

## “It Takes a Village...”

APRIL 8, 2016 ~ A S CHARLES

On Sunday evening, we departed from Delhi to a remote area in the state of Rajasthan. We spent the next three days travelling by car into tiny villages where remarkable and innovative programming is happening – quite literally in the “**middle of nowhere.**” Upon arrival late Sunday at our hotel in **Kishangarh**, we fell into bed past midnight. On Monday we were met by members of **OELP – Organization for Early Literacy Promotion**. (These folks included: the director Keerti; the academic coordinator Arti; the program coordinator Kiran; and the field coordinator Pukhraj.) They took us to a village school where they offer literacy programming for Grades 1 and 2 in the local government school. OELP works in about 15 such schools in the area, and they have also established a handful of libraries.

OELP selects teachers from the local villages (minimum requirement – **a grade 10 education**) and then provides professional development around the program’s ideology and pedagogies. (Keerti explained that the best source of teachers are **daughters-in-law** who are embedded into the village for the long term and thus a wise investment in PD as teachers. They have also recruited young men who were at one time **goatherds**, but who are seeking other opportunities.)

Initially, when OELP started up about 10 years ago, they faced resistance in their efforts to teach in the government schools, but they have since convinced the Indian government officials that they are producing tangible results. Keerti and others have studied and implemented “best practices” in literacy, including engaging children in storybook reading and related activities; building extended discourse around literature; doing careful and ongoing assessment; and establishing classrooms that are warm and inviting.

The approach of OELP has been thoughtful and thorough as they have brought research and practice together. With an eye to what works, they have developed their own curriculum and supplemental materials, established daily routines, and responded to the challenges and strengths of the local communities through culturally appropriate and responsive pedagogy. As we travelled from school to school, from library to library (OELP-established), we found ourselves participating in spaces that were **vibrant** with **incredibly joyful** children and teachers, rich with **literacy opportunities**, and firmly rooted in the belief that **all children are valuable and have potential**.

As for the children themselves... These children are very poor economically, and they live in oppressively hot (and, at times, brutally cold) desert environments that are facing serious drought this year. (The temperature during our visit hovered around **110° F.**) The landscape – **dusty, sandy, rocky** – sustains little in the way of viable agriculture, and most families tend herds of **goats, cattle, or water buffalo**. Some families are migratory – moving back and forth with their herds to find food for them or for the growing of crops, depending on

the time of the year. Some fathers have given up herding to work in the marble industry that dots the highway cutting through the area.

**The children work hard.** Most of them are responsible for taking their herds out to graze in the morning and bringing them back each evening. They have many responsibilities in their homes as well, especially the girls who assist with cooking, cleaning, and taking care of younger siblings. The children often do not have enough food, especially of sufficient nutritional value. You will see in the photos that the hair of some children has a light, reddish tone to it – a consequence of insufficient nutrition. The children’s clothes further reveal economic and material realities.

**And yet...** Despite (or perhaps because of) these harsh realities, these children **LOVE** school. During holidays and vacations, they have been known to show up anyway and go find the teacher at his/her home! OELP initially began with night schools, to try to accommodate children’s daily work obligations, but they found that it was difficult to maintain that evening time frame: children would fall asleep, solar lanterns did not provide sufficient lighting for doing and displaying their work, and it was difficult to keep attendance steady. So they moved into the daytime hours through the government schools, where the kids also get a free mid-day meal.

And these kids don’t just show up – they **LEARN** at a phenomenal rate! We observed grade one children who, within no more than about 8 months of schooling and coming from largely illiterate homes, had become **fluent and literate** in Hindi which, for them, is a second language entirely! These children were reading books, writing sentences and stories, and engaging in critical and creative thinking. The philosophy is grounded in a child-centered approach that builds meaningful understanding. Literacy is built through a blended approach of systematic phonics (syllabic in Hindi) and whole language. (You will see the OELP-developed Hindi charts in the photos.) I would not have believed the amount of learning if I hadn’t witnessed it with my own eyes. And not just in one village, but across every single classroom we visited. Despite almost-impossible odds, OELP has created a **“culture of reading”** and has inundated these children’s lives with literacy and thinking opportunities in ways that defy easy explanation.

And how to describe these **classroom spaces**? To begin with, there is deliberately and consciously **no furniture** to get in the way of **KIDS’ MOVEMENT!** No desks or chairs, just a set of material (pencils, erasers, paper) in a small corner on the floor, and a shelf with a few items. And of course books draped over strings as displays, children-created posters, and curricular material to support literacy. (See pictures to better understand the space.) Children were not passive – they were expected to get up and move their bodies, to ask probing questions, to laugh and sing and dance. When it came time to do written work, they settled onto the floor to complete it, and then approached any one of us to share it, no matter that the three of us didn’t understand most of it. Calendar time, which began each class session, included math-related thinking and was guided by the children themselves who had been previously taught how to ask questions: “How many Fridays in this month? What day of the week does the next month start on? What was the date 3 days ago? What will the date be next Tuesday? How many holidays in this month?” And so on.

## Classroom Photos



OELP has also established **libraries** in many of these villages, with programming to extend and encourage the learning through storybooks and interactive engagement. We saw children of all ages eagerly participating in book reading, shared story-telling, games, music, poetry, puppet shows, "Village News" articles written by children, and more. There have been efforts to engage families, in part by going to where the parents are, such as

work sites, to share children's progress. These libraries are set up in a "courtyard" open-air area, with items stored at the end of the library sessions. (See photo.) In some settings, I read to them (and, as before in a different setting, I chose *Brown Bear...* because of its easily-accessible language and illustrations, and also because I had made materials that I was then able to leave with OELP along with a copy of the book.)



And lastly, a few **snippets of dialogue** from our time at the schools... In the words of the children themselves.

**Teacher:** "When do you feel worried or sad?"

Child1: "I feel worried when I can't get my goats together."

Child2: "I felt sad when my goat got lost. How will we make tea? I need to get milk for my mother. But I found my goat so then I got happy."

Child3: "I felt sad when I got colors on me at Holi." (He didn't want to be covered with colors! 😊)

**Teacher:** "Who cares most for you?"

Most children of course responded with their parents and other family members. One child said, "My goat." (They are very bonded to their animals.)

Here are some of the other questions asked by the teacher that the children responded to with critical and creative thinking:

**Teacher questions:** — the teachers are taught how to do "before-during-after" questioning around storybooks, including inferencing, prediction, comparison, and more.)

Are your parents literate?

Who helps you with your studies?

What do you learn from others?

Is it essential to go to school?

Who brought you to school on the first day, and what were you told?

Is this picture of a highway or of a village road?

What is common (in the story) with your experience?

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