

Hands-on

Learning from our implementing partners

How can we accelerate reading development? Insights from India

Recently, a group from DGMT (Marianne MacRobert, Phillip Methula and David Harrison) visited literacy projects in India. They were intrigued by the claims of Pratham that children of about 5 to 6 years of age could learn to read within 6 weeks and that children lagging behind could catch up to their same-age peers. These claims had been substantiated through randomised controlled trials, which showed that the benefits of the accelerated reading programme were sustained for at least two years¹. In this brief, they share their insights from a brief trip to India.

The context of India

The population of India is 24 times that of South Africa, which means that few non-government organisations can 'cover the country'. But still, many operate at very large scale and provide pointers as to how programmes can reach considerable numbers of people.

Apart from population size, India and South Africa share many social and economic characteristics. Income and social inequality is extreme and educational outcomes are generally poor: only one in two children complete eight years of schooling, and only two-thirds of Grade 6's can read at a Grade 2 level of competency. In 2009, the Right to Education Act made primary school attendance compulsory, but many literacy activists bemoan the fact that children may no longer be held back a year if they have not mastered the subjects.

Key insights

The main 'take-home' messages for us were that:

¹ Banerjee A, Cole S, Duflo E and Linden L (2005); *Remedying education: evidence from two randomized experiments in India*. Bureau of Research & Economic Analysis of Development, Working paper No. 109, Duke University. Available at: <http://ipl.econ.duke.edu/bread/papers/working/109.pdf> (accessed 29 March 2012)

- Working with Government is critical in literacy development, to obtain scale and to ensure that the benefits of accelerated reading programmes are entrenched;
- The availability and affordability of books is crucial – we will not develop a culture of reading without a print-rich environment that puts books into the homes of all children;
- Child-to-child learning can be very effective – it's often more interactive, less didactic and encourages self-correction of errors;
- Reading catch-up, by children lagging behind, is possible; and
- With the resources available at our disposal, significant scale-up of programmes should be possible, based on what Indian programmes achieve with fewer resources than we have.

The experience of Pratham

Pratham is a large non-government organisation (NGO) that has supported literacy development in numerous states across India since 1994. Its specific methodology has been adopted by smaller NGOs.

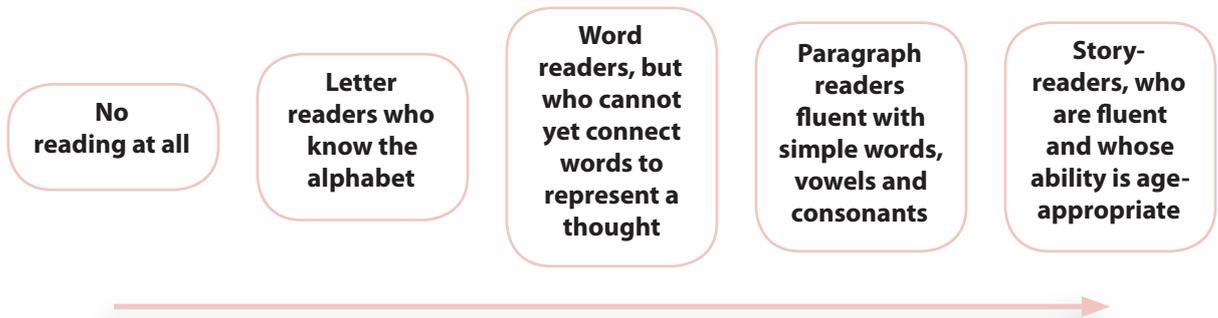
What Pratham does

- Intensive support to Grade III's whose reading lags behind classmates
- Reading development in public early childhood development centres (anganwadi's)
- Driver of the 'Read India' campaign
- Publisher of Pratham books
- Publisher of an annual review of the state of education
- More recently, vocational training and 'youth skilling'





Pratham's way of assessing reading ability



The 4-step Pratham models for building literacy and numeracy

Accelerating literacy

1. Read a story; get child to recite the story; and then read along with you.
2. Use phonics charts and help child identify phonics in text (read and write)
3. Learn with rhyming words (using 12 forms of each letter)
4. Say anything, write anything

Accelerating numeracy

1. Say something: learn to say numbers from 1 to 100, and then 1 to 1000
2. Do something: Count pointing to corresponding objects as you say the numbers
3. Read something: Read equations in text or as numbers
4. Write something: Record what you do. First write numbers, then account for quantities, then add and subtract

Its main programme is to provide intensive support to Grade III's whose reading lags behind that of their same-age peers. It currently reaches 150 000 children in schools and works with 7 000 teachers. It also works with preschool children and, through a network of thousands of stipended volunteers, spearheaded the 'Read India' campaign in 370 000 villages. Phase II of the campaign has scaled back to work in 25 000 villages – still of considerable size but more manageable in terms of support and quality control.

Literacy: The story starts in one of the thousands of government-supported early childhood development (ECD) centres in Mumbai. Here, the teacher reads from one of Pratham's glossy, attractive and high-quality books. Then remarkably, a confident four-year old stands up and tells the story. Then another child stands up, and another. Finally, the children sit with the teacher, follow her finger and watch the words as she reads the same story back to the class.

This approach is also used by Pratham volunteers who assist the Grade III's who are lagging behind

their classmates. Then, alphabet and phonics charts ('barakhadi') are used to develop the building blocks of reading. Hindi, as with most Indian languages, follows a simple phonics structure: there are 24 consonants and their verbalisation is changed by adding one of twelve vowel strokes e.g. ka, kaa, ki, kee, ku, koo, kay, kai, ko, kow etc. Children then learn to associate the phonics with rhyming words and begin to recognise the phonics in short paragraphs.

Initially, Pratham did not focus on writing, but has now recognised the importance of integrating reading and writing. Here, the children are encouraged to draw a 'mind-map' of their story before they start to write it, which gives it structure and form.

Numeracy: The first step is for children to learn to say numbers from 1 to 100, and then in hundreds to 1000, and then in thousands to ten thousand – and so on. In this way, children quickly develop a sense of the decimal quantum jumps in numbers.



Next, children count as they point to and play with corresponding objects, whether beads or play-money. Pratham believes that the 'combined active method of learning' – seeing, saying, touching – integrates numeracy concepts in children's minds.

Once they are comfortable with the basic concepts of sizes, shapes and arithmetic, they are encouraged to say word sums out loud until they are familiar with the language; and finally, they start to record what they do.



We attended a 'camp' for Grade III's – essentially an intensive week-long course held at the school – for children lagging behind. What impressed us was how the children interacted with each other, telling stories, reading, playing games that developed numeracy skills. Volunteers facilitated and, in the main, did not 'teach'. Children used the school floor as their chalkboard to do sums and write stories.

We were inspired by what we saw, but the programme is not without challenges. The state government of Maharashtra no longer has a state-wide agreement with Pratham to work in schools, apparently because the Pratham way of working is inconsistent with the newly approved curriculum. But there are internal challenges as well: we got the idea that the scale of the first Phase of Read India was just too big to manage, with questions about the quality of volunteer support. Pratham has responded by consolidating its work in 25 000 villages – a 14-fold reduction in scale. Finally, while we understood and appreciate the focus on lagging Grade III's, we were concerned about the opportunities lost by not engaging as actively as before with younger children.

Having said that, Pratham is an amazing example of a large-scale literacy programme which has been able to demonstrate through rigorous experimental design that it works! It is also very resilient, able to adapt to different circumstances, including fluctuating donor funds and Government interest.

The experience of Akshara

The Akshara Foundation in Bangalore uses Pratham's learning methods, also working in preschools and primary school. In this way, it reaches 125 000 children in the state of Karnataka – which, like South Africa, has a population of 50 million. Akshara places more emphasis on a longitudinal (as opposed to an intense and focused) approach to literacy development. What impressed us most about Akshara was: its systematic assessment of the motor, language, literacy and numeracy development of every child in anganwadi ECD centres; its excellent library system in 1350 schools; and its use of district score cards to compare school achievement.

Akshara's library system: In partnership with the education department, Akshara has developed a library programme in 1350 schools. The 'libraries' consist of a few shelves of books, which are constantly replenished through a revolving system of over 600 000 books. The difficulty of each book is graded with a colour sticker, so that each child can track her own progress. Incredibly, using a paper-based system (with centralised data-capturing) it is possible to track the reading habits of each

What Akshara does

- Uses Pratham's learning methods
- Literacy support in Government ECD centres (Anganwadi's)
- Literacy, numeracy and English language in schools
- Systematic assessment of every child
- Karnataka Learning Partnership (data on every school in the state www.klp.org.in)
- District report cards





individual child. On average, each of the 215 000 young library users reads 2.9 books per month. This system operates on less than R2 million per year!

The Karnataka Learning Partnership:

Recently, Akshara has established a state-wide learning partnership whereby educators can access open-source learning materials and where parents can compare the schools in their vicinity. The project is in development, but ultimately Akshara hopes to be able to document the performance of each individual school. Visit www.klp.org.in to view the spatial mapping and information related to every school in the state of Karnataka.

District report cards: These are similar to the school performance scorecards ('league tables') used in the United Kingdom, but currently only allows comparison across districts. This is a valuable tool in the hands of education managers, teachers, parents and pupils.

Possible initiatives for South Africa inspired by the visit

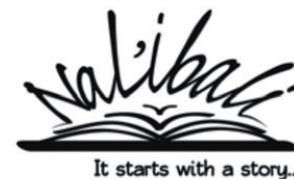
As we came home, we thought about possible applications for South Africa. They include:

- An accelerated literacy programme: A sub-district wide training, support and pupil assessment initiative aimed at all Grade 1 teachers
- A large-scale, cost-effective library programme for children at schools or in municipalities
- Testing 'league tables' for schools – a way of comparing learning outcomes across schools and sub-districts.

Finally, much work has been done on the price

of books in South Africa², but not enough intervention to reduce costs. We recognised that the reading initiatives of India thrive in a print-rich environment and, unless the cost of books can be reduced, our efforts at reading promotion won't be as successful.

The DG Murray Trust is supporting the following reading campaign in South Africa:



Nal'ibali (isiXhosa for "here's the story") is a national reading for enjoyment initiative to get people in South Africa – adults and children – passionate about telling and reading stories. Nal'ibali is spearheaded by the Project for Alternative Education in SA (PRAESA), which has many years of experience and research insights into early literacy development and running reading clubs, and Avusa Education as the primary media partner.

Core funding is provided by the DG Murray Trust.

² See for example South African Book Development Council (2007). Factors influencing the cost of books in South Africa. Study conducted by Genesis Analytics (Pty) Ltd. Available at: http://www.sabookcouncil.co.za/pdf/PICC_Cost_of_books_studyFinal.pdf (Accessed 29 March 2012)