

Understanding Quality: Reflections from OELPⁱ

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On a sunny day:

In the scorching sun, around 2pm, heading through the narrow, dry mud lanes guarded by thorny babool, bouncing up and down in a vehicle, we realized that we have come a long way from the town, hardly any houses, large open fields, with a few lonely adults sitting under some shade looking after the cattle were seen.

Sound of children reciting a song '*nanha munna rahi hun...(I am a little traveler)*' welcomed us. The sound came from a little hut made of hay with three mud walls and a thatched roof. Children's drawings, stories, write-ups decorated the sides of the hut. Pictures on the story books on a rope running along the walls made them colourful and exciting. Reading corner, shabdkona (Word corner) also found space in that vibrant hut. Resting at the centre of one of the walls stood the blackboard.

Children sat near to each other and moved with care so as not to disturb or hurt the nearby children. One little child used the centre space to lie down and observe what was happening around. Nobody was disturbed by this boy sleeping in the middle of the class, trying to make sense of the world around. Two girls, around 7 years old had little babies sitting in their laps and listening to the discussion around, rarely disturbing their caretakers.

Is this the daily routine of these kids?

"Yes!" said the senior teacher of OELP.

This is the daily routine of these girls, to be able to attend the school, they need to carry their siblings with them and take care of their needs, demands through the day. Younger siblings had the freedom to take part in classroom activities. They were not the passive listeners but also participated in making words, identifying syllables and talking about their favourite sweet items made at home!

A quick thought passed the mind: The teacher is not disturbed by these 'non-enrolled' kids, the other kids are also fine with their presence and also participation. These children are able to come to school because their younger siblings are not seen as disturbance but accepted as part of lives of children coming to school.

A Vibrant classroom:

Children in the age group 4 to 7 years, sat in two-three whirls of semicircle. They were all sitting on a mat spread on sand. Even the slightest blow of wind blew the fine sand into the hut and soon clothes, walls, the mat got drenched in sand.

Unaffected, children were playing word antakshari,

Nal – ladka – kagaz – jahaj – jameen– namak – kamaal – lakdi – dimak –

(tap – boy – paper – ship – land – salt-wonderful – stick – bug: In Hindi, each of the next word began with the last sound of the previous word. For example: tap-pal-land-den...)

They not only said the words but also wrote these on the board. No-one shouted with the words, nor they ran towards the board to write, they took turns as the teacher stood there and observed patiently.

One of the visitors called a student and asked to read the story book; he was 4 1/2 years old.

Could he read?

ASER-2015 shows that of all the children enrolled in Class V about half cannot read Class 2 text. This boy was just 4 1/2!

This child, who is barely 5 years, is able to read the story book fluently. He is able to answer to the questions asked by the visitor. The text was not very simple, there were conjunct consonants (example 'gya') too in the text which the child could read.

Ability to read with comprehension and have meaningful interaction with the text are the core objectives of language education. This child and other children of this small school are already there!

Brooding over, what makes this happen? We reached another school.

Yet another vibrant classroom:

This class was held in a pakka building.

12-15 children were engaged in an interaction:

Teacher: Which game do you play at home?

Students: (one after the other): *Luka chupi* (hide and seek), *pakadam-pakadai* (catch-catch), *gillidanda*, *barph-pani* (ice-water), *tikki*,...

Teacher: See how many different games we play!

Student: No teacher, 5 of them said gilli-danda

I was delighted to hear that response. There are at least three aspects he deserves appreciation for: firstly, for how carefully he listened to the other children, secondly for he counted them all to arrive at 5 for gilli-danda and thirdly for the ability of this little boy (around 4 years) to comprehend what his teacher was saying and to present his view to the teacher.

Is he at the level of 'text-critic'? (Luke and Freebody, Four resource model).

Looking at children's written work:

A child has written the following text:

(this text is translated into English below. The text is originally written in Hindi.)

"I was in the jungle with my goats. I saw berries. They looked tempting. I thought they must be sweet. But I saw that there are thorns, how could I take them? I saw that one of my goats was missing. I thought whether to pluck berries or to get the goat back...let me get my goat back first..I can see the litter of my goat, she must have gone that side..but there are thorny bushes..she can't go that side...let me check there".

How beautifully the child represented the dilemma faced by her! She represented her

inner world in a precise manner. This write-up is written in Hindi with script representing the spoken language. She wrote 'meethe'(sweet) as 'miththee', 'shayad'(perhaps) as 'sayad' and so on. This shows the mastery of the child over the script. She used precisely the same symbols which can represent her spoken language.

What makes for these authentic writings?

The third observation:

As we entered next classroom in the series of classroom observation we did, a group of 15-17 kids stood up, they greeted us "Namaste!"

We replied "Namaste!"

Their teacher told them to sit and start the activities for the day.

The first was the calendar activity, a child was asked to make questions for his classmates. He stood near the calendar hung on a wall and asked the following questions:

- How many Sundays are there in this month?
- How many Wednesdays are there, if you do not count today? (That day was also Wednesday)
- Which day is on 20th?
- How many days are left in this month?
- After how many days would it be Friday?

Other children sitting in a semicircle listened to his questions and answered accordingly.

Thinking aloud:

Late in the evening, coming back from the visit, several thoughts captured the mind.

Children at this tiny age are full of energy and enthusiasm. They take up school responsibilities like filling of water, cleaning the floor and also family responsibilities like taking care of the younger siblings without any sense of burden. They participate in academic activities whole heartedly, sportingly.

Only vibrant schools can nurture these kids! It can develop the sense of ownership for the school among the children and the community.

What are the characteristics of such a vibrant school?

Can we grant these schools as centres of quality education?

Coming back to Literacy:

Here, I'll take up one aspect of education – Literacy and make an attempt to unpack 'quality'.

Let's look at those instances mentioned above once again:

What were children doing?

- They were comprehending the text – calendar/ story books / teacher and other students' talk.
- They were participating collectively in an act – antakshari
- They were writing to represent their inner world.
- They were presenting the alternate view
- They were listening to each other and giving space to each other.

'..... if reading were taught in a manner in which it could be effectively learnt, the enormous wastage characteristic of our primary education would be less'. (Kumar Krishna)

The core message in this statement is applicable across the school disciplines. Pedagogy of the subjects need to be in sync with the nature of the subject.

There is a need to discuss about the stage specific objectives for each of the school subjects so that each of these can be mapped to the aims.(Dhankar, Rohit)

Allan Luke and Freebody propose four-objectives of language class:

- Code breaker
- Meaning maker
- Text-user
- Text-critic

I see that these aims of literacy instruction fits well with the aims of education. When a child is able to not only use the text but also critique the text, is the time when the child is becoming independent in his thoughts. When the child decides to speak with or against the text/ well established conversations, that is the time the child is on the way of becoming an independent actor.

Quality education:

Discussion on (quality) education focuses on

- What is education?
- Aims of education
- Nature of a subject
- Pedagogy of the subject
- Age and context of the children

In remote villages of Rajasthan, there are these children who read stories, write, interpret, question. This requires the considerations on all the above aspects and an active involvement of the teachers in the process of learning. At the heart of a quality education is a vibrant classroom.

Characteristics of a vibrant classroom

- a. Interaction with resources: choice of resources for a classroom and being able to use these resources for learning are very necessary for a vibrant classroom.

Often the resources – printed, handmade, naturally available are showcased in the classroom without anyone bothered about them – these become obstruction to outside light and add to crowded feeling in the classroom.

On the other hand, if the choice of resources is done keeping in mind how will they be used, when and how will they be displayed? a lot of material waste can be avoided.

- b. Variety : There was a lot of variety in what students did. Antakshari, independent story reading time, guided reading time, calendar activity and so on which ensured teacher-student, student-student interactions and variety.

- c. Meaning: Every activity needs to have a purpose. Purpose emanating from larger purpose of education and objectives of primary education.

- d. Teacher belief: Teachers were bursting with the belief '*hamare bachche ye karlenge*'('Our children will do it'). Having a firm belief in

child's capabilities is fundamental to any teaching-learning process.

e. Community connect

Taking community into confidence that their children are in safe hands, their children are learning and they will support them by shouldering the responsibility of the younger siblings are the ways of connecting with the community.

As Fullan (2006) points out that for systemic thinking the short term goals are as important as long term goals, unless the community gets the confidence, the long term commitment to larger purpose cannot be visualized.

References:

ASER 2015

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ⁱ Organization for Early Literacy Promotion: is a registered non-profit and civil society organization which came into existence in 2008. (More details at: <http://www.oelp.org/about-us/>)