

Whole Language Approach and Multilingual Pedagogy in Schools

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A few days ago, I visited the Union LPS (Lower Primary School) Thrikkanarvattom in Ernakulam Town along with two experts from NCERT, Professor Indrani Bhaduri and Dr.Vijayan. We saw that the students were fully involved and engaged in learning. After visiting the school, I thought how true the ancient Chinese proverb, "Tell me, I forget/Show me, I remember/Involve me, I understand", was. The students of Union LPS Thrikkanarvattom were really amazing. They could read Malayalam with comprehension, do basic operations in Mathematics and read and communicate in English and Hindi, and of course enjoyed singing songs in their mother tongue. Here is what Professor Indrani Bhaduri, Head of Educational Survey Division of NCERT wrote in the School Visitor's Book:

A great experience meeting and talking to the students and teachers. The students are well versed in four languages, their mother tongue, Malayalam, English and Hindi, which they can read and write. The student-teacher relationship is also worth mentioning. Teachers teach students as their own children. A very dedicated team. The school totally endorses the concept of "Joyful learning".

The Story of Union LPS Thrikkanarvattom

Except for three students, all the other children of the school are the children of immigrant workers, predominantly from Bihar, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Assam and Nepal. The medium of instruction in the school is Malayalam. As the children belong to different linguistic communities, they found it difficult to understand Malayalam, the language of instruction. In fact, the children of immigrants from the North and North East were found to be insecure when they were exposed to

Malayalam. Hence, Samagra Shiksha, Kerala and the district administration launched a project titled "Roshni". This project helps the children of immigrant workers acquire proficiency in Malayalam, English and Hindi by using the strategy of code-switching through special packages, and by taking an extra ninety minutes before the morning classes. It enlists the service of educational volunteers who are proficient in Hindi, Bengali and Oriya. As the volunteers are multilingual, they can communicate easily with the children and hence understand them better.

We met a student from Class 1, whose parents were from Pondicherry. He could speak Malayalam fluently and read and

understand simple stories. He could talk to his classmates fluently in Hindi. Nobody had taught him Hindi; he had acquired it from his friends in Class 1. We also talked to his mother, who had come to pick up her son from school. She told Professor Indrani Bhaduri that her son spoke Tamil at home. So this Class 1 student was proficient in three languages. We also talked to a student from Bihar whose mother tongue was Bhojpuri—the language chiefly spoken in western Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. This student read a Malayalam story fluently and narrated the story to Professor Indrani in Hindi. Professor Bhaduri asked the girl to sing a Bhojpuri song, which she sang rhythmically. This indicated that the students keep up with their mother tongue along with Malayalam, English and Hindi. It was clear that the multilingual pedagogy implemented for the inclusive education of migrant children was working well. The teachers and educational volunteers not only ensured that the migrant children learnt Malayalam, English and Hindi, but they also made sure that they loved their mother tongue and were proud of it.

Multilingual Pedagogy

Professor Rama Kant Agnihotri, in the Joint Review Mission (JRM) Report 2014, specified that the state of Kerala has to seriously think about implementing a pedagogy rooted in multilingualism in the schools of Kerala, for teaching the children of tribal and migrant labourers. He complimented the Malayalam-English code-switching strategy used for teaching English in the lower primary classrooms in the state. In Union LP School as well as other schools in the state where the children of migrant people study, the education system has effectively made use of multilingual pedagogy. The main pedagogic tool used in this inclusive education is code-switching. Code-

switching is generally defined as a shift from one language to another by the speaker during the speech. As part of the teaching process, Malayalam teachers used graphic reading and writing during the early stages of language acquisition. The following processes were used as part of graphic reading and writing. The teacher initiates an interaction in Malayalam using a picture or a video. The volunteer teacher uses code-switching strategy and talks in Oriya, Assamese, Bengali and Hindi. For example, in the picture interaction, the teacher asks in Malayalam: "ഈ ചിത്രത്തിൽ എന്താ കാണുന്നത്?" The volunteer teacher code-switches into Hindi: "यह चित्र देखो, चित्र में क्या दिखता है?" Sometimes, volunteer parents also participate in the team, teaching along with the class teacher. The teacher speaks Malayalam clearly and slowly, maintaining appropriate pace, tone and stress to make her/his speech audible and meaningful. Teachers also use narratives to give meaningful, interesting and comprehensible input to the learners. The narrative is presented with appropriate voice modulation, pitch, tone and body language in order to promote active listening and comprehension. The teacher presents the narratives in Malayalam and the volunteer teacher code-switches to Oriya, Assamese, Bengali and Hindi for the same narrative. In this case, the Hindi, Oriya, Bengali, Tamil and Assamese speaking children could read the elicited text graphically. They were able to identify sentences, words and letters written in Malayalam. We were really impressed by how the multilingual pedagogy came alive in the classrooms.

Phonics Versus Whole Language Approach

Many of us were taught to read and write starting with the sounds of the letters. We

repeated consonants or vowel sounds until the association between the letter and the sound was ingrained in our minds. Educators call this the phonics approach. In this approach, memorizing the shape of the letter and its sound is the first activity to take place in the learner's brain. This approach has been around for so many years that many people are convinced that it is the only way that reading can be taught. In the phonics approach, learning starts with the smallest parts of a language; the pieces are added together until the learner understands how to interpret every symbol to read or write a message. This method however often does not work very well when students are not familiar with books and printed words. For them, the symbols are too abstract and have no meaning as they have not had the opportunity to see others using the symbols to read and write.

The inclusive educational programme for the children of migrant labourers in the schools of Ernakulam is based on the philosophy of whole language and social constructivism. Whole language is not a specific method. It is a philosophy of education that describes how we view language, literacy, teaching and learning. The major assertion in this philosophy of learning is that language is "whole". This means that if we take it apart to focus on its letters, vocabulary or grammar patterns, we lose the essence of what language is. Reading should not be taught as the isolated skill of connecting symbols and sounds. Learning to read must also be connected to life experience, meaningful activities and the learner's goals through discussion, speaking, listening and writing. In the simplest terms, the whole-language approach strives to teach children to read words as whole pieces of language. Influenced by the Constructivist Theory, proponents of the whole-language methodology believe that children draw from their perspective and prior experiences to form the framework for new knowledge. This type

of instruction is taught using a holistic approach, meaning that children do not learn to break down sounds individually but to take words at face value and associate them with prior knowledge.

Multilingual and Whole Language Pedagogy

The pedagogy rooted in multilinguality in the schools of Ernakulam uses whole language strategies. In such a classroom, the teacher focusses on knowing and caring about the learners, identifying generative themes, creating learner-centred materials, integrating skills (LSRW), preparing teaching manuals and learning aids, helping learners to read and write, assessing learners' achievements and mentoring and handholding them to higher achievement and joyful learning. In the whole language approach, the learners play a central role. In fact, programmes based on the whole language philosophy claim that their methods are "learner-centred", rather than "book-centred" or "teacher-centred". Multilingual and whole language pedagogy promotes inclusive education and joyful learning. The students in Union LPS Thrikkanarvattom learn individually, discuss in groups and work collaboratively. Further, the teachers use a variety of teaching learning materials besides the textbook.

Our team also met the parents who came to pick up their children after 3:30 pm in the afternoon. A parent from Jharkhand said the school was wonderful and his daughter, who is in Class two, reads and speaks Hindi and Malayalam. A Bihari mother said to us that her daughter in Class four speaks and reads Malayalam, Hindi, English and Bhojpuri. She is also proficient in maths. The Headmistress summed up, "Our students are coming from small homes to a big home. The school is a big home for them and we love them all."