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Text, Teachers and Tradition: A Survey of *Granny Granny Please Comb My Hair*

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Abstract

*The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reiterates the role of parents and the community in the holistic development of a child. It emphasises the active involvement of parents in the scholastic and co-scholastic milestones of a child. Through the lens of the NEP, the existing language textbooks cover several aspects but are more focused on the traditionally prevalent family dynamics and structures. The space and scope for the extension of conversation is limited. This paper aims to cover the perspectives of primary teachers on the portrayal of family dynamics in texts and the portrayal of families, especially grandparents, in textbooks and the relevance learners can find in such texts, through the example of a poem *Granny, Granny, Please Comb My Hair*.*

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, when the world is changing at an incredible pace, there is a dire need to explore the changes that are taking place in the social fabric as well. Although, this is acknowledged in school curriculum and syllabi it is one of the aspects that textbooks have failed to capture adequately. This is true for language textbooks, where traditional joint

family structures are still prevalent in different forms. If one observes the texts that involve grandparents, it almost seems as if the creators have reached a consensus to portray a particular family type or structure as universal. There is almost no scope for extending the conversation regarding other aspects of family types.

Family, according to Urie Bronfenbrenner's 'Ecological Systems'

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theory, falls under microsystem, i.e., it has an immediate and significant impact on a child's development. Yet one is left to wonder, with the change in lifestyle and living situations, which family members make their way into the microsystem. Bronfenbrenner's categorisation is based more on the child's interaction and involvement in the family member's lives than on the blood relations. If so, a full-time caregiver, nanny or creche teacher who spends more time on a daily basis with the child should also be included in the microsystem.

Indian society has also been a witness to the evolution of family structures. Migration to metropolitan cities for a number of reasons which may include work, education, and better living facilities has resulted in families where the oldest generation is usually left behind in their ancestral homes. At times, they themselves prefer to stay at their abodes because these are comfort zones instead of moving to new places.

Moreover, in cities, due to accommodation issues, small families have become a trend. As a result, there are children who have not had the chance to spend quality time with their grandparents owing to busy schedules from either both sides.

Yet, these children's textbooks have narratives that show grandparents and grandchildren sharing a bond—going for walks, telling jokes and stories to each other, having fun at a picture, etc.

Thus the textbooks are still rooted in the traditional structures and almost minimum scope is there to start a conversation about different and evolving family structures.

This paper is based on the input collected from the practitioners working at different schools who have shared insights on the exercises and text *Granny, Granny Please Comb My Hair*, a poem by Grace Nichols. The text is found in many textbooks of primary stage and is also in NCERT's English textbook for Class 2, *Marigold*.

METHODOLOGY

A Google form was created and shared with practitioners in the field of education. It was ensured that the participants interacted with learners of the primary stage. The form was filled out by teachers of KVs, state government schools and private schools.

Considering the fact, that not everyone might be familiar with the exercise given in the textbooks, pictures of the questions or activities concerned were attached to the form. This was to ensure that the process of filling out the form could be hassle-free for everyone.

ANALYSIS

About the Text

'Granny, Please Comb my hair', says a child of 6–7 years in an English textbook of Class 2. The poem at a glance seems to be a feel-good piece

as articulated through the lines of the poem:

*Granny Granny please comb my hair
You always take your time
You always take such care*

The above lines could be reminiscent of days of the past for many adults. However, in today's context, the text as mentioned earlier leaves much to be desired. On further exploring the text, one comes across questions like—

- (i) Do your grandparents live with you?
- (ii) Do you spend time with them?
- (iii) Have you ever gone out with your grandparents?

While the intention of these questions is to reinforce the bond between grandparents and grandchildren it may fail to provide space for those learners who come from different family structures. The questions are posed in such a way that a learner who has not had the opportunity to interact with their grandparent(s) has no choice but to stop answering (dead-end question).

ANALYSING THE RESPONSES

More than 90 per cent of responses were from teachers teaching in urban areas. Most of the participants were teachers in private schools. The socio-economic background of most of the children coming to such schools would be middle class and above. This is an important aspect as it lowers the cases of seasonal migration that

is often seen in the case of students coming from a lower socio-economic background.

In Indian classrooms, the strength is generally above 30. Thus, it was surprising to find that only 50 per cent of children live with their grandparents. Similarly, in terms of connectivity and distance less than of the students lived in the same city as their grandparents.

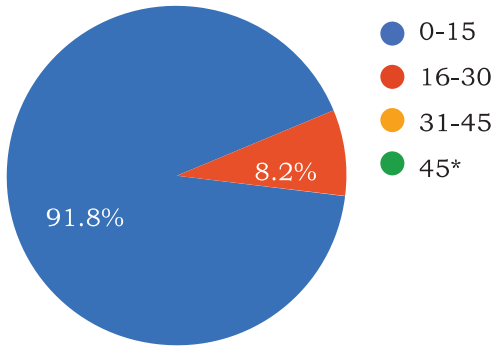
The data further revealed that only 40 per cent of students spent quality time with their grandparents. However, there could be multiple reasons behind that. As school time consists of a significant part of one's day, grandparents are not able to participate or get involved in the lives of their grandchildren. Moreover, one can't forget the time taken up by tuition classes.

Further, the digital divide between generations is a critical aspect that often gets overlooked. With an increase in the number of apps and videos, young kids and even adults spend a good part of their day on screens. Moreover, the grandparents and grandchildren have their separate social circles and they prefer to spend more time with people of their age.

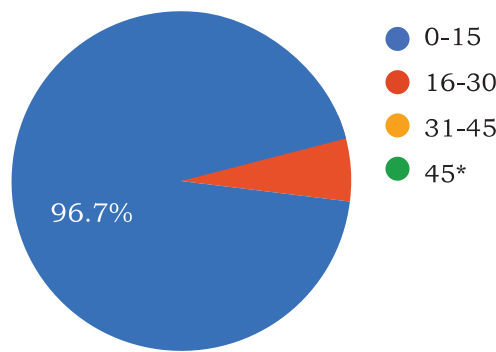
In earlier times, especially in joint families, the social circle was within the physical confine of the home as there would be siblings and cousins who would be their playmates as well. Today, the role played by cousins and siblings has been taken over by peers and friends in neighbourhoods.

Involvement in the Upbringing

Number of children whose grandparents do informal interactions with teachers regarding their grandchildren
61 responses



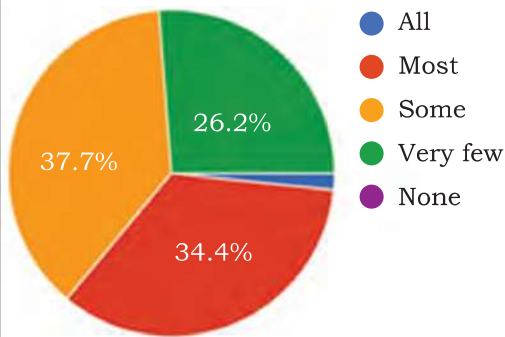
Number of children whose grandparents attend PTMs
61 responses



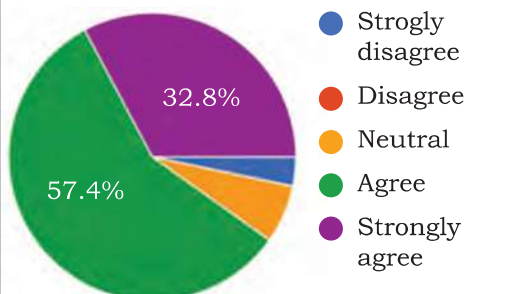
Education is part of upbringing and families with grandparents who live or do not live with their grandchildren may not contribute much to it. As is evident from the data collected more than 92 per cent of participants said that less than 15 per cent of grandparents come to the PTMs.

Around 95 per cent of participants said that less than 15 per cent of their students' grandparents had any informal interaction regarding the progress of their grandchildren. Both the findings indicate the passive involvement of grandparents in education.

Number of children who spend time with their grandparents in an interactive way such as, going for a walk, going together to market, play indoor games together, etc.



Grandparents are usually portrayed in passive roles in textbooks. Do you think that they should be portrayed in a more active role?
61 responses



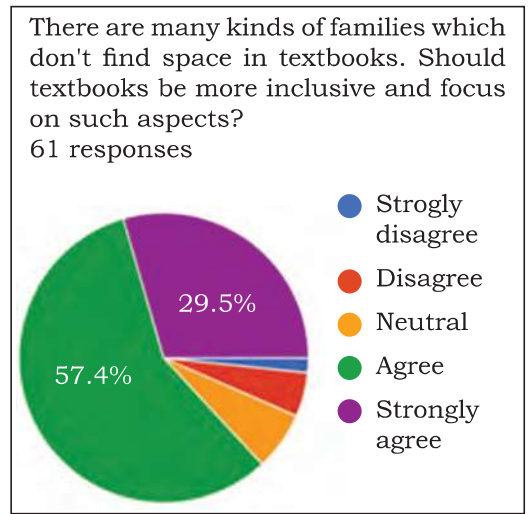
Further, 55 per cent of participants shared that either some or a few children spend time in activities like playing games, going to the market, or going for a walk.

The role of grandparents, which has often been portrayed in school textbooks as dormant in crucial areas of a child’s development, needs re-evaluation. Similarly, the representation of grandparents in textbooks may be reimagined so that they do not get sidelined as merely passive adults with words of wisdom.

Through the Teachers’ Perspective

A thorough analysis of all the responses led to the conclusion that most of the respondents had an inclination towards the traditional structure, i.e., the joint family. The mixed responses received from the teachers on certain topics conform to the notion that although change is taking place, traditional family structures are still preferred by many. This was further confirmed

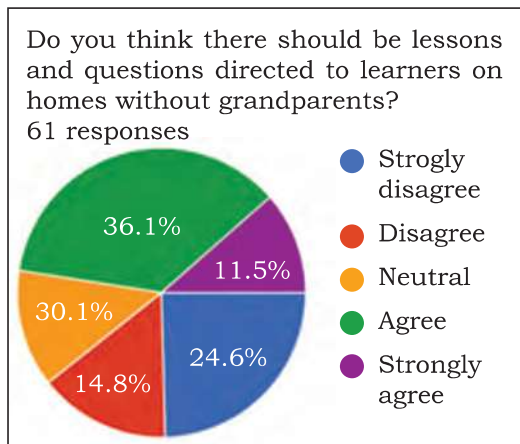
when there were respondents, albeit a few, not in favour of introducing the non-traditional family structure as seen in the responses below.



A positive finding in the data was the teachers’ willingness and efforts to extend the discussion. For example, in the exercise ‘Let’s talk’, there is a question ‘Do your grandparents live with you?’ If the child answers no, is there any mechanism to continue the discussion?

A few replies received from the teachers are shared below:

- (i) We can ask them how their lives would be different if they live with their grandparents.
- (ii) One can start with healthy conversation about their own grand parent’s first. Then it can be continued with some another part of the story.



THE WAY FORWARD

The existing textbooks were designed by keeping in mind the principles of NCF 2005. The NCF 2005 emphasises on the inclusion of the milieu of children. However, pictures like the one given below reflect a culture with which many Indian kids are not likely to be familiar with.

Family picnic as a concept is not very popular in India. The pictorial representation aligns with the family picnic pictures that are common to western society. However, this does not insinuate that in India family members do not sit together for recreational purposes. It is quite common to come across sights of people sitting in the sun in winters or gathered together on a bench in the late evenings of summer but those gatherings are not planned and organised like the one we see in the picture.

It is to be kept in mind that questions like, “Do you live with your grandparents?”, may lead to answers other than yes or no. For instance, the answer could be “I used to”. In such cases, the teacher must make sure to sensitively proceed with the discussion. It is important that in order to diversify texts, elements like single-parent families, nuclear families, families without parents, and adopted children may be incorporated into textbooks. It will not only help to understand different family structures but will also help to reduce the stigmas associated with ‘unconventional’ family structures in Indian society.

CONCLUSION

As one looks at the text, a decade after the introduction of *Marigold* textbooks, it is inevitable to find lacunae. The revision of textbooks could be inclusive of aspects which were probably not thought of or socially not prevalent at the time of the conception of textbooks. Texts like *Granny Granny...* are to be seen as examples that link the past with the present.

There is a misconception that the introduction of unconventional family structures undermines the role of traditional structures and such portrayal might pose a danger to the traditional values.

The stigma associated with ‘broken’ or ‘small’ families needs to be addressed sensitively. This becomes more crucial as we enter a post-covid world in which thousands of children have lost their loved ones and are still trying to adjust to noticeable changes at home and in relationships. The age of learners cannot be considered as an obstacle in bringing up such topics in classroom discussions.

Today, there are additional readings and multiple sources for young learners to get to know and understand families that are not like theirs. This change needs to be there at the level of facilitators as well who need to look beyond their prejudices and biases.

Further, practitioners need to be exposed to literature that creates a space for discussing the evolving family structures and dynamics. In an everchanging society, when learners

find themselves engaged with texts that might not be too relatable to them such discussion forums create classrooms that are more inclusive and considerate of everyone. Holistic

development is incomplete without being inclusive in all aspects. Textbooks are essential to bring any change, but so are the practitioners who transact the content, both what lies within and beyond the texts.

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