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A Strong Foundation: Early Literacy in North East India

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Abstract

Epistemologically, the challenges of education are the same across stages; the nature of the challenges, however, would differ from stage to stage. Yet, the common perception remains fixated on Classes X and XII, and grudgingly on Class V. Paradoxically, Classes I and II, which are educationally extremely important since they introduce literacy to children, do not receive proportionate attention and funds. The consequences of this mind-set are particularly dismal for schools in rural and interior areas. In the light of these and related aspects, the document Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat launched by the Government of India on August 26, 2014, is of enormous significance, as it officially gives belated academic recognition to learning in Classes I and II.

This paper examines the document in the context of North East India and attempts to explore ways to leverage existing opportunities as well as make recommendations for new ones to support early reading and writing with comprehension for children in classes I and II.

Introduction

The Human Development Report of the North East States, in the chapter on educational achievement, states that “for the purpose of census, a person aged 7 and above, who can both read and write with understanding in any language is treated as literate...The age limit was raised to 7 years of age

at the time of 1991 census, on the advice of experts that the ability to read and write with understanding is not ordinarily achieved under the age of 7 years.”

As the report states, this definition of literacy was in the Census 1991, when the awareness regarding literacy in the early grades was comparatively

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less. The Census of 2001 and of 2011 have both retained the above definition. This then, is a reflection of a collective sort of understanding about early reading and writing. What implications does this have on the learning taking place in Classes I & II in the Indian context? If a child is 5 years of age at the time of admission to class I, then 7 years would mean approximately the end of class II. Can a child “read and write with understanding” at that age?

The notion of literacy is changing from that of a narrowly defined concept to one embracing a holistic view of educational development that includes the building of literate societies. The key to all literacy is reading development. Epistemologically, the challenges of education are the same across stages; the nature of the challenges, however, would differ from stage to stage. Yet, the common perception remains fixated on Classes X & XII, and grudgingly on Class V. Paradoxically, Classes I & II, which are educationally extremely significant since they introduce literacy to children, do not receive proportionate attention and funds. The consequences of this mind-set are particularly dismal for schools in rural and interior areas. In the light of these and related aspects, the document *Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat* launched by the Government of India on 26. August 2014, is of enormous significance, as it officially gives belated academic recognition to learning in Classes I and II.

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Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat

A nationwide sub-programme to the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)*, *Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat (PBBB)* is planned in a twin track approach –

- (i) To improve language development by creating an enduring interest in reading and writing with comprehension, and
- (ii) To create a natural and positive interest in Mathematics related to the physical and social world.

The focus is on two areas –

- (i) Early Reading and Writing with Comprehension
- (ii) Early Mathematics

The objectives of PBBB for early reading and writing with comprehension are –

- To enable children to become motivated, independent and engaged readers and writers with comprehension, possessing sustainable and lasting skills and achieve learning levels appropriate to the class of study
- To associate reading and writing with the experience of joy and real life situation

- To recognise social perspective of home-school transition and role of children’s literature in the process of reading and writing with comprehension.

Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat, therefore, is the first of its kind in India. The document reiterates government commitment to increase early literacy rates as a key strategy to help children realize academic goals and quality of life, for research has shown that children who struggle to read at the end of Class II will continue to struggle academically as new subjects are introduced. Hopefully, this initiative will cut down on the high individual and social costs of children’s low reading skills. If implemented in the spirit in which it was envisaged, PBBB will pave the way for a truly nationwide effort to improve early reading and writing with comprehension.

With reference to language, the basic thrust of the document is on improving “language development by creating an enduring interest in reading and writing with comprehension” with vocabulary and context rooted in the everyday world. It stresses that schools should have 200 working days and 800 instructional hours in an academic year. Out of four instructional hours each day, two-and-half hours should be earmarked to reading, writing and language. An awareness and understanding of developmental phases of reading and writing at early stages such as pretend reading, making use of predictions in reading and scribbling, using invented

spellings etc. in writing needs to be developed among teachers handling these classes, as well as a sensitive pedagogy that encourages expression instead of focusing on errors in pronunciation, spelling or writing. Further, classroom conversations should be based on classroom displays, poems, texts and pictures, some created by the children themselves. Activities such as ‘Morning message’ should be encouraged to bridge home-school gaps. Teaching-learning should be preferably in the mother tongue of the child.

AWP&B of North East States

A study of the Annual Work Plan and Budget (AWP&B) of the North East states reveals that funds have been earmarked for Foundational learning programmes in 2014-15. All the North East states have, without exception, envisioned the implementation of a Foundational Programme for learning in Classes I & II with funds approved under their respective PABs. The various headings under which the states have planned their activities are as follows –

- (i) Assessment of Achievement levels of Class II children by a third party (other than SCERT) to track progress of learning outcomes and also provide a baseline for further pedagogical planning. Broadly speaking, learning outcomes define what each child should know, be able to do and the disposition that should be acquired over a period of time. Each state committed

itself to ensure that at least 50% of the children in Classes I and II (some states committed to higher figures) would achieve the learning indicators as defined by NCERT by the end of the academic year.

- (ii) Training of teachers (both residential and non-residential) for CCE at BRC and CRC levels. A comprehensive CCE programme is being worked on, covering aspects such as recording the process of learning, learning gaps and constructive feedback and assessment. Most states have initiated training for teachers, generally for five days, with at least one teacher from each school.
- (iii) Training of Resource Persons for Early Reading and Writing with Comprehension. This addresses the felt need of pedagogy in concepts such as oral and written language connection, uses of literacy in daily life and print-rich environment. Mizoram, for instance, proposed teacher orientation along with pre- and post achievement survey in this regard, while Assam has focused on Learning Enhancement Programme.

Recommendations

In order to create an enabling environment and opportunities for reading and writing with comprehension, *Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat* has identified certain components at various systemic levels, some of which can be directly linked to specific needs of the North East. While the

recommendations given below are directed towards language learning in Classes I and II, they are embedded in the larger context of provision to access to education.

1. Design of Curriculum of Early Reading and Writing with Comprehension by Academic Authority (NCERT or SCERT) –
 - (i) It may be mentioned here that RIE Bhopal, a constituent unit of NCERT, organised a workshop for pre-primary and primary curriculum from 12-16 September 2014. This can be adopted /adapted by the North East states, based on field experiences.
 - (ii) Further, of the 247 universities in the country, only 69 have revised their teacher education curriculum based on the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education 2009, during the past five years to focus on the critical needs of the first generation learners, the diversity of the classrooms and also on the ability to construct critical thinking.
2. Development of simple, region-specific interesting and graded children's literature in local languages: A reference may be made here to the Barkha series developed by NCERT, comprising 40 booklets in Hindi presented at four levels, for young learners in the early grades. Barkha has 40 stories spread across four levels,

with five common themes. The entire package, comprising 40 booklets, is priced at 480 rupees. The number of sentences and the complexity of the plots in the stories increase as we move upwards across the levels –

- (i) The *Barkha* series may be adopted, adapted or translated. For instance, Arunachal Pradesh has disseminated the *Barkha* series as it is, in its schools. States such as Assam, Tripura and Sikkim have expressed interest in its adaptation and translation. (It may be mentioned here that *Barkha* has been translated into Gurumukhi by SSA Punjab, and into Marathi and Konkani by SSA Goa.)
 - (ii) Alternatively, states may develop their own graded series. Arunachal Pradesh has developed a series titled ‘Orchids’, comprising 30 folktales from various tribes. (Funds are awaited from MHRD for its printing)
3. Research: Non-availability of indigenous research in early reading and writing with comprehension is a serious concern. An informed understanding in this area is a felt need. The North East states could focus on research, in individual or collaborative modes, on areas such as –
 - (i) Awareness and understanding of non-negotiable within programmes of early literacy
 - (ii) State Policy clarity on medium of instruction
 - (iii) Aspects of school/ classroom based approaches and activities
 - (iv) Programme Evaluation of States that have practiced ELP for a minimum of three years.
 4. Teacher Training (Pre-service): The Arunachal Pradesh University of Studies has courses on Primary teacher Training (PTT) and on Nursery Teacher Training (NTT). The Krishna Kant Handique University runs a similar course. Early Literacy may be introduced as a component in these and other Universities/institutions.
 5. Capacity Building: Creation of awareness and understanding on Early Literacy through Capacity Building of Teacher Training (In service), Head Teachers (to provide support at school level for ELP) Educational Administrators (DEOs, BEOs etc) Teacher Educators (SCERTs, DIETs etc) is extremely necessary. Each State/ UT has made provision for such capacity building for Early Literacy. However, it is noticed that, in the AWP&B of States, the identification of teachers for training invariably carried a rider ‘excluding single teacher schools’. It is unfair that teachers placed in such schools are denied training; in fact, their need may be greater. Alternative plans can easily be made at policy level to accommodate such teachers.

6. **Concerted Efforts:** A five day workshop was held at NERIE Shillong for SSA officials and faculty of SCERTs and DIETs of the North East states from 18-22 August 2014, in which the academic and administrative aspects of Early Literacy Programme in the various states were discussed and a tentative Plan of Action prepared. A follow-up workshop was also held from 16th to 20th February 2015. This kind of dedicated vision should feed into the Northeast policy.
7. Availability of basic facilities in schools such as toilet and drinking water is an important provision of access to education. The ramifications of dropout crisis go much deeper than one bad decision made by parents on a

child's behalf. There are significant economic consequences on society as a whole. Moreover, the dropout rate has a moral dimension: no young child deserves to have his/her future determined even before receiving a chance to succeed.

Conclusion

The unfortunate reality in Indian schools is that most children, even after five years of schooling, do not become good readers. In other words, many children remain stuck on recognizing letters, and later words; the reading habit is not developed and the joy of reading becomes irrelevant. All stakeholders need to exercise rigorous effort, both academically and administratively, for a strong foundation in early literacy, to benefit the North-East in particular and the nation as a whole.

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