CREATIVE
LEARNERS
RESOURCEFUL YOUNG
CHILDREN
INCLUSIVE, ENABLING
COMMUNITIES
GAME-CHANGING
LEADERS
ENTERPRISING
SCHOOL LEAVERS

Insights from India

Let's Get South Africa Reading   August 2015

How Can We Accelerate Reading Development?
Lessons from Pratham and Akshara on Taking Literacy to Scale

In 2012, three DG Murray Trust representatives 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 years. This visit had a big impact on our approach to literacy development in South Africa.

In 2015, Pratham CEO Madhav Chavan came to visit the DG Murray Trust to see how we'd built on what we had learned – and to share insights about education and going to scale. This brief outlines our key learnings from India, and how they can be applied to the South African context.

The Context of India

India's population is 24 times larger than South Africa's, which means that it is difficult for non-governmental organisations to 'cover the entire country'. Still, many operate at very large scale, and provide pointers as to how programmes can reach considerable numbers of people while maintaining their integrity.

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 6s can read at a Grade 2 level. 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.

There are also key differences. The vast majority of children in India live in two-parent households. The cost of living (and of programme implementation) is much lower, and there is a strong culture of volunteerism.
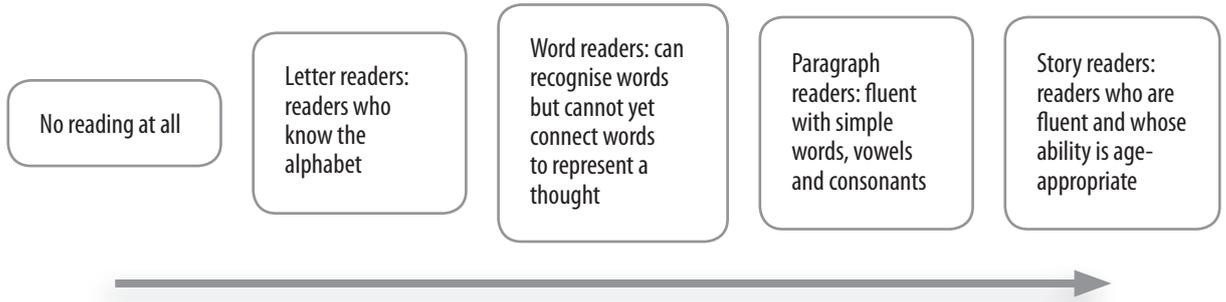
Key Insights

Our visit to India left us believing with conviction that reading catch-up, by children lagging behind,

---

What Pratham does

- Drives the volunteer-powered *'Read India'* campaign.
- Provides intensive support to Grade 3s whose reading lags behind classmates.
- Offers language development in public early childhood development centres.
- Publishes the Annual State of Education Review (ASER).
- More recently, offers vocational training and second chances programmes.

Not-for-profit publisher Pratham Books reinforces these efforts by publishing low-cost books and story cards. It has published 1 800 unique books in 11 Indian languages, printed more than 12 million books and claims a readership of nearly 52 million. It offers books for approximately R7 and story cards for less than a Rand.

Pratham
Every Child In School and Learning Well

Creative Learners

Pratham's way of assessing reading ability

No reading at all	Letter readers: readers who know the alphabet	Word readers: can recognise words but cannot yet connect words to represent a thought	Paragraph readers: fluent with simple words, vowels and consonants	Story readers: readers who are fluent and whose ability is age-appropriate

→

Pratham's 4-step models for building literacy and numeracy

Accelerating literacy

Step 1: read a story; get the child to recite the story; then get them to read along with you.
Step 2: Use phonics charts and help the child identify phonics in text (reading and writing).
Step 3: Learn with rhyming words (using 12 forms of each letter).
Step 4: Encourage the child to say anything and 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.

---

is possible – and that with the resources available at our disposal, significant scale-up of programmes is within reach, based on what Indian programmes achieve with far fewer resources.

As to how we can achieve this, our key take-home messages were:

- Working with government is critical in literacy development, to obtain scale and to ensure that 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.
- To improve literacy at scale, we must set a goal and design an approach that can meet it, rather than design on a micro level and try to replicate many times over.
- To spread and reach scale, an approach must be simple – just like a game of "telephone", complex messages will get lost in dissemination.

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. In 2014-2015, it reached 7.7 million children, 15 000 youth and enrolled 4 600 school drop-outs.

Read India

Pratham's main programme, *Read India*, provides intensive support to children who have fallen behind in reading and maths, primarily through running learning camps. The majority of children are in Grades 3-5, although some of the programme targets children in Grades 1-7.

In 2013-14, *Read India* reached almost 400 000 children in 11 450 villages, and mobilised approximately 19 000 volunteers to run more than 20 000 learning camps. Although vast, this was a considerable decrease from Phase 1 of the campaign, which was run in 370 000 villages. The scale back did, however, allow for the programme to become more manageable in terms of support

and quality control. It also works in "balwadis "(preschools) with children aged 3-5, to ensure they are prepared to start formal schooling.

Literacy: Our visit takes us to 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 older children 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. 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 1 000, and then in 1 000s to 10 000 – 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 has innovated and promotes the 'combined activities for maximised learning' method (known as CAMaL), whereby seeing, saying and touching integrates numeracy concepts in children's minds.

Once children 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 in writing.

Learning camps: In 2012, we attended a 'learning camp' for Grade 3s – essentially an intensive week-long course held at the school – for children falling behind. What impressed us was how the children interacted with each other, telling stories, reading, and playing games that developed numeracy skills. Volunteers facilitated rather than 'teach'; children used the school floor as their chalkboard to do sums and write stories.

ASER: Pratham's Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) is the largest non-governmental household survey in rural India. It measures enrolment status, as well as basic reading and maths skills of children aged 3-16, using a common set of testing tools and a comprehensive sampling framework. In 2013, the survey targeted 600 000 children in 570 rural districts, and was administered by more than 25 000 volunteers.

What struck us most about this process was that assessments are done by volunteers, in homes, in front of parents. This ensures that all children are reached, even those not enrolled in school. It also sometimes sparks parents' outrage – "my child goes to school every day, why doesn't she know how to read?" – but it also galvanizes parents to demand quality education to get involved.

External and Internal Challenges

We were inspired by what we saw, but the programme is not without challenges. In 2012, the state government of Maharashtra had terminated its state-wide agreement with Pratham to work in schools, apparently because the Pratham way of working was inconsistent with the newly approved curriculum.

There are internal challenges as well: we got the sense that the scale of the first Phase of *Read India*, with 370 000 villages was just too big to manage, and raised questions about the quality of volunteer support. Pratham has responded by consolidating its work to 25 000 villages in Phase 2, and 11 450 in Phase 3 – a 32-fold reduction in scale. Pratham's reading evaluation tool is simple and quick to administer, and can be used by volunteers – but the ASER team has found that while it provides useful information about reading fluency, it does not tell us enough about reading comprehension. Finally, while we understood and appreciate the focus on lagging Grade 3s, we were concerned

about the opportunities lost by not engaging more with younger children, to prevent them from falling behind in the first place.

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

What Akshara does

- Uses Pratham's learning methods.
- Provides literacy support in government ECD centres "anganwadis".
- Offers literacy, numeracy and English language in schools.
- Systematically assesses every child.
- Runs the Karnataka Learning Partnership, which consolidates data on every school in the state[1]
- Compiles and issues district report cards.

Akshara Foundation
EVERY CHILD IN SCHOOL AND LEARNING WELL

1   www.klp.org.in

The Experience of Akshara

The Akshara Foundation in Bangalore uses Pratham's learning methods, also working in preschools and primary schools. 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 1 350 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 1 350 schools. The 'libraries' consist of a few shelves of books, which are constantly replenished through a revolving system

of more than 600 000 books. The difficulty of each book is graded with a coloured 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 215 000 young library users – each of whom reads an average of 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, increasing accountability. 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 allow comparison across districts. This is a valuable tool in the hands of education managers, teachers, parents and pupils.

Opportunities for South Africa

Since our first trip, we have thought about and explored possible applications of these lessons for South Africa. They include:

1. Adapting and piloting Pratham's learning camps for literacy and numeracy catch-up.
2. Developing a simple reading assessment tool, based on the ASER, that can be used by volunteers.
3. Designing a large-scale, cost-effective library programme for children, modelled after Akshara's hub-and-spoke and classroom library approaches.
4. 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 Africa , but not enough intervention has reduced costs. 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.