *as they learned to speak* – through immersion, modelling and implicit learning.

Immersion meant that children needed to be surrounded by print-rich environments. Modelling meant that children needed capable and competent adult models who showed them how to navigate through the worlds of literacy. And incidental or implicit learning meant that children didn't need to be taken through a well-laid out or systematic sequence of phonics instruction. They would pick it up through multiple ways.

Children could use the context of the sentence to figure out how to read a word. Or, a child could learn the sound that the letter 's' made while exploring the spelling of her friend, Sunita's name. Or else, a child who is interested in butterflies might learn the spelling of that word by reading many books about butterflies or by asking an adult for help.

Phonetic input, according to this theory, was just one of several important inputs into the reader's brain. Readers also used cues based on vocabulary and grammar to figure out unknown words. Whole language theorists and several affiliated paradigms, for example, that of 'emergent literacy' (Teale & Sulzby, 1986) brought in the following influential ideas to the teaching of early literacy:

- Literature-based reading curricula – even young children who couldn't yet decode the scripts should have high quality literature read aloud to them;
- High-quality discussions – that were about more than 'understanding' the content, but included discussing connections, implications, predictions, interpretations, responses, and so on;
- The importance of the child's background knowledge – what was taught should always be connected to what the child already knows;
- Welcoming of children's 'emergent' reading and writing attempts – encouraging children to browse through books that they couldn't yet decode and encouraging them to represent their thoughts in writing through drawings, scribbles and invented spellings;

- Integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing and thinking – the recognition that all these capabilities developed simultaneously and must be taught in an integrated manner in classrooms.

In India, the whole language approach was never widely adopted in classrooms across the country. NCERT, under the leadership of Professor Krishna Kumar established the Early Literacy Cell during the first decade of this century (now merged with the Department of Elementary Education). Scholars affiliated with this cell conducted the Mathura Pilot Project that implemented a whole language curriculum in 561 schools in five blocks of Mathura district in Uttar Pradesh, and showed positive outcomes in terms of student learning (GoI, 2012-13). NCERT also developed a story-based textbook series called the 'Barkha series' that was inspired by ideas from the whole language paradigm (see Figure 3). But despite these attempts, by and large, the teaching of early reading and writing clung tenaciously to the traditional methods described earlier.

Meanwhile, in the West, the Whole Language Approach was not without its opponents. Advocates of phonics-based approaches took on the whole language paradigm from a variety of angles and perspectives, attempting to debunk many of its key assumptions. Finally, in 1998, an eminent panel of scholars drawn from across the U.S. concluded that many children do not pick up the sounds and symbols of the English alphabet without explicit and systematic instruction (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998).

Learning to read and write, it turned out, is not like learning to speak. It needs careful and prolonged letter-sound instruction. This is not applicable just to the learning of English. In India, Sonali Nag (2007) has shown that children take multiple years to learn to read and write Indic (alphasyllabic) scripts. In fact, her data suggest that learning to read and write Indic scripts may be a longer process than learning to read and write English in Western contexts!

So, where does all this leave us? Since the Whole Language paradigm was wrong on certain counts, are we wise to stick to the traditional *varnamala* approach? Whole Language was wrong about the teaching and learning of phonics. However, it had many insights of value to offer, which are important to retain. Therefore, contemporary educators favour what is referred to as a 'balanced' or 'comprehensive' approach to teaching early literacy.

The comprehensive approach:

- Pays equal emphasis to various aspects of reading and writing, such as, the teaching of letter-sound relationships, vocabulary, writing, oral language, comprehension, and so on.

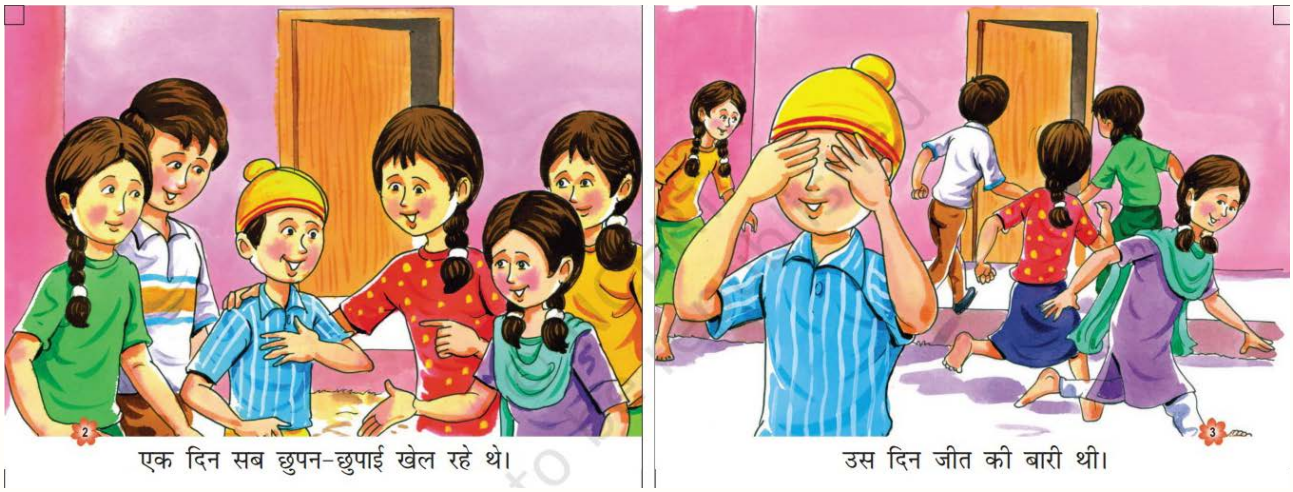


Figure 3: Pages from the Literature-based Barkha Series (NCERT, 2008, Chupan Chupai)

- Asserts that listening, speaking, reading and writing must be taught together and in conjunction with high quality thinking.
- Uses a variety of teaching methods, such as reading aloud, guided and modelled and independent writing, shared and guided reading, independent book browsing and reading, and so on.
- Recommends a variety of curricular materials for the teaching of literacy, such as, high quality literature, *akshara* cards and games, worksheets, tiles, sand, etc.

In tracing important influences on early language instruction in Indian contexts, it would be remiss to not mention the pioneering attempts by Ajit Mohanty and colleagues (Mohanty, Mishra, Reddy & Ramesh, 2009) to develop curriculum and pedagogy for Mother-Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTBMLE) for children speaking tribal languages in Odisha. Mohanty et al. showed how children could access the multiple languages of their surroundings (their own mother tongues, the regional language and English) in a meaningful manner.

They challenge us, as a nation, to consider how mother tongues of children can be used to maintain and nourish the less powerful languages. This will help these langauges not just survive, but thrive in contemporary Indian societies. The mother tongues of children speaking less powerful languages such as those of the ST communities, thus, need not just be used to transition children to the more powerful languages.

The approach taken by several influential contemporary organizations and individuals working in India are included in this volume. Many of them are pioneers in imagining and implementing the balanced approach in Indian contexts. Noteworthy contemporary efforts that have expanded upon earlier efforts include:

- Organization for Early Literacy Promotion (OELP), which uses a systematic and meaningful approach to teaching the Devnagari script to children in northern India. In addition, it has a deep focus on using literature and complex conversations in early language classrooms and gives children opportunities for meaningful writing, valuing their emergent writing attempts. OELP has also done pioneering work with engaging communities meaningfully in early literacy instruction.
- Learning and Language Foundation (LLF), which acknowledges that in India we cannot assume that young children understand the oral language of the scripts that they learn. Hence, mother tongues must be used in the early instruction of children, and curricular materials need to be developed that permit the meaningful use of mother tongues, especially in Grades 1 and 2. LLF is sympathetic to the MTBMLE approach proposed by Mohanty et al. However, in large-scale implementation efforts with governments, it has been restricted to using mother tongues in an early-exit transitional model in which children 'exit' from the mother tongue to the regional language by Grade 2.
- Room to Read's effort to bring a library to every village, and to provide a framework for implementing balanced literacy curricula in government schools.
- Various NGOs, including Gubbachi, have developed 'bridge' curricula and methods to enable children who are out of school to start or resume formal schooling.

As we look back, we have come far, and covered much distance in our collective understanding of early literacy over the past few decades. For one, we have understood that it is a priority for education. For another, we have agreed that literacy without

meaning-making is not terribly useful. We have only just begun to understand that learning to read *is* reading to learn. We have also begun to forge professional alliances to strengthen this domain and to articulate our collective thinking and positions (e.g., Position Paper for Early Language and Literacy, Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development, 2016). Finally, we have an NEP that identifies this as an area of national priority.

Despite these signs of progress, we are still in a very nascent stage in terms of working together in this domain. We need to be vigilant against our collective historic tendency to understand reading and writing in narrow ways. The most recent trend in this direction has been to aim for developing oral reading fluency, understood in terms of the number of words correctly read per minute. Oral reading fluency norms, when used knowledgeably in the context of a balanced literacy curriculum, can be helpful indicators. Taken out of context, it can be disastrous to a nation that is only beginning to understand literacy as a broader construct than script decoding. We also sorely need evidence and data-based approaches to the teaching of different scripts and languages.

The teaching of multiple languages marked unequally by power is a burning question. While NEP 2020 calls for 'mother tongue based' teaching, it often uses this term interchangeably with 'regional language' instruction, leaving us unclear about the political clarity or will behind this injunction.

Work on specific learning disabilities, including dyslexia, will add much to our understanding of how to supplement balanced literacy classrooms to ensure the success of all children in accessing literate worlds. Most of all, we need informed professionals who understand how to go about accomplishing the broad and evolving aims of language education.

How do we proceed? The path ahead appears to be complex, challenging, and fraught with uncertainties. However, there are also enough signs for cautious optimism. Perhaps, as the poet, Theodore Roethke put it, we will 'learn by going' where we have to go...

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1. Taken from Berntsen, M. (2020). The Pragat Shikshan Sanstha (PSS) Approach to Teaching Literacy in Indian Languages: Part I, p. 74. In S. Menon, S. Sinha, H. V. Das, & A. Pydah (Eds.). (2020). *Teaching and learning the script. Early Literacy Initiative Resource Book Series*. Hyderabad: Early Literacy Initiative, Tata Institute of Social Sciences & Bhopal: Eklavya Foundation.

2. Varnamala refers to the complete set of *aksharas* (consonants and vowels) within several Indian languages.

3. Barahkhadi refers to all possible combinations of *moolaksharas* with the *maatras* (secondary vowel signs), for instance, क, का, कि, की

4. Akshara refers to symbols in Indic scripts comprising of *moolaksharas* (क, ख, ग), as well as units of *moolaksharas* combined with *maatras* (abbreviated vowel sign) (e.g., का, कि, की).

5. Maatras refer to the secondary vowel diacritics (ा, ि, ै).

6. Left hand image from: West, M. (1942). *New Method Catholic Readers*. Madras: Longman, Green & Co. Right hand image from: *Boys Own Reader* (1934), Madras: The Model Press.

7. Taken from: Vaachu Ya, Leehu Ya, Gram Mangal, Maharashtra; in: Berntsen, M. (2020). The Pragat Shikshan Sanstha (PSS) Approach to Teaching Literacy in Indian Languages: Part I, p. 77. In S. Menon, S. Sinha, H. V. Das, & A. Pydah (Eds.). (2020). *Teaching and learning the script. Early Literacy Initiative Resource Book Series*. Hyderabad: Early Literacy Initiative, Tata Institute of Social Sciences & Bhopal: Eklavya Foundation.

8. This series can be viewed at: https://ncert.nic.in/dee/barkha-series.php?ln=

9. Many Indian languages use alphasyllabic scripts which combine aspects of both alphabetic and syllabic writing systems. For a fuller description, refer Nag (2007).

प्रारंभिक भाषा शिक्षण की कक्षा प्रक्रिया में सुधार हेतु लैंग्वेज एंड लर्निंग फाउंडेशन की पहल

गजेन्द्र राउत

लैंग्वेज एंड लर्निंग फाउण्डेशन (एलएलएफ) एक गैर-सरकारी संस्था है। इसकी स्थापना 2015 में डॉ. धीर झिंगरन के द्वारा की गई जो वर्तमान में इसके कार्यकारी निदेशक हैं और राष्ट्रीय शिक्षा नीति 2020 के आलोक में एक नई राष्ट्रीय पाठ्यचर्या रूपरेखा के विकास के लिए बनाई गई समिति के सदस्य हैं। यह प्राथमिक कक्षाओं में भाषा-शिक्षण को प्रभावी बनाने और बच्चों के सीखने के स्तर में सुधार के लिए कार्यरत है। एलएलएफ का मानना है कि भाषा न केवल अपनी बात कहने का, बल्कि सीखने, सोचने और दुनिया को समझने का भी साधन है। बच्चे औरों से बातचीत करके, सवाल पूछकर, तर्क-वितर्क करके, विश्लेषण करके, समूह में काम करके या एक दूसरे के साथ काल्पनिक संवाद करते हुए विभिन्न चीजों के बारे में अपनी स्वतंत्र राय और समझ का निर्माण करते हैं। "जब बच्चे भाषा सीखते हैं तो वे बहुत सारे विषयों में से सिर्फ एक विषय नहीं सीख रहे होते हैं, बल्कि वे सीखने की आधारशिला सीख रहे होते हैं" (हैलिडे, 1993)। भाषा, सीखने की सभी प्रक्रियाओं—तर्क करने, सोचने, विश्लेषण करने, निष्कर्ष निकालने, समस्याओं को हल करने और विचारों को व्यवस्थित करने—में मदद करती है।

एलएलएफ प्राथमिक स्तर की कक्षाओं में बच्चों के घर की भाषा के उपयोग की पैरवी करती है। बच्चों की भाषा में शिक्षण इतना महत्त्वपूर्ण इसलिए है क्योंकि अपनी भाषा में सोचना, समझना और उच्च स्तरीय काम करना आसान होता है। इसके अलावा घर की भाषा और स्कूल की भाषा एक होने पर शिक्षकों के लिए बच्चों के अनुभवों, पूर्व ज्ञान और संस्कृति को कक्षा में शामिल करना आसान हो जाता है, सीखने-सिखाने की प्रक्रिया में बच्चों की सक्रिय भागीदारी होती है और बच्चे अपनी भाषा में वह आत्मसम्मान और आत्मविश्वास महसूस करते हैं जो सीखने के लिए आवश्यक है। स्कूल में बच्चे की भाषा को स्थान देने के सन्दर्भ में जिम कमिन्स कहते हैं, "स्कूल में किसी बच्चे की भाषा को खारिज करना बच्चे को खारिज करने के बराबर है।" अन्य विषयों के शिक्षण–अधिगम पर भी इसका प्रभाव पड़ता है क्योंकि जब बच्चे एक परिचित भाषा के माध्यम से सीखते हैं तो अन्य विषयों में भी उनके अधिगम परिणाम बेहतर होते हैं। कई अध्ययनों में भी इसे रेखांकित किया गया है, जैसे :

भारत में हुए कई अध्ययन बताते हैं कि आदिवासी बच्चों की पढ़ाई यदि उनकी अपनी परिचित भाषा (L1) में होती है, तो उनका भाषा और गणित में प्रदर्शन उन बच्चों से बेहतर रहता है जो किसी अन्य भाषा (L2) के माध्यम से पढ़े हों। (सैकिया और मोहन्ती, 2004)

इथियोपिया में किए गए एक अध्ययन में पाया गया कि अपनी भाषा (L1) के माध्यम से पढ़ाई करने वाले बच्चों ने कक्षा 10 में विज्ञान और गणित में बेहतर उपलब्धि हासिल की।(ह्यूग एवं अन्य, 2007)

USA में लगभग 10 वर्षों तक चले एक अध्ययन में पाया गया कि द्विभाषी शिक्षा (bilingual education) में बच्चों के सीखने के स्तर कहीं अधिक थे।(थॉमस और कोलियर, 1997)

एलएलएफ देश में प्राथमिक स्तर पर भाषा–शिक्षण में सुधार के लिए तीन तरह की रणनीतियों का उपयोग करती है :

शिक्षकों, शिक्षकों को अकादमिक सहयोग देने वाले लोगों एवं प्रशासनिक लोगों का निरन्तर व्यावसायिक विकास करना।

सरकारी स्कूलों में बुनियादी साक्षरता और गणित के परिणामों में सुधार के लिए डेमोंस्ट्रेशन मॉडल का प्रयोग।

प्राथमिक शिक्षा में सुधार के लिए राज्य की मदद करना और व्यवस्था में बदलाव लाने के लिए लगातार सक्रिय सहयोग प्रदान करना।

वर्तमान में एलएलएफ का कार्य 7 राज्यों में संचालित हो रहा है। ये राज्य हरियाणा, छत्तीसगढ़, असम, ओडिशा, राजस्थान, उत्तर प्रदेश और बिहार हैं। हर राज्य में सहयोग की प्रकृति अलग-अलग है। यह हरियाणा, उत्तर प्रदेश, छत्तीसगढ़, असम और ओडिशा राज्य में बुनियादी साक्षरता और संख्या ज्ञान (Foundational Literacy and Numeracy—FLN)[1] मिशन को वृहत स्तर पर अकादमिक क्षेत्र में सहयोग प्रदान करती है। इस मिशन के तहत समग्र शिक्षा अभियान और एससीईआरटी के साथ पाठ्यक्रम और सामग्री निर्माण, शिक्षकों के व्यावसायिक विकास, अकादमिक सहयोग, आकलन, इत्यादि पर काम किया जा रहा है।

हम यहाँ हरियाणा राज्य में राज्य सरकार और एलएलएफ के संयुक्त प्रयास से प्रारम्भिक भाषा शिक्षण पर चलाए गए 'स्कूल

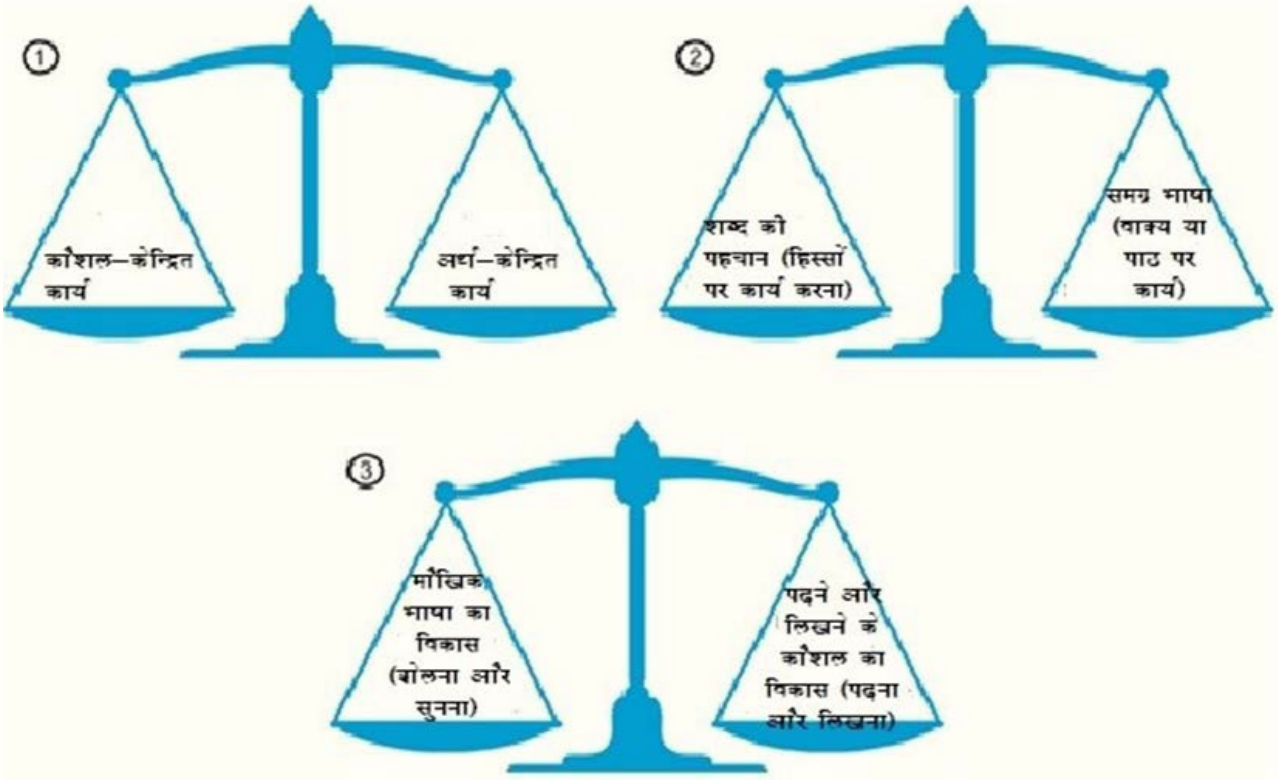
डेमोंस्ट्रेशन कार्यक्रम' का एक केस अध्ययन (Case Study) पेश कर रहे हैं। इस कार्यक्रम की शुरुआत 2018 में हरियाणा के कुरुक्षेत्र जिले के 175 विद्यालयों से हुई और 2022 तक इसका विस्तार 7 जिलों के 3300 से ज्यादा विद्यालयों में किया गया। इस कार्यक्रम का लक्ष्य बच्चों के भाषाई और साक्षरता कौशल का विकास करना था।

यह कार्यक्रम सन्तुलित भाषा शिक्षण पद्धति पर आधारित था। इस पद्धति में भाषा शिक्षण के दौरान डिकोडिंग सम्बन्धी कौशल (ध्वनि जागरूकता, डिकोडिंग, लेखन) और अर्थ निर्माण पर आधारित कौशल (मौखिक भाषा विकास, सुनने की समझ, समझ के साथ पढ़ना, किताबों के साथ जुड़ाव, स्वतंत्र लेखन) दोनों पर बराबर ध्यान दिया जाता है। इसका उद्देश्य शिक्षण–प्रक्रिया में सन्तुलित भाषा–शिक्षण पद्धति के प्रयोग द्वारा बच्चों के सीखने के स्तर में सुधार लाना था। इसके तहत यह सुनिश्चित किया गया कि प्रत्येक दिन हर कौशल (मौखिक भाषा, शब्द पहचान, पठन एवं लेखन) के अभ्यास से जुड़ी गतिविधियाँ हों। इसके लिए चार–खण्डीय रूपरेखा को अपनाया गया जिसमें मौखिक भाषा विकास, डिकोडिंग, पठन और लेखन पर एक साथ कार्य होता है। इसके अलावा कार्यक्रम के तहत बच्चों के लिए कई तरह की सामग्री जैसे— बिगबुक, चार्ट, पोस्टर, अभ्यास पुस्तिका, पठन कार्ड, इत्यादि प्रदान किए गए। साथ ही, शिक्षकों के लिए एक शिक्षक सन्दर्शिका भी प्रदान की गई जिसमें कक्षा में शिक्षण कार्य के लिए आवश्यक योजना, गतिविधियाँ और दिशा-निर्देश दिए गए थे।

स्कूल डेमोंस्ट्रेशन कार्यक्रम के तहत शिक्षकों की मदद के लिए अनेक गतिविधियाँ आयोजित की गईं जिसमें राज्य और जिला संसाधन समूह का निर्माण और क्षमता वर्धन, शिक्षक प्रशिक्षण मॉड्यूल का निर्माण, स्कूल स्तर पर शिक्षकों को सीधा सहयोग, शिक्षक प्रशिक्षण कार्यशालाएँ, कक्षाओं का नियमित अवलोकन, समीक्षा, प्रिंट-समृद्ध कक्षाओं का निर्माण, छात्रों के सीखने के स्तर का आकलन, फॉलो अप प्लान बनाना और साथ ही साथ समुदाय के साथ जुड़ाव के लिए कार्य करना शामिल था।

इस कार्यक्रम में पाठ्यक्रम निर्माण से लेकर शिक्षकों को अकादमिक सहयोग देने तक एक व्यवस्थित तरीका काम में लिया गया। इसे स्ट्रक्चर्ड पेडागोजी एप्रोच भी कहते हैं। इस एप्रोच में शिक्षण में सन्तुलित भाषा शिक्षण पद्धति का उपयोग, भाषा शिक्षण के लिए हर रोज निश्चित समय (90 से 120 मिनट) देना, डिकोडिंग का स्पष्ट और व्यवस्थित शिक्षण, शिक्षक संदर्शिका के माध्यम से हर दिन की शिक्षण योजना में शिक्षकों को मार्गदर्शन, अच्छी तरह से डिजाइन की गई अभ्यास पुस्तिकाएँ और अन्य उपयोगी सामग्री प्रदान करना शामिल था। इसके अतिरिक्त उन्हें नियमित अन्तराल पर मूल्यांकन और नियोजित पुनरावृत्ति के अवसर दिए जाते थे।

गतिविधियों को उद्देश्यपूर्ण, आकर्षक एवं सुगम बनाने के लिए आवश्यक रोचक तरीके काम में लिए गए। सरल से जटिल कौशल की ओर बढ़ना, सामाजिक गतिविधियों के माध्यम से सीखने के अवसर प्रदान करना, कक्षा में बच्चों की भाषा को



लान्गुएज आंड लर्निंग फाउंडेशन

स्थान देना, बच्चों के अधिगम स्तर के अनुसार सीखने–सिखाने की प्रक्रियाओं में बदलाव करना, कक्षा में प्रिंट समृद्ध वातावरण निर्मित करना, सभी बच्चों की भागीदारी सुनिश्चित करने के लिए विभिन्न रणनीतियों का उपयोग यह सब इस कार्यक्रम के प्रमुख आधार थे।

इस कार्यक्रम के लिए सामग्री-निर्माण में SCERT, SRG, और DRG के कई सदस्यों ने योगदान दिया। इसके लिए उन्होंने उपलब्ध सामग्री की समीक्षा करके नई सामग्री का विकास किया। इसकी इंस्ट्रक्शनल डिजाइन में एक मार्गदर्शक ढाँचे का प्रयोग किया गया ताकि यह सुनिश्चित किया जा सके कि सीखने–सिखाने की प्रक्रिया में सभी बच्चे सक्रिय रूप से भाग ले सकें और उत्तरोत्तर उच्च दक्षताओं को सीखने के साथ वांछित कौशल में महारत हासिल कर सकें। इस डिजाइन में प्रारम्भिक भाषा और साक्षरता के लिए आवश्यक सभी घटकों के लिए रणनीतियाँ शामिल थीं। कार्यक्रम की अकादमिक रूपरेखा में बच्चों का सीखना सुनिश्चित करने पर काफी जोर था। इसके लिए कई तरह की रणनीतियाँ अपनाई गईं जिनका संक्षिप्त विवरण इस प्रकार है। कार्यक्रम में कक्षा–शिक्षण के लिए साप्ताहिक मॉडल 4+1+1 को अपनाया गया।

इस मॉडल के तहत, सप्ताह के पहले चार दिन किसी नई दक्षता पर कार्य होता था, पाँचवें दिन सप्ताह भर सीखी गई सभी दक्षताओं की पुनरावृत्ति होती थी और छठे दिन आकलन करके उन बच्चों के साथ विशेष शिक्षण–कार्य होता था जो इन दक्षताओं को नहीं सीख पाए।

प्रत्येक 3–4 महीने के अन्तराल पर एक सावधिक आकलन करवाया जाता था, जिसके दौरान बच्चों के सीखने के आकलन के आधार पर 7-10 दिन तक उन्हें विशेष पुनरावृत्ति करवाई जाती थी। दैनिक स्तर पर पीछे छूट रहे बच्चों को व्यक्तिगत सहयोग के लिए विशेष समय उपलब्ध करवाया जाता था।

कार्यकम की इंस्ट्रक्शनल डिजाइन के प्रभाव पर शिक्षा मंत्रालय की पूर्व सचिव श्रीमती वृंदा स्वरूप का कहना है कि, “एलएलएफ की इंस्ट्रक्शनल डिजाइन ने स्थानीय भाषा, उदाहरण के तौर पर हिन्दी भाषा, पढ़ाने के प्रति शिक्षकों के दृष्टिकोण में एक पूर्ण परिवर्तन लाया है। निर्धारित पाठ्यपुस्तक, झिलमिल और एक व्यापक शिक्षक मार्गदर्शिका के बीच संगतता है, जो शिक्षकों को कक्षा में पढ़ाई जा रही विषयवस्तु के दायरे और दिशा से अवगत कराती है, जिसके लिए उन्हें प्रशिक्षित किया गया है कि वे इन्हें किस तरह से प्रयोग कर सकते हैं।”

वर्ष 2021-22 में कार्यक्रम के प्रभाव को समझने के लिए किए गए एक अध्ययन में पाया गया कि जिन विद्यालयों में यह कार्यक्रम चलाया गया उन विद्यालयों के बच्चों के सीखने में उन बच्चों की

तुलना में 4.5 गुना वृद्धि हुई जिनमें यह कार्यक्रम नहीं चलाया गया। इस कार्यक्रम से जुड़ी रजनी शर्मा (शिक्षिका, जीपीएस, सुन्दरपुर, थानेसर) का कहना है कि "प्रारम्भिक भाषा शिक्षण पर 3 वर्ष पहले चले कार्यक्रम में हिन्दी भाषा को वैज्ञानिक, अर्थपूर्ण, सहज, सरल और रुचिपूर्ण ढंग से सीखना और सिखाना जाना जो आज तक 18 साल से शिक्षक के रूप में कार्य करके भी नहीं जान पाई थी। हर बच्चे का सीखना अति आवश्यक और उसका मौलिक अधिकार है पर कक्षा में शत प्रतिशत बच्चों का सीखना सुनिश्चित करना मैंने पहली बार प्रारम्भिक भाषा शिक्षण कार्यक्रम के माध्यम से सम्भव होता देखा।"

इस कार्यक्रम को सफल बनाने में राज्य सरकार, स्थानीय शिक्षा विभाग के सदस्यों, शिक्षकों और समुदाय की महत्त्वपूर्ण भूमिका रही है। कार्यक्रम की सफलता को देखते हुए हरियाणा सरकार ने निपुण भारत कार्यक्रम के तहत 'प्रारम्भिक भाषा शिक्षण कार्यक्रम' की रूपरेखा और उसकी सामग्री को राज्य स्तर पर अपनाया। हरियाणा सरकार वर्ष 2021 से इस रूपरेखा के आधार पर राज्य के सभी प्राथमिक विद्यालयों में शिक्षकों के लिए सामग्री प्रदान कर रही है।

2026 तक एलएलएफ का लक्ष्य 10 लाख शिक्षकों और टीचर एडुकेटर्स की कक्षा पद्धतियों में सुधार के माध्यम से सरकारी स्कूलों में कक्षा 1-3 में पढ़ रहे लगभग 60 प्रतिशत (यानी 3.5 करोड़) बच्चों की शिक्षा में सुधार करना है, जो मूलभूत कौशल नहीं सीखने के जोखिम का सामना कर रहे हैं।

सन्दर्भ

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मरयाणे वुल्फ (2007) प्रोस्ट एंड द स्क्विड—द स्टोरी एंड साइंस ऑफ रीडिंग ब्रेन

सैकिया एंड मोहन्ती, 2004 बायलिंगुअलिज्म एंड इंटर ग्रुप रिलेशनशिप इन ट्राइबल एंड नॉन ट्राइबल कॉन्टैक्ट सिचुएशन

गजेन्द्र राउत ने लन्दन यूनिवर्सिटी के इंस्टीट्यूट ऑफ एजुकेशन से करिकुलम, पेडागॉजी एंड असेसमेंट में परास्नातक किया है। वे पिछले 14 सालों से शिक्षा के क्षेत्र में कार्यरत हैं और वर्तमान में एलएलएफ में अकादमिक प्रबन्धक के रूप में कार्य कर रहे हैं। उन्होंने इससे पहले दिगन्तर, रूम टू रीड, टाटा ट्रस्ट जैसी प्रतिष्ठित संस्थाओं में काम किया है। वे अन्तरराष्ट्रीय फोर्ड फाउंडेशन फेलो भी हैं।

1. *इसे भारत सरकार की नई शिक्षा नीति के निपुण भारत मिशन के तहत लागू किया गया है।

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How to Approach Early Literacy

Learnings from Past Experiences and Research

Hridaykant Dewan

There is a buzz around early literacy and numeracy these days with a lot of effort around it. However, those emphasizing it have different perspectives and purposes. They might superficially have the same agenda. However, their purposes makes them emphasize different elements. This structures their programs and their contents accordingly.

In some ways, this is similar to the adult education efforts made earlier in our country as well, where the motivations arose from very different perspectives and concerns. On one side, the effort was to make neo-literate adults part of the system, to be able to reach them and inform and instruct them in the rules and regulations of the country. The focus was on the necessity to assimilate them into the mainstream and make them serve the system, as well as educate them about what the mainstream considered as good for them.

Other groups wanted to help adults become a part of the democratic polity. The goal was to contribute to the struggle for their rights and to make them a part of the discussions on the route that the country should take. People taking this approach to adult education wanted neo-literate adults to become aware of the richness of their culture, heritage, concerns and knowledge systems. A parallel goal was to help neo-literate adults develop the confidence to try and shape the country and its policies. In order to clarify the purpose of those who were struggling to achieve universal adult literacy, there were even different names that were formulated for these diversely focussed programs.

The differences in the intent and purposes of these programs were reflected in the structures created, the way teachers (facilitators, instructors, etc.) interacted with them, and the content/material and methods they used. Even the nomenclatures used were reflective of the varying intents. However, often there might have been be a big gap between the stated, and even believed, intent, and the intention that played out in real situations.

For some of these groups, the key belief was that teaching should challenge learners to examine power structures and patterns of inequality within the status quo. They spoke of conscientization and critical pedagogy. There were other groups who defined their task as giving adults the abilities to read and write and analyze. They did not have any goals to change the status quo through these efforts.

Many of these groups however believed that learners learn better through an idiom that is a part of their lives and through issues that affect them. So for these groups, there were pedagogical reasons suggesting that learners be involved in conversations about their lives and various related dimensions including the inequities they face. These groups developed materials that used words and small texts that were a part of people's challenges and struggles. In that sense, the materials they prepared would have some common elements with the earlier group.

Another group comprised of people who felt that the key purpose was to rid the adults being educated of their superstitions and align them to the 'mainstream'. Their

materials were different in nature. They created material on new knowledge and government schemes. The goal was to enable neo-literate adults to be subsumed in the emerging economy.

There were pedagogic divides as well. These could cut across groups. These focussed around the way learning was conceptualized and how the implementers and designers of programs felt learners should be engaged with. For example, whether reading is learnt through alphabets or through words or texts. Should the texts be simple in script joining two and three letters only (and without matras, for example) or they should first be meaningful words irrespective of the supposed complexity in script.

Similarly, in numeracy, there were efforts that reflected a spectrum of pedagogical ideas. There were debates within the groups regarding the methods as well. All these debates and discussions revolved around the issues mentioned in this and the preceding paragraphs. The educators struggled with these questions. They also developed shared understandings that led to building common strategies for initiating interactions, models of orientation, production of materials, and for reaching the community and the adult learners, etc.

They shared platforms for advocacy and awareness as well and had uneasy collaborations on raising the issue of investment. There were groups who remained outside these attempts of coming together. The broad principles that arose from these attempts became a part of the culture of literacy even though the deeper, emergent questions did not.

The present literacy and numeracy efforts have to take benefit of the earlier work and the lessons learnt therein. The age and experience of the learners in the context of early literacy is much less. However, some of the principles like knowing the learners and using what is of interest to them and part of their pre-existing knowledge is essential.

The materials and the methods must involve, and be based on, children's language and culture. It is good to use words that are part of their lives and are meaningful for them. Examples of these include their own names, and those of their families and friends. Apart from these, there are the games that they play, the plants and animals around them, the tasks they engage in, etc.

Pedagogic interactions must allow them to use their language and expressions and make them feel empowered to learn more. The ideas they learn and the capabilities they develop must make them feel positive about themselves and also be useful in their lives. This learning must give them capabilities and knowledge about what all they can aspire to.

There is increasing awareness of the challenges that children from diverse backgrounds face in coping with literacy. Their context is often not rich in terms of printed/written materials. Their languages are often different from those in which materials that start them on to reading are generally available.

Similarly, children know mathematical ideas and use them in their lives. However, what they come across in the teaching learning materials is completely alienated from what they already know. The language in which these are presented, does not allow children to engage with the ideas.

The importance of using children's own languages, their culture and idiom in initial learning cannot be overstressed. The focus on children's participation and contribution to the conversations in the classrooms has to be increased. This has been suggested by many international studies and the work of educators in India.

We also know now that a multilingual climate makes for better leaning. We should not be

worried about language mixing – lexically or syntactically – as the learner would slowly acquire mature competence in both and benefit from the ideas available in the languages and experiences of the classroom. Having the use of her language not only helps her comprehend and express but also gives her self-respect and confidence.

There is an increasing emphasis on bringing in children's lived experiences and culture, and those of the communities they come from, into classrooms and learning processes. This suggests the need to bring in parents into a more participative role in their children's education. As Mahatma Gandhi and the Nai Talim movement pointed out, through education children must learn to respect their community. It must not alienate them from their own roots.

Children must feel themselves as useful and integrated members of the society they are from. They must respect all kinds of labour that is essential for society's functioning. Education should not produce white collared alienated youth. Communities' association with schools and children's education is, therefore, critical for many reasons.

Groups working in foundational literacy must be aware of the importance of the participation and ownership of the community. The importance of their active interest in ensuring children's learning, aside from just herding them to the school, is growing. Many organizations have initiated interactions between community groups other than the formal PTAs, panchayats etc. and the schools.

These interactions aim to build mutual respect and trust. These often share the common concerns about children's learning. In some of these interventions, communities and schools jointly organize events as well in which children, teachers and parents all participate. Some of the activities have children connect to their parents in settings of doing things together that help in learning.

Such interactions are essential to build mutual trust and understanding and develop a different understanding of childhood and learning. Our understanding related to how children learn, and of the notion of childhood itself, are constantly evolving. This evolution can only be efficient if the ineractions between communities and schools are rich and meaningful.

It is clear that there are lessons for the FLN efforts with regards to organizational structures, and pedagogical and content ideas from both the adult education experience, and the research and thinking about children's learning within institutional structures.

This knowledge is more about what is not good and should not generally be done, and some general principles that can be extracted, rather than about the precise steps to be followed. The journey to meaningfully educate children universally is not a simple one. We would have to continue learning and evolving contextual strategies.

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Foundation Building within Low Literacy Contexts

The OELP Experience

Keerti Jayaram

OELP's journey with Early Literacy began in 2006 in Municipal Corporation schools on the outskirts of Delhi, bordering Haryana. In 2008, we relocated to rural Rajasthan. We began work within the early grades of a few select government-run primary schools as well as in night schools or non-formal centres for out-of-school children.

During our establishment phase, each member of the OELP team taught for at least one year. We also engaged with the communities that the children came from. This allowed our small team to gain first-hand experiences and insights into some of the complexities that define classrooms within this rural context.

This compelled us to remain grounded and focused on conceptually sound, low-cost and doable pedagogies that address the diverse needs of our learners and the challenges of the teachers. The latter traverse the highly structured terrain of centralized mainstream curricula that is driven by 'outcomes'.

Each journey is fuelled by the stories which drive it. These are stories of children, teachers and classrooms, as well as of those who linger on the margins of schools. Among the plethora of stories that have driven my experiences within OELP, there are a few that I refer to as 'quantum leap stories'. Sanju's is one such story.

Sanju Learns to Read

It is a story from the early years of our journey. Sanju—a little wisp of a girl with untidily cropped, shaggy hair and large soulful eyes—was anywhere between five to seven years old. She attended the night school in Deendhwada village. This school was located in the *Balai Mohalla* of the village. This was a community of mainly landless, daily-wage labourers.

Like many children in the night schools, Sanju was invariably huddled in a corner. She generally remained a mute spectator when any learning activity was taking place in the class. For several days I found her completely passive and inert. On rare occasions I found her hesitatingly join a play activity. I was very aware of her silent presence.

After a spell of about ten days, I decided to quietly reach out to her. I sat next to her during group work. She gradually overcame her discomfort and began to respond as I engaged her with a few symbols and sounds from the *akshara* chart and its corresponding poem poster.

After almost two weeks of quiet resistance, Sanju wrote */ma/* and */la/* in tiny letters in one corner of her slate, but quickly covered these with her hand. After another three days of similar behaviour, she gathered the courage to show me her written symbols. I pointed to the letters in quick succession... "/ma/ /la/". As she repeated these sound symbols, Sanju heard herself pronouncing the word '*maalaa*'.

I then asked her to find the word from the poem poster. Next, she looked for other lines in which the word *maalaa* was written. At this point her excitement was palpable. She

now willingly drew the picture of a tiny little *maalaa* (necklace) in one corner of her slate, and ventured to sound out some other words. To my utter surprise, despite her apparent passiveness in the class, she had learnt to recognize quite a few *aksahras*.

When this particular class was over I noticed a slight buoyancy in her body language. As she picked up her bag to go home I overheard her telling her sister "*manne padbha aagiyo*" ("I have learnt to read!"). When I entered the class on the following day, I found Sanju running her finger along the words in the poem poster.

Several years have passed since. However, her words still echo in my ears - "*manne padbha aagiyo*". For me, this was her 'quantum leap moment'. It transformed her engagement in the classroom. More importantly, it transformed her sense of self. She had begun to view herself as a learner.

The Importance of Self Development in Pedagogic Processes

Based on his work on critical reflection, Max Van Manen, has written prolifically on the pedagogic experience. In an article titled 'Pedagogical Sensitivity and Teachers' Practical Knowing-in-Action' published in 'Peking University Education Review' in 2008, he says, and I quote, "It is not surprising perhaps that many stories that students tell have to do with approval, being noticed, feeling special. To receive recognition literally means to be known. Someone who recognizes me thereby acknowledges my existence, my very being. This is not the same as fleetingly noticing people who one passes in a busy street."

While cautioning us on the possible negative impacts of recognition, he elaborates that, "Recognition is inextricably intertwined with selfhood and personal identity. And self-identity is the realization of the tension between the being of self and the becoming of self, between who we are and who and what we might become. And that is how recognition plays such powerful role in teaching and learning. Recognition, and the feeling it produces—a positive sense of self—are public phenomena. It is something that unfolds in the space of relationships."

During our initial engagements with early literacy within schools in rural Rajasthan, we realized that we were working with children who were actively engaging with written words and written worlds for the first time only after they had entered classrooms. They were in fact emergent readers and writers who, unlike their more privileged peers, had not had exposure to reading and writing in their early years at home.

The school program was not addressing this disadvantage. To compound matters further, most of these young learners belonged to communities that existed on the lower rungs of the social ladder. By the time they entered grade one, many of them had learnt to navigate and submit to the contours of the social, religious, gender and linguistic frames that defined them. They had a fairly clear idea of their place in the social world.

The classroom was a reflection of their realities in the world outside and 'who you are' seemed to matter within this learning space too. Interestingly, this was not only in terms of how most teachers viewed the learners, but more importantly, in terms of the self-perceptions of learners themselves. It seemed as though their low self-esteem drove a lack of confidence. Perhaps as a consequence, many of them were afraid to risk participation in the class.

Working with local team members helped to deepen our understanding and engagement with the children, their communities and their lives outside school. We also began to explore ways in which children's lives and knowledge could inform classroom practice. It also helped to build bridges with the government schools, and the administration, at the levels of the block and the district.

Navigating Literacy as a Set of Social Processes

We were however, thrown into new challenges of addressing shifts from oracy to literacy within the adult members of our local team. They were conversant with the narrative and anecdotal forms that were derived from their oral traditions. The more expository written forms such as writing reports, proposals or reviews were hugely challenging for them. Assignments, which were required as a part of their professional development courses at times, became nightmares.

We were now grappling with the perplexing question of how to create engaged readers and writers within environments that did not nurture these modes of articulation and expression as a part of natural communication. This dilemma led OELP to initiate a parallel community reading program. This was part of the attempt to create a culture of reading and writing within the villages in which we were working.

We juxtaposed our ground experiences with insights from available literature on early literacy. As far back as 1989, Professor Krishna Kumar had argued in his book 'Social Character of Learning' that "The experience of education under the prevailing curricular and instructional norms can serve to assist students who come from so called backward backgrounds to internalize symbols of backward behaviour."

The scholarly works of Brian Street, Lisa Delpit , Purcell-gates, James Gee and several others from across different academic disciplines, alerted us to the shift in early literacy perspectives. Within this vast body of work, literacy is viewed as a set of social practices which are not neutral but are influenced by the context within which they unfold. This newer thinking which emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century compelled us to explore meaningful ways of addressing the context within which our own early literacy program was evolving.

At this stage in our journey, there was a churning within our program. We were struggling to address the specific needs of young emergent school goers from low-literacy, and often marginalized, communities. We were, at the same time, grappling with the demands of mainstream education and that of large-scale, centralized programs like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. We were being evaluated against standards that were beyond our reach. We felt stretched and challenged.

Our focus now shifted to the development of a nurturing, responsive and facilitating environment with a corresponding focus on the wholesome self-development of all learners and teachers in a classroom. We began to view self-development as the bedrock upon which learning unfolds. It was at this point of time, i.e., around the year 2014, that we revisited our instructional design. Our idea was to design a conceptually sound yet grounded foundational program, which addressed the multiple needs of emergent learners from low literate, rural communities. We were clear that our priority was to 'make success achievable' for the target group of learners we were engaging with.

By the year 2015, the key elements of our redefined and overarching theoretical framework emerged as follows. We now view literacy as a set of social practices which are influenced by the contexts within which they occur. There has been a shift from our earlier skill-based reading readiness approaches to process-based emergent literacy perspectives. This has taken place alongside a change from deficit perspectives which view learner inadequacies as inherent gaps within learners to discontinuity theoretical perspectives which address the social, cultural, linguistic differences of learners.

Translating Conceptual Clarity into Action

Our focus has become sharper and our objectives clearer. These have emerged

as follows. We now want to equip children from diverse backgrounds for schooling by focusing on foundational learning and self-development. The goal is to address shifts from oracy to literacy for children from low-literate backgrounds through foundational literacy and numeracy.

Addressing shifts from home language to school language is a part of this process. Our objective is also to enable high quality learning by enhancing higher order thinking for each child. We are also pursuing the goal of addressing the challenge of making a conceptually sound framework simple, doable and accessible for teachers who are working with limited resources.

We have operationalized the above objectives through an instructional design which consists of three strands or pillars. These are: a) Foundations for learning; b) Foundations for literacy and numeracy; and, c) Foundations for higher order thinking. These three pillars or strands are implemented simultaneously over a two year period across grades 1 and 2. Some of the key components within each strand are detailed below.

Foundations for Learning: Creating a nurturing, non-threatening and active, print-rich learning environment in the classroom is an integral part of this process. The focus is on the physical environment and on building relationships of mutual trust and cooperation within which each child experiences acceptance and a sense of belonging.

An important element of this environment is the use of the written forms of the children's names. This is our starting point. It offers the multiple advantages of giving the learners a sense of belonging and acceptance. It engages them with print in meaningful ways and creates an inclusive classroom that honors each learner. Developing the skills for school-based learning, i.e., self-regulatory skills and a focus on building the skills of efficient executive functions, is also critical.

Foundations for Literacy and Numeracy: The *Varna Samooha* Approach for engaging learners with the written script is central to this. This approach was developed through our engagement inside classrooms and aims to make decoding and engagement with a written script a meaningful process. The main idea of the Varna Samooha Approach is that each child needs to experience aksharas as sound symbols, which she can combine to construct the written forms of her own meaningful spoken words.

Engaging with planned print-rich classrooms and daily read-alouds in a variety of meaningful ways are strategies that are at the heart of building foundations for literacy and numeracy. Classroom practices for strengthening basic numeracy concepts such as number sense, quantity, cardinal and ordinal numbers, and number facts involve games, activities and their application in daily life activities.

Foundations for Higher Order Thinking: This is attempted through a variety of planned opportunities that address the varied interests, needs and levels within the class. The issue of language disadvantage has been clearly identified as an area of concern within the Indian context. However, a parallel concern has not received as much attention. This involves the shift that a large number of young children are required to make from the oral cultures in their homes to the unfamiliar print culture of a classroom. Research indicates that this transition does not come naturally. It can be very challenging for children from low literacy backgrounds. This is because they often do not have any support for reading and writing in their homes and social environments.

Through our journey of a decade and a half, we have learnt that children get to the school their real world experiences and knowledge. They also bring along competencies in the usages of spoken language, i.e. of their home language or mother tongue. They also carry

OELP

Engaging with the Print Environment

their imaginations, curiosities and natural inclinations to be purposefully engaged. These resources can equip young children to engage with their new classroom experiences in meaningful ways.

Classroom learning environments need to encompass these experiences and resources that children bring into the classroom. A young child's home language, and the world that it encompasses, must find acceptance within the classroom. Otherwise, it is unlikely that she will participate meaningfully in classroom processes. Instead it is more likely that the child will internalize rejection and adopt the role of a benign spectator who does not want to risk failure.

Children, teachers and communities who have been a part of the OELP Foundation Program have responded positively to our interventions. The responses to the instructional design and classroom practices that have evolved organically within the program have been encouraging. These have propelled us to explore digital platforms and other options for making our ideas and resources available across wider geographies.

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Mindful Learning

Literacy Programs Need to Focus More on Higher Learning Competencies

A K Jalaluddin and Arpan Mitra

Introduction

Education is a deliberate intervention to guide the processes of individual development and social transformation. The abilities to communicate meaningfully, read, write, compute and think critically, and to act critically and rationally, are some of the fundamental and basic characteristics which indicate the level of development of an individual, and, when aggregated over a large population, in a society.

These basic learning needs are not static. Their meaning and scope vary with the change in the context. In the ultimate analysis, the ability to read the context, to understand it, and to be able to consciously manipulate it, form the content of basic education.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the responses articulated by the systems of education in India do not adequately and effectively address the challenges we face. The responses of the system, by and large, have been taking the form of enlargement of the content areas rather than an integrated approach to the renewal of basic education.

Such an approach must give greater emphasis to generating higher order abilities in the learners. These abilities include searching for necessary information, processing them, constructing knowledge and correlating it with practical action.

This is the broad context we have to keep in mind while discussing the vital issues related to emergent literacy in the country. If we consider human development as one of the major goals of education, we cannot possibly shy away from these concerns and how they affect the practice of emergent literacy in the long run.

In contemporary societies, the definition of literacy is not limited to the measly attainment of the proverbial three 'R's as basic functional skills. Skill development in the areas of reading, writing and numeracy are important. However, we have to focus more on developing children's internal learning competencies. We have to help young learners start on the path of becoming self-organized and self-driven, with questioning and adaptive minds.

For many years now, several researches have indicated that a sizeable section of our young learners suffer much from what is termed as 'reading comprehension disability'. Once a child acquires this disability, it keeps on increasing at a frightening scale with her growing up. Intervention at higher stages of learning may not yield expected results.

The Core Problems

In India, from the moment a young learner steps into her first classroom, she is met with the problem of transitioning from one language to another. This is about learning a second or a third language.

Given our kind of regional and cultural diversities, it is often found that the 'standard' language used for communication in schools is quite at variance with the language used for communication at home.

The vocabulary, diction and idiomatic expressions a child acquires at home differ hugely from those used in schools by teachers and textbooks. Without proper support, this transition becomes difficult for many. If neglected, this may remain a perennial cause of frustration.

The second problem, related to the above, is found in most of our language learning primers and basal readers. They mostly begin with words and corresponding pictures. Children are expected to learn words as pictures, encouraging logographic reading from early on. While this technique has its own merits, this, nevertheless, can be positively detrimental for students coming from insufficient print-rich backgrounds.

This kind of reading skill limits children's ability to decode new words. Without sensitizing children with alphabets, the vowel diacritics (barakhadi/matras, as they are used in Indian languages), their independent and compounded sounds (syllabication), their splitting and blending, writing and orthographic skills, any literacy program is bound to remain incomplete.

Learning to Read

There are many reasons for the failure of our primary school students in reaching the desired levels of reading, writing and comprehension. The inability to read at any level is closely related to the deficiencies accrued at the stage of emergent literacy. We have seen that when the weak readers attempt to read their grade level texts, they falter at many words and are unable to make any sense of those. To understand the problem in the Indian context, we have to trace back some of our historical developments that took place with early literacy.

Most Indian languages are closely phonetic. Therefore, early literacy revolved around alphabhets and their vowel diacritics (barakhadi). Old vernacular primers used that technique. In the 1970s, the whole language approach was developed. Soon it became a sensation in India.

The effectiveness of the whole language approach is predetermined to a great extent on fundamental reading skills. As we have already mentioned, the readers have to become adept at identifying individual sounds of groups of letters, word syllabication, splitting and blending compound sounds, in short, the whole paraphernalia of phonics skills. Otherwise, it is difficult for them to make a swift transit to the complex world of whole language.

The art of writing is, in fact, a repository of artificial human memory which has been handed down to us over a very long time. First generation literates, who have had no social exposure to that memory, are palpably unequipped to begin their journey in the first place. In spite of the overwhelming support the whole language approach had garnered, it was soon found that it fell short of expectations.

Reading to Learn

By the next decade, another technique, the phonics technique that enabled people to read by correlating sounds with symbols within the framework of alphabetic writing system was developed. The rationale behind this new approach provided us with a practical-theoretical framework to integrate it with our alphabetic system and the whole language approach. It was found easy to apply phonics skills to Indian languages, as every letter is marked by its single corresponding sound, which rarely varies even with their combinatory vowel associations.

As the first author of this paper (A K Jalaluddin) reminisces, ''I was unable to influence over my friends who had then rooted strongly for whole language approach, but were unable to put up a convincing rationale for the same as drawn up by the

NCERT. However, in the early 1980s, after I took charge of Literacy House in Lucknow, I was able to put my ideas into practice. A new textbook 'Nai Rah' (New Path) was prepared by highlighting the phonic characters of the alphabets, their combinations and sound patterns of Hindi.

"Later in my career, I developed these techniques further and had put them to use in several learning improvement projects that I had taken up with Kolkata Corporation, Narendrapur Ramkrishna Mission, Lok Shiksha Parishad and BRAC in Bangladesh, with remarkable results... After a year's work, noticeable improvements were seen in the areas of phonemic awareness, letter-sound matching, recognizing alphabetical patterns, sight reading and contextual meaning making among several other learning competencies.''

While advocating the role of phonics in emergent literacy, one has to remember that teaching mere phonics serves no purpose whatsoever. It has to be used judiciously with other approaches to make the learning effective. Knowledge of phonic patterns, or phonemic awareness alongside vocabulary instruction help children sound out familiar words and prepare them to predict sounds of unfamiliar words. New phonology as a subject is more emphatic on the complex relationship shared between graphemes and phonemes, and between orthography and their phonation.

Translating between the Languages of the Home and the School

We all know that the basic four language skills are Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. It has been found that almost in all the schools, around 20% of the learners have problems with listening and remembering.

In most of the cases this happens because: (a) the child is unable to follow the inflections of standard language which differs from her own speech production; and, (b) she is unable to translate it back into her 'own' language, a necessity for her remembering. This is a problem which is usually overlooked by our education system, creating problems for many young learners.

The first author of the present paper (A K Jalaluddin) tried to overcome this in his Chandina Learning Improvement Project (CLIP), supported by BRAC, by creating hybrid basal readers using both the local Bengali dialect and Standard Bengali. Usage of phonics skills, the traditional alphabetic method, building usable vocabulary, story grammar, loud reading and identifying miscues, guided classroom discussions through questions and answers, reading and writing tasks along with these basal readers showed immediate positive results. The curriculum included rhymes along with other techniques of mnemonics, visual representations, and carefully designed tasks, including pre-reading exercises.

These techniques were further improvised in several later learning improvement projects. Researches in cognitive sciences and brain-based learning techniques have shown that it is possible to develop a learner's working memory and thus enhance the executive functions of her brain. Several educator-researchers have developed models to apply these research findings in classroom scenarios. However, how to apply these to large scale learning projects calls for another kind of research.

Need to Inculcate the Habit of Reading

Another crucial area that our early childhood educators tend to overlook is the inculcation of the habit of reading among the children from early on. Perhaps this has got something to do with our education system's penchant for single textbooks.

Creating wide repositories of graded and interesting reading materials is an absolute must. In today's world one has to remember that literacy is no more just about developing one's basic skills in reading and writing. It is

also about developing a child's cognitive and critical faculties.

Reading is primarily about constructing meaning(s) out of a text. It is also about being able to read words and sentences fluently, or rather automatically. A child's brain simultaneously activates a grapheme-phoneme pattern and also a schema networking for making sense of what has been encoded.

We have to equip learners with strategies of word coding and meaning making in a balanced way. Those who depend much on the skill–based approach, often fail to see the forest from the cluster of trees. Moreover, those who are overly dependent on schema activation alone are at the risk of seeing the trees but not the forest.

Strategies for Reading Period and the Role of Basal Readers

The aim of reading classes is to encourage students to improve upon their reading abilities by creating a joyful environment. This can be done by reading a series of basal readers, especially designed for the project, keeping in mind the initial vocabulary and language skills of the majority of students. The beginning texts should be profusely illustrated stories with built-in repetition of the new and unfamiliar words, thus building in redundancy.

Frequently used words are introduced at first, and then the number of other familiar words is increased. These words are repeated in the same text or subsequent, expanded texts. Thus, the reader would gradually increase the size of sight vocabulary, which in turn would improve her fluency of reading. This is the most well-known method of developing graded materials.

Beside the text, with its gradation in terms of difficulty level and controlled vocabulary, it is also necessary to expose the child to creative literature. Even when she is unable to read them fluently, in listening to the narration and speaking and enjoying them, the imaginative part plays an important role. Through this exposure, the child is familiarized to the sounds of different kinds of words and draws meaning from the context. This has a very powerful effect on learning.

Further, it is important to take the child beyond what is written. It is a strategy one has to learn. This is the level where thinking begins and language becomes a more meaningful tool to interpret reality. This can be done with any text, including basal texts. What is important is the discussion that a teacher is able to generate around the text or even a word.

Research and Innovation

The play-way method aims to create an enjoyable learning environment for children. Apart from making learning easy and pleasurable, it ensures opportunities for participation. It also develops knowledge and abilities and brings about intellectual satisfaction. From the cognitivist-constructivist point of view, this method is the most suitable in early childhood education. While this method is adapted by many, and has become quite popular in India, most of the practitioners show a clear lack of interest and aptitude when it comes to putting their practices on a scientific basis.

Testing a new idea as a research hypothesis, and studying its results by careful means, is imperative for any conscientious education practitioner. Besides finding new ways of training our teachers for early childhood education, there is also a great need to sensitize young parents and guardians about how a child learns and what are the best ways to provide support for learning.

In India, we still do not have adequate research-based technical support systems to guide schools and other organizations in their endeavours. Policy planners, administrators, school authorities, universities and other

research organizations should pool in their technical expertise to meet this requirement. While doing this, one has to be open to learnings and insights from extant and emergent approaches to early literacy. We also have to be alive to the real life contexts within which we work.

Note: This article has been prepared by putting together certain sections (with additional inputs) from the authors' recently published book 'From Mindless to Mindful Classrooms: Reflections on India's Struggle for Culture Shift in Education', edited by Arpan Mitra, and published by Bodh Shiskha Samiti (Jaipur) in 2022.

A K Jalaluddin is one of India's most renowned educationists, widely known for his contributions in the field of early, basic and mass education. He has served as the Joint Director, NCERT, and as senior advisor to World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF, among other organizations, in their early school education reform projects.

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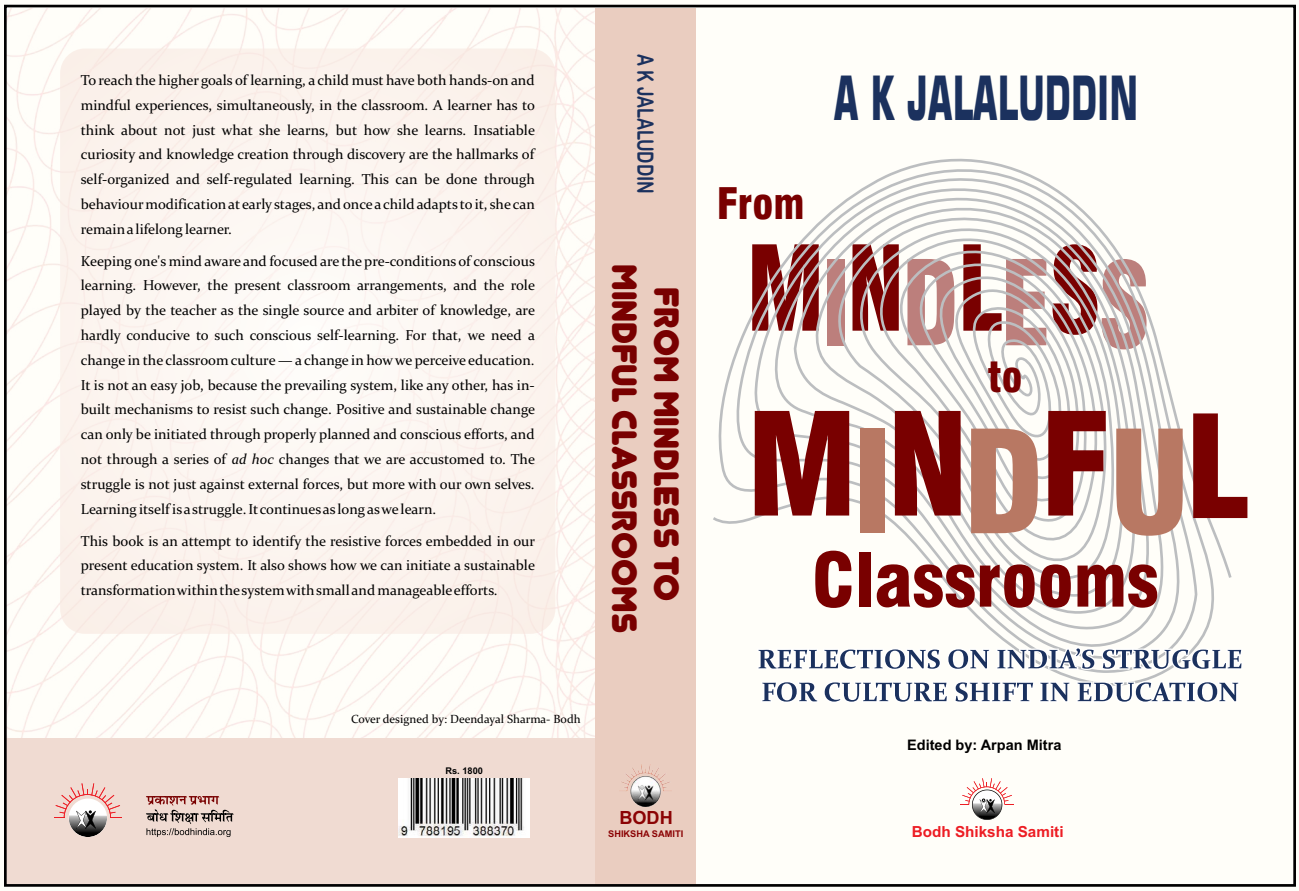

Nali Kali: Engaging Every Child in Learning

Manimakalai Raja

How it All Started

We started Gubbachi Learning Community (Gubbachi) in September 2015 to work with out-of-school migrant children in Bengaluru. We partnered with the BEO, S4 Block, Department of Education (DoE), Government of Karnataka (GoK). By the end of the first year, our first Bridge Centre in GHPS, Kodathi had mainstreamed 25 children.

We assumed that the school's teachers will take over from there. GHPS Kodathi had 70 children enrolled in classes 1-7. Adding our 25 mainstreamed students meant close to 100 children in the school with two teachers and a HM addressing their learning needs. All they could do, was divide the children into two groups to take classes.

A class size of 50 children with multiple needs, multiple ages, multiple classes and multiple learning levels is a huge challenge. It affects learning processes in the class. Maintaining discipline becomes very difficult as well. Our children were now at the risk of dropping out again. That was when the HM-in-Charge approached us. I jumped at the opportunity. Along with a colleague, we took on the teaching of classes 1-3.

In my previous avatar, working with a documentary film maker, I had filmed the Nali Kali program for classes 1-3, with the curriculum designing team of teachers from H D Kote under the guidance of Mr. M N Baig, the B.E.O. They were then part of the Nali Kali Pilot Phase initiated by DoE, GoK, in collaboration with the Rishi Valley Institute for Educational Resources (RiVER) in 1998.

Theoretically, I knew what the program was. Being a Montessorian, I clearly understood the philosophy and pedagogy of the Nali Kali program. However, theoretical knowledge of a program and practice of the same are two very different things. We had our work cut out for us.

It took us six months to lay our hands on a complete set of Nali Kali cards. We spent time after the classes reading every card. We tried to understand the trajectory, planning and the process of creation of the Teaching Learning Materials (TLMs) required for each of the cards.

The CRP who visited us every month helped us put the Nali Kali class together with the important elements that define the activity-based, multi-age, multi-level class. These include the following: the *kalika chappara* - the wire grid to hang children's art work; the *wall slate* - along the bottom quarter of the class wall for the children to practice on; the *havamana nakshe* – for the children to maintain the daily weather chart; the *pragati nota* - for each child to keep track of their progress in each subject; and the *Nali Kali diary* - the daily record of each child's progress maintained by the teacher.

We learnt to appreciate this curriculum and recognized the massive effort that had gone into putting it together. We then participated in a Nali Kali workshop run by Azim Premji Foundation (APF) at Yadgir.

In this workshop we had the opportunity to learn from APF's Master Trainers. This deepened our understanding of the content, and the philosophical and pedagogical aspects of the Nali Kali curriculum.

The Nali Kali Classroom As We Experience It

- Joyful learning curriculum: The day is filled with songs, activities, art work and games for each subject with ample scope for multiple sensory stimulations.
- Recognizes the migrant nature of the child: The curriculum is designed for the child to re-enter the learning continuum and pick up where she left off.
- Recognizes the ground realities: That government teachers were anyway teaching multi-grade, multi-level classes. The Nali Kali curriculum is designed to facilitate this nature of the classroom interactions in the government primary schools.
- Ideal class size is 30:1.
- Child-centric curriculum that starts from the simple to the complex: It has a well thought out trajectory, where children acquire their competencies incrementally.
- The child learns from her environment: The teaching learning material, the peer group, the curriculum, and the teacher(s), are all crucial to the child's learning.
- The child takes charge of her learning and marks her progress in each subject: A daily progress report is marked by the child herself. Competition is not an external pressure. It is there only if the child is driven by it.
- Conceptual clarity is encouraged by a focus on peer learning: When a child finds herself in the peer learning group, she gets to practice a newly learnt concept from a peer. Through this process, she gets to hone her own understanding of a concept learnt and practiced months ago as well.
- Fear-free environment: there is no fear of examinations as the assessment is through activities and is a continuous process.
- Classroom management: This leaves no scope for groupism along the axes of caste, gender and cliques. The child moves from one group to another according to the nature of the activities. The groups are ever-changing in every hour and in every subject.
- Immersive classes: children do not feel rushed because there is ample time for each class (90 minutes).
- The *vaachakas* (readers): These are well thought out. They have been consciously created to avoid gender stereotypes. These include names of characters from different faiths as well.
- The songs: These are sung by children during circle time, and are well curated. The language used is representative of the different regions in Karnataka.

Our Struggles, Responses and Learnings

There are areas in which we have struggled as facilitators as well. We have identified these gaps. We have tried to supplement the curriculum to make the teaching learning process meaningful for children. Details of this process of co-learning through struggles are elaborated below.

The Math Class: We felt the need to supplement the math practice for each child, as the exercise books afforded limited scope for the same. We have created math practice cards for the children to practice, not only in class but also at home.

These practice cards replicate the square book that children work in. The intention is to present the children with a model math practice template that they can reproduce in their notebooks. We have created multiple practice sheets for each concept by mapping them to the Nali Kali curriculum. This makes

it easy for the child to work independently. These are printed on class-specific coloured papers (pink for class 1, green for class 2, and blue for class 3). These are laminated so that they can be used for many years. These math practice laminates have eased classroom processes. They have also ensured that children have ample practice work in an organized manner.

The Kannada Class: Children do not learn the entire alphabet in the Kannada Nali Kali class. They are introduced to it five letters at a time. The child then learns to make words and small sentences using just those five letters. Each cluster of letters has a list of words for the child to practice dictation. Some of these words are new to the children. All the words are new for the child whose mother tongue is not Kannada. To enable meaningful learning of new words, Gubbachi has created flashcards of the simpler dictation words. This allows the children to see the words, engage with them, discuss the meanings and then learn to write these. This way, the child is familiar with the words when she comes across these in the readers.

English: At Gubbachi we have designed our own curriculum in English using the foreign language approach. BOB books (early readers) mirror the Kannada curriculum where a few, often-used, letters are introduced.

We introduce a few (2-4) common sounds to the children. They learn to make words with these sounds and have a little reader at the end of that cluster. Sounds are introduced using carefully created flashcards. These help the child understand the meaning of the word. Flashcards have been created not only for every letter, but also according to themes. These flashcards are curated according to the children's lived reality. They do not include content that is far away from their lives.

Lacking access to an immersive English speaking environment is the challenge we face in the government schools. The English class includes songs and stories. It has a daily component of conversation as well. This helps children to comprehend and speak the language. However, we realize that children don't prefer speaking in English yet. They often lapse into Kannada when questioned in English. We hope that as they move through higher classes, they would gain enough familiarity with English and speak it with greater confidence.

Daily Remedial Classes: The Nali Kali curriculum surely accommodates the migrant child who is absent for many days of the academic year. However, this child needs extra time to reach her learning outcomes and be Class 4 ready. This is possible only with remedial classes. Our teachers conduct an hour long remedial class every day of the week.

The child who has just got back from her village stays back to catch up on lost time. Once the expected learning level is met, the child does not continue with remedial sessions. But in case the learning gap needs more work, we work with the child during summer holidays as well. It is during summer that all the children are in town and regular. This extra time is crucial for the child to bridge the gaps in her learning.

Library Program: Gubbachi has a classroom library with books curated according to the needs and abilities of children in classes 1 to 3. The weekly library program includes read-alouds. These are planned by the teachers in advance. This also includes interesting craft work related to the story the child has just heard.

Extra-Curricular Activities: In continuation of the Nali Kali holistic learning experience, we have additionally included weekly sports and dance sessions for the children. These sessions give the teacher a bit of a breather as well. She can finish up corrections and look at the specifics of a child who might need more help.

Celebrations: In an attempt to make the Gubbachi learning experience a holistic one, we celebrate major festivals on a large scale. Children get a glimpse into each other's cultural practices and grow with a healthy respect for diversity.

Teacher Professional Development: We train our Nali Kali teachers through the Teacher Apprenticeship Model. A new trainee teacher assists and learns from a Nali Kali 'expert teacher' who understands the philosophy, content and pedagogy of the curriculum. This expert teacher guides the trainee teacher for 4-6 months and supports her learning process. We have an English coordinator to work with our Nali Kali teachers on the English curriculum too. Numerous other workshops for teachers on literacy, numeracy, understanding the children and their development, policies, understanding the self through reflection, and developing self-esteem and confidence are held throughout the year.

Why Are We Teaching Nali Kali Classes in Government Schools?

In 2016 we started our first Nali Kali class in Kodathi GHPS and continue here till date. There is a huge dearth of teachers in government schools in the Doddakanelli cluster. Trained Nali Kali teachers are few. The number of children is growing. The Department of Education is unable to meet the need. A class strength of 30:1 is ideal. Any number beyond that is a stretch for the teacher and learning levels will take a dip.

Gubbachi Nali Kali trained teachers have been conducting classes keeping the fundamental principles of the curriculum in mind. Teachers in Class 4 are happy to receive children with the required learning competencies in place.

Where Are We Today?

Gubbachi is now working in eight government schools in the S4 Block. This has been facilitated through an MoU with DoE, Government of Karnataka. Our interventions cover 18 classrooms.

Our teachers are there for the children of classes 1-3 every day from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Remedial classes take place every day for children who need that extra time and attention.

This year, all the children in classes 2 and 3 are in need of remedial classes. This is because of the learning losses over the past two years. These have taken place due to the school closures following the Covid-19 pandemic. One-child-at-a-time is Gubbachi's refrain. The Nali Kali curriculum allows each child her space and time to learn.

Manimakalai Raja is a co-founder of Gubbachi Learning Community. She leads the Gubbachi Transform Program that implements the governmental Nali Kali curriculum in classes 1 to 3. This program extends across 21 classes in eight (8) under-resourced government schools in Karnataka.

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The Power of Open

How Pratham Books' StoryWeaver is Creating Access to Children's Storybooks at Scale

Purvi Shah

"My students speak Pawari, a tribal language spoken in Maharashtra. Pawari is a dialect, and hence, no written material is available in that language. The language of instruction in schools is different from their home language, creating learning difficulties." - Amit Dudave, a teacher from a Zilla Parishad Primary School shares the challenges faced by his students in Jalgaon, Maharashtra.

Mr. Dudave's experiences are not isolated. UNESCO (in its Global Education Monitoring Report Policy Paper 24, titled 'If You Don't Understand, How Can You Learn?', and published in February 2016) estimates that 40% of people globally do not have access to an education in their own language. For children to become readers, they must have access to books in the languages they speak and learn in. There are not enough books, in not enough languages, for children to learn and practise reading. If we are to achieve our commitment towards universal literacy for all children by 2030, we face the fundamental challenge of bringing books to millions of children in an accelerated and sustainable manner.

The StoryWeaver Journey: The Power of Open

StoryWeaver builds on the legacy of Pratham Books (a non-profit children's book publisher in India, set up in 2004) to address the global inequity of not having enough books for children in their mother tongues. This platform provides open and free access to high quality, openly licensed, multilingual storybooks from Pratham Books and other reputed publishers.

The goal is to promote reading acquisition among children. The storybooks are levelled and diverse. They include early readers, fiction and nonfiction books based on science and math concepts, the environment, biographies and more.

The StoryWeaver platform is digital. However, the books are available in multiple formats to overcome the issue of digital access. These can be read online, offline or downloaded and printed. StoryWeaver has simple tools embedded on the platform. The tools allow users to further translate (and create versions of the books) for localized requirements. These resources then become available to other users as well. This process creates a multiplier effect and amplifies impact.

StoryWeaver has leveraged the power of technology and the open licensing framework. This has resulted in the creation of books such as those translated by Amit Dudave into Pawari. He has read these books to hundreds of children in his school and community.

StoryWeaver builds on the legacy of Pratham Books - a non-profit children's book publisher in India, set up in 2004.

Opening up Windows to New Worlds through the Joy of Reading

StoryWeaver was launched in September 2015 with 800 books in 24 languages. Today, there are over 47,000 books in 327 languages. These have been read over 100 million times on the platform. Of these, 70% are underserved languages, for which books are scarce or even non-existent. These books

are being used by Ministries of Education, literacy organizations, language collectives and digital and non-digital applications to improve children's reading and learning levels.

Our storybooks have travelled far and wide, reaching millions of children in India and across the world. At a government school in Kota, Rajasthan, a group of fifth graders read a Pratham Books title called 'How do Aeroplanes Fly?'. This book explores the idea of biomimetics by drawing parallels between the structure of an aeroplane and that of a bird.

The story is told through the eyes of a young girl called Sarala, who grows up to become a pilot. Some of the young girls in the group in the government school in Rajasthan said that they did not know that girls could fly planes. They also shared that this story had helped them imagine a new future for themselves.

Building Communities of Practice

Using the nearly two decades long experience in developing original content and translating it into multiple languages, we have developed tool kits, training modules and manuals for organizations and educators interested in translating into new languages. We have also developed a translation sprint workshop model. This has been used extensively in many countries to translate books. This model includes a peer-to-peer review system. It aids the quality checking of books that are created.

The African Libraries and Information Associations and Institutions (AfLIA), an organization working to promote mother tongue reading across 28 countries in Africa, held a series of translation sprints. More than 200 books were translated into Ewe, Fante, Hausa, Igbo, Isixhosa, Kikuyu, Luganda, Swahili and Yoruba on StoryWeaver in these sprints. The translated books have been used in the 'Read Africa Read' campaign.

Closer home, Suchana in West Bengal, India has been able to translate over 200+ books into the indigenous languages of Santali and Kora. Fuelled by the success of creating these digital books, Suchana printed 10,000 copies for distribution in local schools.

Responding to Ground Realities

There is a real and present need to find and publish diverse and inclusive narratives that represent the experiences of the entire Global South. We started with publishing 200 storybooks across languages with publishers like Room to Read and Sub-Saharan Publishers.

The aim was to expand our repository of storybooks on the platform. These collaborations took shape after much deliberation on how open licensing works and how StoryWeaver could help version existing storybooks into multiple languages.

In the early years of our journey, as we built the platform, we heard from many practitioners that internet access was an issue in remote areas, not just in India but in other parts of the Global South as well.

To address these concerns we built an Offline Library on StoryWeaver using Progressive Web App (PWA) technology. This allows users to save books on their devices. These could then be accessed without the internet without compromizing on the StoryWeaver reading experience.

Similarly, translation partners from Africa and India were unable to use StoryWeaver uninterrupted. This was because they lacked access to desktops and stable internet connections.

It led to the development of the 'Offline Translate' feature on StoryWeaver. It enables users to save books to the 'Offline Translate Library'. They can then translate the stories without the internet, and then sync and publish the translations once they have internet connectivity.

The Right to Read through the Pandemic and Beyond

2020 was a year like no other. All over the world, the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic loomed large. School closures brought an abrupt end to the planned learning journey for months to come. In the state of Maharashtra alone, 5.3 million government school students were bereft of their regular learning environment.

In response, StoryWeaver, Maharashtra State Council of Educational Research & Training (MSCERT), Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), and UNICEF came together to create Goshticha Shaniwar, (Saturday of Stories), a Reading Program designed to keep the joy of reading alive while children were at home.

Every Saturday, teachers, parents and volunteers would receive and disseminate the all-digital 'package' of storybook, posters, and activities via WhatsApp. Ms Sheeta Katkar, a parent whose daughter goes to a municipal school in Mumbai, received these stories during the lockdown.

She reminisces, "My daughter loved reading the storybooks shared on StoryWeaver and asking questions related to the topic. Once, while reading a story about a baby, she asked me about how she was as an infant. We then spent the rest of the afternoon discussing stories about not just her, but also her brother's and my childhood. It was fun!"

The program shone a light on the role remote learning can play in a student's life. As children return to school, it falls upon us to continue this momentum. We need to keep building foundational reading skills by providing regular online and offline access to interesting, relevant storybooks in mother tongue languages. Children who read are able to think more, are able to express themselves more freely, and become independent learners.

In our continued efforts to reach more children, we also partnered with the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and Central Square Foundation (CSF) to launch the CBSE Reading Mission. This is a two-year-long initiative open to all 25,000 CBSE schools across India. Under the Reading Mission, CBSE schools and teachers have enrolled in the Pratham Books Reading Program. This is available for free in English and Hindi on StoryWeaver.

Shalini Gupta, a CBSE teacher in Purkal, a village on the outskirts of Dehradun, Uttarakhand, narrated 'Gulli's Box of Things' to her students, which helped them build their vocabulary. After the storytelling session, her class was divided into teams. Just like in the storybook, they identified a problem or a situation. Then they tried to find an object around them that could solve the problem. They also did a class project where they created something out of waste material gathered from home and in school.

As we scaled into more marginalized languages, we found that many onground partners did not have access to desktop devices and laptops. Sauramandala, an organization working in North East India was one such partner. They work on translating children's storybooks into indigenous and underserved languages like Garo, Khasi, Paite, and Zou. Mobile phone penetration was high in the community. Therefore, we developed a Mobile Translate feature on StoryWeaver. This has been used to translate 2000 storybooks into 109 languages (mostly underserved) on the platform.

Democratizing Access to Books and Kindling the Joy of Reading

In a world where six out of every ten children are not achieving minimum proficiency in reading, the road to literacy – and UN Sustainable Development Goal 4, quality education – is an uphill climb. We are less than a decade away from 2030, that time in the future by which nobody is expected to be left behind.

Yet in sub-Saharan Africa, 88% of middle school children cannot read properly. In South and Central Asia, 81% of children are not learning the basic minimum. Closer home in India, half of children with three years of schooling cannot read at their grade level.

The obstacles are many. These include a shortage of schools and teachers for millions of children. This is compounded by a dearth of local language reading material for 40% of the students. StoryWeaver is committed to providing children with the very first step to literacy acquisition - storybooks. With StoryWeaver, we are drawing upon the best of technology and open licensing to ensure that children can have uninterrupted access to the books they so richly deserve to read and enjoy.

Purvi Shah works with Pratham Books where she has managed several diverse portfolios over sixteen years of service. Her current role involves driving the organization's mission of 'a book in every child's hand' through its digital platform, StoryWeaver.

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Connect On:

Pratham

Aiding children's transition from the mother tongue to the language of instruction in school - storybooks in the tribal Indian languages of Kora and Santali being used by Suchana

Learning Disability and Early Literacy

Kushal Dattani

India has adopted the Federal Definition as quoted by Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 2004. Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, speak, read, spell or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia and developmental aphasia.

The term does not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing or motor handicaps, or mental retardation, emotional disturbance or environmental, cultural or economic disadvantages. This definition focuses on the fact that before we go ahead with screening for learning disability, any possibility of hearing and vision impairment needs to be ruled out.

Around 5-15 percent (SLD Study 2017, 'International Journal of Contemporary Pediatrics') of school-going children showcase some form of learning disability. As per the report, teachers are the first to spot and refer to the challenges faced by the child for additional intervention.

Learning Disability versus Learning Difficulty

In the Indian context, 'learning disability' and 'learning difficulty,' both these terminologies are often used interchangeably. However these are two very different things and need to be understood by every educator. Gaps in foundational literacy and numeracy do spill over into other areas of learning in later years.

While some students may have consistent and lifelong needs, chances are that many don't. They have not developed adequate skills due to a range of cumulative factors (for e.g., inadequate early physical, learning and socio emotional milestones, unaware parents at home, frequent absenteeism, etc.) and are generally described as having learning difficulties.

Learning disability is usually based on diagnosis. Learning difficulty is a non-categorical definition, including all those who have difficulties learning one or more of the basic academic skills. Learning disability more accurately termed as Specific Learning Disability (SLD) constitutes a neurological and cognitive impairment which affects learning, information processing, language processing, mathematical and logical reasoning and writing expression.

Learning difficulties result from specific causes, such as physical, educational, emotional, or environmental factors. These include sensory impairment (weaknesses in vision or hearing) and severe behavioral, psychological or emotional issues. Learning difficulties may arise from English as a second language or dialect (ESL or ESD), high absenteeism, ineffective instruction or inadequate curricula.

There are multiple sets of interventions that are prevailing in India to support schools and parents to cater to learning disabilities. These include:

a. Effective teaching learning practices: More and more schools are starting to focus on teacher training in schools with

Evolution of Thinking about Learning Disability

Years	Evolution
1800 - 1930 Foundation Phase	● Early brain research was done during this period. ● In 1802, Franz Joseph Gall introduced the relationship between brain injury and mental impairment through observation of brain injured soldiers. ● The work was carried forward till 1866 by Pierre Paul Broca who introduced that brain injury is also associated with speech problems. He found that the left side of the brain was responsible for speech. ● Carl Wernicke, in 1874, studied people with brain injury in the left temporal lobe who had difficulties in recognizing and comprehending words. ● In 1877, Adolph Kassmaul coined the phrase blindness for loss of ability to read. ● In 1896, John Hinshelwood, took Kaasmaul's work ahead to find that the left angular gyrus section of the brain was affected with visual processing difficulties. ● Kurt Goldstein, in 1929, referred brain injured soldiers as traumatic dements with consistent behaviors like meticulosity, hyperactivity, concrete thinking.
1930 - 1960 Transition Phase	● A study on brain-injured children was proposed by Alfred Strauss and Laura Lehtimen in 1947. Brain injury occurred in three stages - before birth, during birth and after birth. Strauss created the diagnostic category of minimal brain damage suggesting that children with LD who were not affected due to mental retardation, hearing impairment, and emotional disturbances, had minimal brain damage. ● Thus, such behaviors got termed as Strauss Syndrome. ● Grace Fernald introduced the multisensory approach to reading disabilities. ● Marion Monroe developed the diagnostic test for reading disabilities. ● Samuel Kirk developed the assessment for Specific Learning Disabilities. ● Samuel Orton introduced Orton Quillingham method, for remedial intervention.
1960 - 1980 Integration Phase	● Learning disability started being recognized in schools across the country in the US. Programs were developed, teachers were trained and children began to receive services. Syracuse Public School in New York came up with their own curriculum. There was a major shift from the traditional delivery system in special education.
1980 - Present Current Phase	● Identification of students with LD doubled between 1977-1989. Research started building up on institutes for LD, research on phonological processing, and research on biological causes of learning disabilities. ● In May 1987, in India, section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was formed as the first civil rights statute for Persons with Disability. ● In 1990, in the 'Individuals with Disabilities Education Act,' the term 'disabilities' replaces 'handicap'. ● In 1996, a research team at National Institute of Mental Health used Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (FMRI) to identify activities in the regions of the brain that behave differently in dyslexics. ● Concessions by Maharashtra State Board were provided for students with LD - dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia. ● In 1997, regular education teachers were included in IEP processes and students were provided more access to general education curriculum. ● In 2004, school personnel received greater authority in educational placement decision making.

the hope to improve classroom learning. However, there is a catch here. Simply focusing on teacher training may not yield results, unless it is taken as a long-term professional development in school culture.

b. Resource rooms: Schools with adequate facilities and infrastructure have established resource rooms with shadow teachers, remedial focus learning facilities and teaching learning materials. The curriculum and implementation may look different in different schools.

c. Importance of screening and benefits of assessments: Schools and parents with more awareness prefer to get screening and early identification for children to ensure they receive adequate support early on. This is done ideally with support from clinical psychologists and special educators, along with parents and the classroom teacher.

Early Literacy Challenges Faced by Children with Learning Disabilities

- Can hear but not understand what they hear (auditory perceptual problems)
- Can see but not make sense of what they see (visual perceptual problems)
- Difficulty in writing and expression, but understanding more than what they can write or express
- Difficulty in decoding and segmenting words; transpose, insert or omit letters
- Slow reading, lacking fluency, which can affect comprehension of material
- Poor spelling skills, lack of recognition of patterns of words
- Pronounce a word in many different ways within the same reading passage
- Substitute one word for another (for/of, were/where, are/and, was/saw)
- May struggle with the vocabulary of math and understanding word problems
- May have difficulty recalling words for both oral and written expressions

Common Ways of Addressing Challenges Related to Learning Disabilities

- Provide students with structures to succeed in acquiring content/skills. Examples of these include keeping procedures, routines, teacher actions consistent each day till it is mastered by the children.
- Teach the rules of language, which include the sounds paired with symbols (letters, vowel teams, types and rules of syllables, doubling rule, etc.)
- Use of assistive technology features in different open source digital tools like G-suite/Microsoft for education. Further examples of these include spelling and grammar check in MS Word, voice typing features, optical character recognition with voice output, digital tape recorders, and use of e-text copies, etc.
- Use of graphic organizers for every subject and concept and using mind maps; pair audio books (read aloud programs) with written text to improve vocabulary and comprehension while building decoding skills
- Use of printed worksheets that are well organized, well-spaced and uncluttered
- Allow oral expression of information for assessments or one-on-one expression of information
- Grade spelling and writing mechanics separately or not at all when they are not the purpose of an assessment
- Use visual supports and manipulatives during lectures and math lessons
- Provide explicit instruction with examples and non-examples

- Provide opportunities for repetition of instruction
- Discuss teaching objectives daily at the start and repeat these at the end of the class and how it has been achieved
- Small group work (through role assignment); assigning a peer buddy for assistance
- Teach chapter previewing skills
- Provide page numbers where the answers can be found
- Break two-part questions into two separate questions
- Reducing number of questions to be answered for homework/tests
- Wherever possible, provide printed copy of summaries, points and mind maps of the concepts
- Learn about different accommodation provided by your respective boards during Grade 10 and Grade 12th exams. Ensure that the school practices those accommodations early on with children. All accommodation may be used on a case by case basis.

Kushal Dattani, a founding member at Samait Shala, has been an education sector professional since 2010. He initially worked as a Special Education Teacher Assistant for five years in Melbourne. He then transitioned to mainstream education as a teacher in India. He believes in leveraging and building leadership capacities in stakeholders to define inclusion for themselves.

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Connect On:

Terminologies Associated with Learning Disability

Dyslexia: Challenges faced by children in word processing, fluency and reading

Dyscalculia: Challenges faced by children in numerical ability and mathematical reasoning

Dysgraphia: Challenges faced by children in writing expression

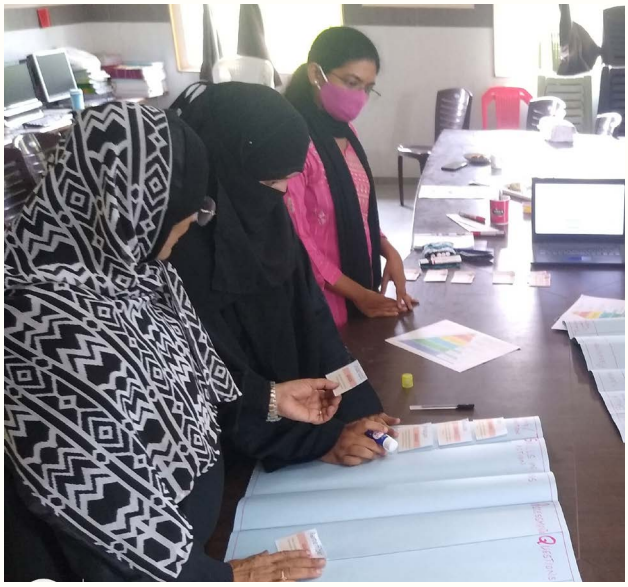
Dyspraxia: Challenges faced by children in motor coordination

Central Auditory Processing Disorder: Challenges faced by children in processing and remembering language-related tasks

Non-Verbal Learning Disorders: Trouble with nonverbal cues, e.g., body language, poor coordination, clumsiness

Visual Perceptual/Visual Motor Deficit: Challenges faced in respect to reverses letters; cannot copy accurately

Language Disorders (Aphasia/Dysphasia): Trouble understanding spoken language; poor reading comprehension



Samait Shala

On Language in Education

How words can open up our worlds when we let the world into our classrooms

Jane Sahi in Conversation with Thejaswi Shivanand

The following is a conversation between Jane Sahi and Thejaswi Shivanand on Jane's work in language education over the past four decades. Jane Sahi is the founder and teacher at Sita School which ran for many years. She has also been instrumental in co-creating and co-teaching a course in First Language Pedagogy in the MA in Elementary Education program at TISS, Mumbai, for several years. Thejaswi Shivanand was a teacher at Centre for Learning, Bengaluru, for many years. He and Jane are colleagues at a Library Educator's Course run by Bookworm Library, Goa. This conversation between them has been minimally edited to capture the texture of the actual exchanges in person.

Thejaswi Shivanand (TS): What would you like to begin with Jane?

Jane Sahi (JS): Your first question was about beginnings, wasn't it?

TS: I know you like beginnings!

JS: *(Laughs)*

TS: How did your journey begin with language learning and children?

JS: So I think from childhood I had a very strong sense of the gift of language actually, right from early on, it was something very precious. My father was a great storyteller and I readily became absorbed in reading even when I was quite young. It was never threatening for me in a way that, sadly, it is for some people.

TS: Right.

JS: And so when I grew up and interacted with children, it was something I really wanted to share with children; whether it was our own children, or the school children at Sita School or whoever. Because I do believe that every child has that potential to use language in a way that is right for them and empowering in a way. What is sad for me is sometimes just to feel how language can be so disempowering for various reasons. So that was probably not a conscious beginning...

TS: (Smiles) OK!

> "Whether a child asking, or ourselves asking questions, that reflective mode, that hesitancy, is the core of the language of learning."
>
> – Jane Sahi

JS: But that was the journey that I took, now that I think about it.

TS: But Jane, this is perhaps at the heart of your sharing about this journey. Do you recall any moments along this journey where it felt language learning was something you wanted to work on more deeply? For example, as part of running the school, or as part of documenting your observations? I have seen your documentation of children's work, play and learning, which is quite extensive. So did it occur to you at that point that this is something interesting?

JS: There were many occasions over the years. One that I particularly remember was when children in the school used to write a newspaper. And the younger children would

have a scribe to write down what they said. The newspaper would be shared once a week or once a fortnight in the assembly.

TS: OK!

JS: And I remember watching a little girl, Lakshmi, from a Lambani family. She was probably about five. And an older child read out what she had said. And the memory of her face just surprised and lighting up that what she had said could be recalled, was of value to other people, and was now somehow being heard by all was rather special... It was nothing particularly tangible. She didn't say anything, but I don't think I'm just romanticizing...

TS: Of course...

> "There is so much talk about resources and packages and so on. But one much neglected resource is children's ability with language itself."
>
> – Jane Sahi

JS: But it was illuminating on how, to be heard is really important sometimes. That right from a very young age that space for a child to speak, to listen and to be heard is so absolutely critical.

TS: That's an interesting example that you take there, Jane. If you look at Lakshmi, she comes from the close-knit Lambani community where her home language is different from Kannada, that is the language of other families in the village. And then she is learning other languages in school as well!

JS: Yes!

TS: But you picked up on something that seems fundamental to all of us, wanting to be heard, something we can all relate to, so it seems to transcend many barriers...

JS: Yes. And I think it's true of every child, actually. Even if we have had children in the school who can't speak - I can think of two children who were non-verbal – they were finding other ways to express themselves. There was a boy, who is sadly no more now, who said very few words. We had a box of dressing up clothes in the school and he absolutely delighted in dressing up from the box!

TS and JS laugh

JS: So, it's not just words, but expressing through gesture, or drawing. For him, even drawing was difficult. He was 7 or 8 before he drew something which articulated an idea, some way representational of something he wanted to communicate. In more conventional terms, you could say his development stages were quite delayed. But his desire to communicate was always there. So, it's not just verbal but also non-verbal and action.

TS: I think in a world that is more accepting of diversity, of difference, there will be space for any child to find their place in the world. I recall meeting a child with Down's Syndrome in the UK a few years ago. This child worked with his mother in a pottery class. I was on and off in touch with the child. And many years later, the child has grown to be a highly skilled and much sought-after ceramics artist. Often what seems to happen with children who don't have conventional forms of expression, don't have much space in our world, or don't find a way to navigate it very easily, or find a way to be heard, so to speak.

JS: Yes...

TS: So I wonder what we are doing, say, when we think of a language program in schools, and there are so many languages that we require a child to learn, what are we doing with the primary urge of the child to feel part of their world, to express, to share....

JS: And children often feel marginalized. First of all, so much attention on the word.

Secondly, on standard language. Thirdly, on English.

TS and JS laugh

JS: (Smiling) Fourthly, particular ways of writing. That goes right through up to the university level where if you don't write in a particular, academic, discursive frame, you are dismissed... Somehow, not incompetent, but not worth paying attention to...

TS: Of course. You know, I recently had several long conversations with a young writer-publisher of Dalit-Bahujan literature in English. He has a halting manner of speech in English. But when you listen to his ideas and read his poetry and essays, it is something else altogether. Someone could easily dismiss him by his speaking manner. But I'm sure no one could argue with the depth and fluency of his ideas and scholarship.

JS: Society can be very oppressive with demands of performance of particular kinds.

TS: Extremely oppressive. It leads me to wonder... We have millions of children in government schools across the country under the three language paradigm... Given that is not likely to change anytime soon, however much we would like for learning to be much more flexible and accepting, what do you think we can do in schools, you know, for the system to be more accepting of difference in children's approaches to learning language, for more time, and even for the teacher to see that it's alright to arrive at it when they are ready.

JS: Yes. Actually I was interested in one of your questions about teachers.

TS: You mean the question on teacher education and language learning? I wondered if you could share your observations and thoughts on trends that you have observed.

JS: Yes. I often feel that teachers get exposed to a lot of theory. But unless teachers have had a constructionist and experiential approach to learning, these theories make no sense at all. So you are learning about joy of learning, activity-based interactions, etc. But, unless it is part of your experience, you don't really value it and it's quite threatening in fact. Finally, a creative process is a democratic process, whether you as an adult are faced with a blank piece of paper or a child of five is faced with blank paper, it can be equally frightening sometimes.

TS: That's right. Of course.

JS: You are beginning from scratch. You can imitate, copy something, but if you are actually drawing from your own resources, it is enlivening and can also be empowering, both. And so I feel that teachers need to really have the experience of connecting to what they read, and to what they write. I remember a workshop at Centre for Learning some years ago, with government school teachers.

> "Writers and translators often seem to feel that since every book offers an opportunity for the child to learn language, they ought to use the right language, or in other words, standard language. The sense of play there is lost as well."
>
> – Thejaswi Shivanand

TS: Ah! Yes, I remember. That must have been in 2011-12.

JS: Yes, eight or ten years back. There was an older man there. He must have been in his late 50s, close to retirement. I put out a pile of objects and asked each one to choose an object and write a letter to it. And this man, I mean, talk about prejudice (laughs), he looked like a typical authoritarian teacher. He took a little cloth pouch with a draw string

and he wrote about his childhood, how his grandmother used to put mixture in a little pouch like that when he went to school. And I'm not exaggerating, when he read out what he had written, he became tearful and confessed that he had never in his life written anything like this before. He had even forgotten this memory.

And then I thought, not that one expects everyone to weep. But, just how much of a closed door it has been for so many teachers. So how can you encourage children to have the sense of space to write if you haven't actually experienced it yourself? So I feel that teacher training has to be so much more experiential. Teachers need to draw upon the theories and make the connection to their own lives.

TS: I remember your teaching sessions in the library educator's course, where the course participants experienced themselves as readers who see the world, and who listen, and write – reading as not as an isolated activity of decoding. These have been hugely influential on my own approach in working with teachers.

Most teachers haven't had a chance to express themselves, haven't listened, haven't been read to, and haven't written something independently. Their jobs have just been to deliver, to complete the class, the curriculum as a series of tasks, rather instrumental and not located in an embodied sense of being emotionally related, moved by the experience of expressing themselves in their adult lives, and draw from that in their work, to share it with another, whether with each other or with children.

JS: Yes...

TS: Now if I were to ask you, suppose you get to change the B. Ed courses, how do you think we can make them more experiential? There are attempts to make B. Eds more progressive, immersive, be in a classroom with children for longer periods of time. But other than the program testing you for certain classroom and assessment skills, how can it be different?

JS: A few things come to mind. One, training should be a collaborative process so that teachers and students work together rather than as individual competitors out to get the top marks. Teachers' education programs should model elements of being in the classroom. You are taught the constructivist process. You are taught about it, but you don't experience it as part of the course. You don't at all experience the connection to the theory. Even the classroom observation and demonstration sessions are not designed to facilitate this experience. There is no space for sharing any experience with other fellow learners either, to tentatively exchange ideas and build on them creatively.

TS: Hmm...

> "I think so often that we have come to think of meaning in a very literal, rational way. But we actually make meaning in multisensory, intuitive ways." – Jane Sahi

JS: Secondly, I think, and this is happening all over the world, that teaching is taught as deliverables, you know. So, the emphasis is on skills rather than a deeper understanding of the basic foundational principles, say, of language. So you are learning how to teach grammar before you have engaged with meaning making of language itself. So we definitely need a shift towards a balance of skills and understanding, so that it is not just about skills and classroom management. But the question of why classes need to be 'managed' has to be asked! Why are children so disruptive, especially in the West? Because the content and approach is not meeting their levels of interest or need.

TS: I completely agree with you there. This is a phenomenon we increasingly see in India as well. We don't reflect on that ourselves, why is this disruption there in the first place.

JS: Yes...

TS: Can you please share further examples of what can change in teacher education, particularly with respect to language learning?

JS: Another thing that is a bad model in the B. Ed. Programs is the lecture mode. Since you are learning in a lecture mode, that is what you will use in a classroom as a teacher, isn't it? You are not taught to be a facilitator. You are a passive listener.

So if the faculty, the professors in the B. Ed. institutes saw themselves as facilitators, rather than as lecturers, that would change practice, model practice, better than any amount of reading about theory can do... Otherwise you begin to doubt whether a dialogical process of any kind is possible in the classroom...So we can't teach some of these matters. It has to be part of the shape of the course, an integral part of it. And we need to constantly reflect on the process.

TS: I see what you mean...

JS: I do remember - and this is an aside - in the TISS MA in Education course that I was teaching some years back, we were talking about dialogue and I asked, is this class a dialogic process and there was an uncomfortable silence...

> "Communication is the heart of the matter, not the correctness of the language." – Jane Sahi

TS and JS laugh

JS: And it really made me stop on my tracks because you can't talk about dialogue and leave no actual space for dialogue.

TS: I'd like to return to your experience of teaching in the master's program. But if we could for some time discuss your experience of dialogue in Sita School, with your colleagues of many years? Suppose we take language learning as an example. How has dialogue worked with teacher colleagues in that space? I understand this might sound a bit artificial as work and learning in a school is so much more wholesome, less divided or reductive. But for this discussion, can we talk about the space of dialogue in shaping every facilitator's learning in the school around language learning in children?

JS: Some of it was by default in a way, for example, my Kannada is quite weak even now after many years. And one of the other teachers was quite weak in English. So there was quite a bit of what you might call trans-languaging, which involved shifting very easily between languages. When you couldn't find a word in English or Kannada, you substituted it with another from the other language. So that was one aspect, that we were as open to sharing weaknesses as we did our strengths.

TS: OK

JS: Apart from that, I think really trying to... hmmm...for me it was a dialogic process to really try to understand where people were coming from and trying not to impose a framework and realizing that language and culture are so deeply...

TS: ...intertwined....

JS: ...embedded in each other...

TS: That is such an important aspect of life itself. If we think of our approach of starting with A for Apple, B for Ball, C for whatever, which is very removed from the child's own experience of learning the home language or home languages rooted in the child's socio-cultural world. But if we go back to your earlier thought of bringing a balanced approach of skills and the social environment of the home and school, and then consider

this in the context of working with teachers, like you would with children?

JS: Thinking of an example, one of the things that many teachers really find challenging is thinking about standard and non-standard language. For most teachers, teaching standard language is something that they can give to a child to empower them and that non-standard language is going to further marginalize them or they just don't value non-standard language for various reasons. So when a 4-5 year old says something in a Kannada dialect which is not in standard language, do you correct it, do you write it down differently, do you stay true to what the child says? This is not to say that the child has to forevermore stay on speaking the non-standard language. But how do you help the child negotiate both, without devaluing one at the cost of the other?

> "...when a child speaks in class in the same way they speak at home, and they are told that this is wrong, it silences the child." – Jane Sahi

TS: Right...

JS: An issue like that is so fundamental, because when a child speaks in class in the same way they speak at home, and they are told that this is wrong, it silences the child. They lose confidence to express themselves. And words like 'dirty language', 'impure language,' these are so much part of some teachers' vocabulary and often reflect not only ideas around standard and non-standard language but also complex caste dynamics around language use and what is considered 'cultured' and good language. So if a child is told their language is dirty, and I have heard teachers say this in many places, how does the child feel, what does it do to their whole identity? Pronunciation is another issue. For instance, the idea that children don't have to be drilled into making the sound 'Ha' as opposed to 'A' in Kannada classes and how that can make children so self-conscious that they avoid talking... It's just paralyzing!

TS: Definitely!

JS: Children are, at some point, highly motivated to align themselves with standard language if they are allowed some space to recognize and see for themselves the value. But not as a four year old!

TS: Forced into it and made to feel inadequate. It's rather tiring after a while. This happens in writing as much as it does in speech, does it not?

JS: Yes, indeed! Whether it is English or Kannada, there is one kind of language that is expected, isn't it? Whereas, the real skill and sensitivity is to navigate whom you are speaking to, where are you going to communicate? Communication is the heart of the matter, not the correctness of the language.

For instance, I never know how to behave in a government office. But there is a way which allows for an entry point there. I don't have that skill unfortunately. I bumble about trying to find the right manner. But some people can move very easily between different spaces and find the right register to inhabit those spaces and contexts. And that is something that is not taught in schools. Isn't it?

TS: It is what we call life-skills nowadays, something to be taught separately. So it ends up being something you either acquire or you don't, depending on the circumstances of home and school that you are in... Isn't it somehow coming back to the core ideas expressed by Freire for adult learners that are the same for children?

JS: Actually, I am reminded of Sylvia Ashton-Warner who worked with Maori children in New Zealand in the 1930s-40s. I have often thought that her approach was quite like Freire's, but for children. For example, she found textbooks completely irrelevant to

the children's lives. So she would ask them to say a word. So she writes that they would say words like 'blood' or 'kill' or 'knife'. These were words that would never, ever, come in a middle class, western-oriented textbook. And yet these were the words that generated energy for children, since it was part of their environment. She has written a book called 'Teacher' which documents her work. So many things that we are talking about are actually relevant for everyone. It is not one thing for children and another for adults. Not that I'm actually saying we start with 'kill' and 'knife' in our classes.

TS and JS laugh

JS: The point is that we consider the relevance of the language of the specific group of children we are working with and how it links with the motivation to learn.

TS: That is critical. Nowadays documents such as the recent NEP consider this point and emphasize the role of language in communication while shaping language policy in schools. In reality though, there is a tendency to adopt a reductionist approach to learning which involves say, assessment of narrowly defined skills with yearly benchmarks in school on language competencies. The child hasn't picked this up by such and such a grade, so we need to fix it.

Doesn't that come in the way of each child's motivation to learn and to explore new contexts for the language they pick up? For instance, having demands of a certain number of new words to be learnt in a year and that too in standard language, without context, can be quite oppressive as you shared earlier. How do you suggest we approach this?

I remember that one of my colleagues at Centre for Learning, Leela Garady, used to introduce complex words in songs and rhymes. Children would love the sound of the words. And I felt that whether they understood it or not, they seem to love the sound rolling off their tongues. In conversations with her, she mentioned that meaning isn't just in the contextual location of a word in a sentence. It took me a while to understand this with children. What are your thoughts on this?

JS: I think so often that we have come to think of meaning in a very literal, rational way. But we actually make meaning in multisensory, intuitive ways. And so the emphasis on the spoken word is very heavy. But the way we communicate is through eye contact, intonation, the sound of language. And that is something that is often sidelined. One of your questions was about play. And the idea of playing with language is where every child's learning language starts with, whether it is babbling or just playing with sound and the possibilities of sound. And if that rhythm, repetition, intonation is somehow brought into the classroom as a natural, normal, valid way of understanding meaning, then it is a good starting point.

> "So if the faculty, the professors in the B. Ed. institutes saw themselves as facilitators, rather than as lecturers, that would change practice, model practice, better than any amount of reading about theory can do." – Jane Sahi

TS: Yes.

JS: I remember, rather painfully, a time when I was an observer in a teachers' workshop in Rajasthan. The session was on rhymes. The person facilitating the workshop did 'Jack and Jill' with teachers who weren't very fluent in English. So they were split into groups to work on the rhyme. One group came back with a whole explanation of Jack and Jill, which wasn't at all the point of the session!

None of these rhymes are dependent on the literal meaning. They build images, patterns, the beginning of a story – the cow jumped over the moon, or jack fell down and broke his crown – the joy and energy is in the sound, the image. And to translate this into an essay of literal meaning is completely beside the point, where the passion of the language is stilted and frozen.

TS: This seems yet another example of the facilitator not facilitating a dialogue...

TS and JS laugh

JS: So again, not the theory but simply exposing the children to rhymes that they can join in... Children love the rhymes... They are a natural way of enjoying, participating and sharing language. And repetition that is not boring, unlike much repetition that happens in classrooms everywhere.

TS: Don't we see this pattern of wilful ignorance from adults in making space for children to enjoy in participating and sharing language, for instance in children's books? Both in writing for children and in translating books for children. Linking this to our earlier conversation on standard language, writers and translators are quite resistant to feedback on the use of standard language when it often feels forced or stilted, rather unnatural in those story contexts.

Writers and translators often seem to feel that since every book offers an opportunity for the child to learn language, they ought to use the right language, or in other words, standard language. The sense of play there is lost as well. So it comes back, doesn't it, for us to think about more inclusive, empowering and exploratory ways of learning language rather than fixing a frame. In this context, can you share some thoughts on children's books and your experiences of working with them?

JS: There is so much talk about resources, kits and packages and so on. But one much neglected resource is children's ability with language itself. In the school, a lot of the texts the children used were the texts that children had generated themselves and shared. We also told stories, and read stories. But actually using the children's own texts was an important part.

But where did those texts come from? They come from experience. But they also come from hearing languages in multiple ways – in the telling of stories, in riddles, tongue twisters, rhymes, in song... All this build up children's ability to create a text. Children's texts don't come from nowhere. They come from many exposures of how language is being used.

TS: Of course, yeah...

JS: So, that is one thing that is not thought about enough, for children to share each other's texts, especially for young children, that too in non-standard language, close to their own way of speaking. One of the gaps in Kannada, English and perhaps in all other Indian languages as well, is the gap between spoken and written language, and how to bridge the gap to enable children to express themselves.

> "Most teachers haven't had a chance to express themselves, haven't listened, haven't been read to, and haven't written something independently."
>
> – Thejaswi Shivanand

TS: I had a glimpse of this when I tried to introduce book making in a library project in Yadgir in north Karnataka. Children initially modelled their books on other books they knew, from the storylines to the Disneyfied images and the characters like princes and princesses. But very soon, in the very next iteration, they wrote of their own lives, the breaching of their village kere (lake) featured in one story, and so on.

Another time, I suggested maybe they could write a story that was shared at home. Children collaborated on writing stories. Sometimes when the home language was Telugu, a child wrote down the story, collaborated with another on the translation, another drew the images or they all drew together. It was quite a different experience, without much support from the facilitator.

JS: But it does require on the part of the facilitator a trust that children have something to share. This reminds me of one of the students at TISS, Jitendra Kumar, who was working at Ekalavya. And he did a field project on stories in one of the schools. He asked a group of 9-11 year old children - it wasn't a classroom setting, but an activity workshop – to tell stories.

Nearly all the children told stories in the manner that they had read in the textbook. However there was one child, a girl of 11, I think, she told the story in a completely different manner. Not only the content but the style as well – story within story within story – and plenty of body gestures to make her points. And afterwards he found out that she was one of the weakest in terms of reading and writing in that class.

All of those who conformed to what a conventional story meant had got trapped in, locked in a particular way, with a kind of linear trajectory for the story. That was expected and that's what they produced. So that was quite a revelation. And then culture comes in, where storytelling varies so much. Yet in the school textbooks, it is reduced to a single way of telling a story.

TS: The dangers of a single story and the single ways of telling a story.

TS and JS laugh

JS: I'm reading a slim book by Ben Okri on storytelling where he says that story is not about the outline or the plot, but it is actually the way of telling the story that makes it alive. He wasn't only talking about the oral tradition but the shape you give the story, how you have internalized it and expressed in a particular way. I find that interesting. So often the story is the plot, but the actual way of telling a story can make all the difference.

> "I do believe that every child has that potential to use language in a way that is right for them and empowering in a way."
>
> – Jane Sahi

TS: Now that you shared the story of your student from the TISS program, I wondered if you could share your experience of co-teaching the course on First Language Pedagogy in the TISS MA course. How was this different from working with your colleagues at Sita School where interactions are spread over a number of years?

JS: I must say that everything I have done in terms of teaching in courses, including the TISS course and at APU, has been rooted in my experience of being at Sita School. I can't imagine how people teach teachers without having teaching experience themselves. But so many do, in fact.

TS: That's right, quite rampant, in fact.

JS: So, it was really a way of reflecting on what happened in the school. For many years I didn't write anything, for nearly 20 years I think. It was in the 1990s that I first began to write anything on teaching. I was too busy... (laughs) And so in the next 20 years, I have been really drawing on those experiences and reflecting on them. I was enormously lucky that Maxine Berntsen (with whom I co-taught the course) and I had complete freedom at TISS to shape the course. We had about a year, if not more, to prepare the course. Now I hear of people having been asked to prepare a course in 2-3 weeks and then you look up someone else's course. But you

really can't write in those timeframes. But it evolved, changed, inevitably as it should, never a repetition from one year to the next. We approached the content, delivery and assessment with complete freedom. I mean, there was accountability in terms of sharing our work.

TS: Since we discussed earlier on the role of the teacher as a facilitator, how did you use the course to create a praxis, so to speak, around facilitation in the course?

"Often what seems to happen with children who don't have conventional forms of expression, don't have much space in our world, or don't find a way to navigate it very easily, or find a way to be heard, so to speak." – Thejaswi Shivanand

JS: One thing we did right at the beginning was that we included a very wide range of texts and resources – film, poetry, story, diary. We also drew on the experience of students, and many of the TISS students were mature students who brought in their own experiences in life and work. The MA did not require you to have a B.Ed. or any teaching experience, actually. There was much diversity in terms of language diversity, qualifications, work experience, age and that was actually a resource.

TS: That is somewhat different from what courses do usually – drawing from participants' experiences.

JS: I hope we did. For some English was their mother tongue, perhaps their only language. And there were others who came knowing multiple languages. There was a student from Nagaland, I remember, who had grown up with many languages. I think we tried to be inclusive by providing a range of material and also a range of assessments. We offered a choice, not expecting everyone to follow a standard assessment – an observation of a class, an interview with a publisher, or whatever it was – there were different possibilities.

TS: So you were attempting to model, in the experience of the course, of learning and opening up the space of learning with children, if the course participants hoped in future to work with children.

JS: Definitely. It wasn't a pedagogical course in the sense of how to teach grammar or vocabulary. Those came incidentally. It was much more about understanding language as a process of meaning making, about looking at it as a multimodal process where image, dance, music could be understood as other forms of expression and communication. And addressing issues of justice, inclusion, multilingualism. So this particular course wasn't a pedagogical course in the sense of how language is often taught. I'm not saying there isn't a place for other ways of teaching language. But we tried something different because our intentions for the course were different. This course, I suppose, was about language in education.

TS: That is a crucial distinction you make there, about language in education, rather than language education.

JS: I remember several articles in this context, especially the one by Bruner called 'Language of Education' in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Have you read it?

TS: I have read one or two excerpts some years back...

JS: Yes. So Bruner was talking really about the language of learning. That is not often talked about...for example, the idea that hesitancy....he doesn't mention hesitancy, that was Nel Noddings, but a tentative language of learning, an exploratory way of learning, when you don't feel compelled to come up with some definitive, articulate

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answer - that the language of learning is a tentative process. It isn't being clever with language, it is probing into language.

So I think some of these ideas, such as the language of learning, aren't emphasized enough. There are a lot of people who have written on this now, the meaning of classroom discourse or whatever. But it is something that quickly gets sidelined. You want to get on with it. Talking about hesitancy, tentativeness, is not a popular way of talking about it.

Coming back to Bruner, he gives the example of how a student questioned his statement that any subject could be taught to any child at any age 'in some form that was honest'. To his complete surprise she asked, " How do you know what's honest?" He writes with such humility about his inability to respond, though at the time he was a well-known professor.

Whether a child is asking questions, or we are asking ourselves, that reflective mode, that hesitancy, is the core of the language of learning. Language is the bedrock of learning, it is so fundamental to the way we live. We are, because we live and share through languages of different kinds.

TS: That is perhaps a good point to pause this conversation and take it up again later. It was wonderful to have this discussion. I feel rather strangely contemplative and energized at the same time. We must return to it soon.

JS: Perhaps as a group? I was hesitant at your questions after eight years of not being at school. But it was perhaps a good time to rethink as well.

TS: So much to think and rethink. Thank you, Jane.

JS: Thank you, Theju, for this conversation.

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Strengthening Foundational Literacy

Aastha Maggu

Foundational literacy involves activities that build rich language skills. These include vocabulary, self-expression, and understanding with comprehension for children in the three-to-eight-years age group. It involves literacy practices and activities that could involve playing, singing, reading, speaking and writing. These five years include pre-schooling and elementary schooling. This period of time is known to be critical for children's educational outcomes in later years.

National Education Policy 2020 has brought back the focus on the need for improving foundational literacy and numeracy abilities of children in our schools. Government of India has set an ambitious goal to achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy in primary schools by 2025.

In this piece, we speak with organizations working towards improving foundational literacy of children belonging to marginalized communities. These organizations have adopted contextualized appropriate pedagogies that incorporate the children's diverse experiences. As a part of this process, they develop innovative teaching learning materials. They also capacitate community members and schoolteachers to engage with children's language and orality, both inside and outside the classroom.

Samerth Charitable Trust

Over two decades, Samerth has been working to empower vulnerable, marginalized communities and provide them with social and economic dignity. It is present in parts of Gujarat and Chhattisgarh. In 2001, Samerth started early education centers for children

Samerth Charitable Trust

between the ages of three to five. The team capacitated community members to start facilitating sessions at these centers and activities were conducted using creative pedagogies. Once anganwadis became functional in the region, Samerth stepped away from running this program.

Their approach to foundational literacy entails a contextualized, activity-based and child-centric pedagogy to enhance the quality of education in the region. To bring about systemic and sustainable change, they capacitate government schoolteachers to adapt this methodology as well.

Rajul from Samerth shares, "These children's parents are migrant laborers who are natives of states such as Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, etc., and speak different languages and dialects. Since the medium of instruction in primary schools is Gujarati, the children struggle in their lessons. It'll be unfair to expect the child to start reading, writing and speaking a different language. We train educators who hail from the communities we work with. These educators usually have completed school till the tenth and twelfth grades. We encourage our educators to contextualize teaching/learning materials (TLMs) to suit the diverse backgrounds of the students."

Samerth runs 28 learning centers and works in 28 government schools in Ahmedabad. The idea is to make education more interesting and relatable for children, so their foundational concepts are strengthened. The current teaching method in schools is still through rote learning, chalk and board, with a focus on disciplining the child rather than igniting her creativity.

The team has observed that for vulnerable children, this leads to high dropout rates, poor performance in academics and a lifelong dissent towards anything to do with 'education'. Samerth's pedagogy, on the other hand, is aimed at establishing a relationship

Samerth Charitable Trust

with the child, and to facilitate learning in ways that are meaningful and relevant.

Rajul recounted that some members belonging to the Mir Fakir community sustain themselves by begging. Their children are enrolled at centers or government schools. During the annual Urs, members from this community attend the festivities and must beg to sustain themselves. Since it is an event of great importance, the educators were encouraged to use things that the children could relate to from the festival. For instance, as the festival revolves around a Sufi saint, lessons on literacy could bring references to it in words, stories, etc., apart from the words used in common parlance in their homes. This helps the child to open up and connect better to the activities at the center.

Samerth's pedagogy focuses on engaging all the senses of children and catching their attention and interest. This leads to better retention. Children love rhythm and melody. Most children have heard songs since early childhood. These are the songs that are sung to put them to sleep, those that have the rhythm of their swings, and songs that the adults sing during specific occasions etc.

A poem with rhythmic sounds, recited with animated expressions and gestures, holds the children's attention for longer periods.

Samerth Charitable Trust

Such narrations interest children. Over a period, they start repeating the words and gestures and gain an understanding of their meaning. It is after this that the team introduces the written form of the same lines. Thus, an association of words to the alphabet is then created.

The educators work with government schoolteachers and Cluster Resource Centers (CRC) to help them understand creative pedagogy. Rajul shares, "In government schools, in the first year, our educators take the classes, and the schoolteachers are the secondary supporters. It is ensured that the government schoolteacher does not consider this as a break and continues to learn from the educators. The classroom must become a support room for the teacher, where we impress upon them that creative pedagogy can be beneficial for their students."

In the last few years, the team has also started working with Cluster Resource Centers. The CRCs conduct training for in-service government schoolteachers. This intervention with the CRCs provides them with academic support and aids in community mobilization activities. Resource persons from CRCs visit to understand the creative pedagogy adopted by Samerth.

The team has observed that through their interventions at the centers and schools, the retention of children and attendance in schools has improved. They hope to showcase their learning centers and schools as models where schoolteachers have understood and adapted the pedagogy.

Central Square Foundation

Central Square Foundation (CSF) is a non-profit organization that works with the vision of ensuring quality school education for all children in India. They are driven by the mission to create effective, scalable and sustainable changes in the school education system to ensure that all children get equal

access to learning opportunities. CSF prioritizes four critical areas of work. These include foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN), education technology, early childhood education, and affordable private schools.

Anustup Nayak and Debatri Sengupta from the CSF team share, "Children's first interaction with any language is typically through sounds. Having oral abilities in a language does not necessarily warrant the more complex skills of reading, comprehending and writing - all of which could be considered literacy. Most children naturally pick up speaking and understanding the language(s) they are exposed to. They need explicit intervention to learn to read and write."

The CSF team attempts to approach problems related to foundational literacy both from the outside in and the inside out. They support the state to envision, build, develop and sustain robust foundational learning programs. At the same time, they also design classroom-level micro-practices and habits that are necessary to build foundational skills. CSF's interventions in foundational literacy are governed by espousing the Balanced Literacy Approach. This is implemented through a structured pedagogy and teacher support system.

The Balanced Literacy Approach promotes meaningful and relevant learning by focusing on both 'skill building' - like phonological awareness (bottom-up) and 'meaning making' - like reading comprehension (top-down) work at the same time. National Education Policy 2020 and the recently released National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Learning advocate this approach.

This approach emphasizes the simultaneous focus on critical literacy skills such as manipulating the smallest units of sounds in words (phonemic awareness); mapping a sequence of letters to a sequence of sounds in a word (phonics); reading accurately at an appropriate rate (fluency), breadth and depth of word understanding (vocabulary); and extracting meaning from text (comprehension).

Structured pedagogy support for teachers involves a scientific, evidence-based, learner-centered approach to teaching that equips every teacher with a 'tightly knit teaching ecosystem. It has clearly defined scope and sequence of learning objectives and proven instructional methods embedded in step-by-step teaching plans. It uses student worksheets, print-rich materials supplemented by skill-focused training and classroom coaching. Such a systematic approach has been proven to work for empowering teachers in countries like India, where teaching skill is variant, quality training opportunities are relatively scarce, and instructional time is less than required.

CSF's FLN work in the states focuses on strengthening and sharpening professional development programs for teachers as well. Teachers are supported through state-wide FLN-specific training and byte-sized videos. These support a teacher's understanding of program elements and practices. Feedback is also shared by mentors through classroom observations.

The CSF team shared that the challenges of building effective foundational literacy are vast. It is impossible for any single entity to address all these challenges by

Central Square Foundation

Central Square Foundation

itself. The team works towards building effective foundational skills in close collaboration with state governments, along with a coalition of their partners. The latter includes organizations such as Room to Read, Language and Learning Foundation, Vikramshila, Samagra, The Education Alliance and Madhi Foundation.

The responsibilities of the coalition are to design a strong, contextual, evidence-based foundational learning program for the states, support state-level cadres to implement the program, and build capacity in the states in monitoring and evaluation. The coalition envisions that the expertise in the domain is leveraged to build, design and create proof points of a strong program. The state then becomes capable to independently run the program's subsequent iterations.

Anustup and Debatri added, "CSF has concentrated its efforts on home-learning solutions that combine pedagogically sound, quality content with effective digital delivery tools. Some of our partners include Rocket Learning, ConveGenius, TopParent, Google Read Along, Chimple, and Saarthi."

Google's Read Along app uses AI and Google's proprietary speech recognition technology to improve oral reading fluency (ORF) and audio/sound to reinforce sounds, words, and sentences, all through a range of engaging, illustrated e-books rooted in the Indian context.

Rocket Learning, a Delhi-based organization, delivers fun, low-cost activities and bite-sized multimedia content to parents' smartphones/smart-feature phones. The goal is to nudge parents to meaningfully engage with their children to build key foundational literacy skills. This is helpful in Indian contexts, where many parents from low-income households may not feel equipped to engage in their child's learning.

The CSF team understands that improving foundational literacy and numeracy is an ambitious goal that involves multi-pronged efforts. These include streamlining our understanding of foundational literacy, capacitating our teachers, leveraging expertise of partners, and embracing ed-tech solutions.

The Community Library Project (TCLP)

In 2014-15, TCLP set up its first library in partnership with other non-profits. Currently it runs three libraries in Delhi and Gurugram. In libraries run by TCLP, everyone is welcome, irrespective of their caste, religion, class, gender and language. Anyone – child or adult – can become a member and there is no membership fee. TCLP facilitates programs that focus on encouraging first-generation readers as they embark on their reading journeys.

Prachi and Rajni from TCLP share, "We believe that by becoming independent readers, children will also be able to become independent thinkers and writers. Children should not merely learn to decode the text. We see reading and comprehending as an intrinsic part of literacy."

A large proportion of the members coming to TCLP libraries are first generation readers. It is usually their first experience of going to a library, certainly so for those children who are four to six years old. At this age, some of them are usually not enrolled in schools either. This means that for many of them, their exposure to print, and experience with any kind of text, is negligible, contrary to what is considered as an important part of a child's literacy learning.

The team runs a multitude of reading programs in the library, including the 'Headstart to Reading Program.' This program envisions giving children an early orientation to libraries. It helps children from ages four to six years to feel comfortable with books. As a part of this program, sessions are organized once a week. These are led by a trained team of librarians and volunteers.

Each session focuses on developing print awareness among children before they start reading and writing. The goal is to build their cognitive capacities and engage them in creative playtime. These sessions develop better communication skills among children. They help improve their awareness of issues related to health and nutrition as well.

Headstart sessions have varied components. Each session starts with a read-aloud. This allows children to listen to the text voiced. This interactive dimension of the strategy bridges the gap between rich oral storytelling traditions and books. Read-alouds are a significant part of TCLP's reading curriculum and happen every day, multiple times in a day. Children are often read aloud by older siblings or members in the library. This enables the younger ones to be motivated to develop their reading habits.

Prachi and Rajni from TCLP shared that in each read-aloud, children are engaged where they are prompted to answer questions. This evokes their interest in the story and encourages reading with thinking. These questions could relate to their understanding of the characters, how they think the story would unfold, and their reflections, etc. Children are also invited to share their thoughts and ask questions of their own.

In the Headstart Program, after each read-aloud, children are divided into three stations where they spend twenty minutes on each station. They engage in activities that focus on enhancing their imagination. These include solving puzzles and patterns, and creating art.

For instance, if the theme of the Headstart session is animals, children are asked to imagine inviting a dinosaur for dinner and picking him up from the railway station. Then they are prompted to think about who will become a dinosaur, who will ride the train, etc. Other activities could involve using letter puzzles to write names of animals such as 'fox,' 'cat,' 'dog,' etc. and make an animal from Lego pieces.

In the book circulation program, a collection of books curated for children who are four to six years old is kept at each library within easy reach of the children. Children are free

to select books to issue, from this collection or any other book in the library. They are allowed to issue two books at a time, six times a week.

The team also runs a Book Report Program. As a part of this, children who have completed 80 books in the circulation program are encouraged to share reports. In these they summarize the stories and their reflections. Very young members, who are unable to write yet, use the pictorial format to draw their thoughts about the books. They often do this with the help of an older sibling or a librarian. They also give oral book reports to the librarian, who writes them down.

After each report, children sit with a librarian and discuss the report. The librarians ask questions and prod them to think about the book. For instance, discussions could revolve around their favorite illustration. Or if the book is on a particular theme, such as rain, questions on what the children feel about rain, have they previously read any book on the theme, etc. are thrown up and discussed.

The team has observed that children participating in the Headstart Program develop a sustained and deep relationship with books and reading. Often these children go on to assume leadership roles in the library.

They are often seen reading aloud to other members, and reading aloud to parents, siblings and neighbors. They also bring in friends and siblings to the library, articulating everyone's right to read.

In Conclusion

Focus on foundational literacy is crucial to avoid prolonging learning problems in higher grades. Through ongoing mechanisms and reflective platforms, educators must be supported with teaching learning materials, appropriate support in pedagogy and in building sensitivity towards young learners. The path to improving foundational literacy is fraught with challenges. It is rife with opportunities as well.

You can reach out to the organizations featured in this story at: Samerth Charitable Trust - info@samerth.org; Central Square Foundation - info@centralsquarefoundation.org; and The Community Library Project - mridulakoshy@gmail.com.

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