

# Pre-literacy Skills

## Case of a Rural School in Uttar Pradesh

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### Abstract

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*Rural India has a large number of first-generation learners. The Socio-economic Status (SeS) combined with the absence of a proper schooling environment in homes i.e., no exposure to printed material, communication opportunity and community ignorance to such factors result in low or no pre-literacy/readiness skills. Pre-literacy skills are understood in terms of a child's vocabulary, phonological sensitivity, print knowledge, knowledge of the alphabet and an understanding of common print concepts like print goes from left to right and from top to bottom on a page. Pre-literacy skills or readiness for formal schooling has been proven by research to be an important contributor to literacy, school success and education, at large. The government through 'Aanganwadis' has taken adequate steps to nurture this pre-requisite, especially for the first-generation learners. The ground realities, however, suggest otherwise.*

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### INTRODUCTION

The rural belt of India has a large number of first-generation learners, especially in a relatively backward state like Uttar Pradesh. The Socio-economic Status (SeS) combined with the absence of proper schooling

environment in the community and homes results in poor or no pre-literacy/readiness skills. The pre-school years are critical for children to develop their cognitive and social behavioural readiness skills necessary for school success (Blair,

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2002; Raver, 2002; Campbell and Von Stauffenberg, 2008; Bierman, Nix, Greenberg, Blair, and Domitrovich, 2008). The government has made provisions for such children in the form of *Aanganwadis*, which are meant to serve as pre-schools to nurture school readiness and pre-literacy skills. Pre-literacy or readiness skills are understood as vocabulary, phonological sensitivity, print knowledge, knowledge of the alphabet and an understanding of common print concepts like print goes from left to right and from top to bottom on a page.

The presence or absence of pre-literacy skills in a child entering school determines his/her motivation to learn and eventually his/her success at school. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005, recognises language as a variable determining the quality of learning as a factor in the school success of the child. Several researches have shown that when language is not understood by a learner (due to the lack of appropriate vocabulary, etc.) it reflects in dropouts, non-comprehension of text, rote learning, etc., therefore, making learning a task that ends up being a burden on the learner, impacting his/her school performance. This gradually translates into non-comprehension, lack of interest, poor expression and communication and in drastic cases, dropout. However, when the language is properly learnt due to better literacy skills and teaching practices,

these stresses do not plague students and they perform well not just in the language but in all subjects as they better comprehension, expression and general command over the text. The gap created by the absence of pre-literacy skills continues to widen with non-comprehension, contributing to differences in eventual educational attainment and long-term employment (Ryan, Fauth and Brooks-Gunn, 2006), and making the improvement of school readiness a social and public policy concern.

### **THE SCHOOL PROFILE**

The school was established in 1905. The school has a governing body, which comprises the Principal, the village 'Pradhan' and some parents. The school's primary section (Class I to V) had 431 students. The school started at 7.00 a.m. and continued till 12 noon. The academic staff comprised five assistant teachers along with two '*siksha mitra*'. The '*siksha mitra*' are educated till Intermediate and are appointed from within that village community with the prime purpose of working as a bridge between the village and the school. These appointments are for a period of 11 months. The school had three teacher trainees, who had just completed their graduation and were doing a basic teacher course (BTC). Contractual teachers (CT), originally trained for nursery teaching, but due to backlog and excess vacancy in schools were allowed to apply for teaching positions in primary schools where they teach till Class V.

Most students of the school had poor reading habits, as they do not see it in their immediate environments at home or the community. During the child's pre-school years, his/her parents spend most of their time managing home and work with little story-telling/reading, newspaper or magazine-reading with the child, especially in case of first-generation learners. What makes matters worse is the sheer absence of communication or talking. The child is not talked to much, communication being limited to giving instructions, during these pre-school years, thus, making him/her deficient in vocabulary and phonetics. The non-functional *Aanganwadis* in the village serve as a deterrent to the development of pre-literacy skills or school readiness. The child carries these deficiencies to the school and the gap keeps getting wider through the schooling years, if proper measures are not adopted in their teaching-learning.

*School Practices:* The school admits children of six years and above but given the rural circumstances and lack of health facilities and awareness the birth of a child is rarely registered and, therefore, the school administration has to go by what the parents say. This results in seemingly early admissions of children. Rural schools have come up with an innovative practice to determine whether the child is old enough to get admission (government schools admit children at the age of six years). At the time of admission,

the child is asked to hold his right ear with his left hand, and if he/she succeeds in doing so, then the child's age is taken to be six, and if not, then he/she is considered too young for formal schooling. As per interactions with the school principal, this has been a practice for decades in rural India. I taught Class I. The strength of the class was 82, which was double the optimum class size of 30-35 that the NCF proposes. The school principal and teachers said this was an annual phenomenon where there were good number of admissions but after the distribution of scholarships and other benefits in November/December, there was around 50 per cent dropout. The sheer numbers in terms of students made teaching-learning difficult as most of the class time was spent in maintaining order.

### **PRE-LITERACY SKILLS**

As the age for entry cannot be determined correctly and the age range is wide, it is difficult to say if all children are developmentally appropriate. Most students have some literacy skill and this could be understood from the fact that most of them handle books for the first time in their lives when they go to school. A student's first resource for literacy is the printed material. In case of these students, there are no magazines or newspapers in their homes. Students get books from their school under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the school also makes an effort of covering them up with brown paper by

taking a contribution of ₹5 from each child. This effort is made as neither students, nor parents consider it necessary. Teachers feel that this inculcates in students a sense of respect and helps them maintain the books for the entire session. Some children are particular about their books and keep them properly, while most of them tear them in a month or so. There were also cases where students sold their books to shopkeepers, '*layiachan wala*' for pencils, sweets or '*layiachan*'.

Some students who had completed pre-nursery and nursery from private schools in the village had an understanding of text, language differences for example, they could differentiate Hindi from English and knew the English alphabet and the Hindi *varnamala*. On the other hand, children who had come directly from home had nearly zero literacy skills i.e., they could barely differentiate Hindi from English or hold pencils. Most children did not know how to hold a book, so they had to be taught to hold it correctly. Most cannot tell which language is Hindi and which is English. During a class, if they were asked to take out their language copies they would put up all books they had one-by-one for the teacher to tell them which one was to be taken out. The average time required to open a particular page in the book was 10 minutes. It was observed during the visit that studying at home or after school was not a practice as most students were first-generation

learners with the possibility of having parents' assistance in studies being minimal. I also encouraged students to make full use of the neighbourhood (as most of them lived close by) and gather with their classmates and study after school hours. Parents were sending children for tuition after school but the teaching there was of low quality.

To sum it up, I would say that the constructivist approach is the most appropriate in the Indian classroom, especially rural areas where children come from backgrounds where they are the first-generation learners and are deprived of adult company to enhance their learning experiences. In some cases like this school, the class strength makes the practice difficult.

In my limited experience of the rural school system, I realised that teachers always assess both for learning and of learning but in the interest of the child and the system eventually end up giving more importance to the assessment of learning. This has an element of convenience too. I often heard teachers say that these children make a lot of effort to come to school. Girls make added efforts to continue their education as they start taking care of the household from the day they have control over their bodies, starting from responsibilities of watching over their younger siblings to doing household chores. I noticed that most girls whose brothers studied in the same school, irrespective of the birth order,

carried their plates or tiffin boxes and washed them after they had the mid-day meal. Some parents send girls to school on the condition that they will take their younger sibling along with them (who is not yet ready for school or can barely sit). The girl looks after the younger sibling during her classes taking him/her to the toilet, helping him/her with the meal and even calming him/her down when he/she cries during class. The school teacher in these cases shows a lot of tolerance and consideration for such girls on the ground of assessment for learning by simply encouraging them to learn irrespective of whether she is a bright

or an average student who might not continue education beyond Class V.

While being with these students, I realised that gender, age, nutrition and parental background as suggested by the research do have a major role in the educational output of children, but the foremost is food. At this point, one cannot but appreciate Maslow's hierarchy of needs. When a child is hungry learning cannot take place, and that education should start at a given age for it to result in proper learning. Gender in such backward areas too plays a role in the learning as it determines nutrition and nutrition affects learning.

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