

Achieving Literacy Through Joyful Learning

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In a hard-to-reach corner of Southern Odisha's Rayagada district lies the sleepy village of Kashipur. Aspects of the village are picture-perfect, with gently undulating hills and streams. The hillsides are covered with a chequered quilt of cultivated squares and the observer is struck by the many shades of green that exist in the landscape.

The reality of the peoples' lives here is, however, far from perfect. The hills conceal rich mineral deposits that have brought in mining companies with their noisy machines and gigantic trucks. The largely tribal population faces chronic poverty and is prey to malaria in addition to centuries of exploitation by colonial and post-colonial rulers. Literacy rates are low and about thirty years ago, there were no schools at all. The organisation, *Aragamee*, rooted itself in this village with the objective of working with the communities to ensure their rights and to empower them against exploitation. Much before the government set up schools in these regions, *Aragamee* had started night schools in the hamlets around Kashipur and to this day, young women and men who learnt to read and write in these schools recall the extraordinary excitement of those days. With the government finally taking up the responsibility for educating children, *Aragamee* decided to focus on livelihood and health issues. Sadly, they found that despite the presence of schools, children were dropping out early and girls were the most vulnerable in remaining trapped in intergenerational cycles of low literacy and poverty. About fifteen years back, *Aragamee* started a primary school for girls, called *Mukta Gyana Kutir* (MGK).

The need for innovation

In the *Aragamee* school, as elsewhere, teachers had been teaching in the traditional manner, focusing on letters first and later reading aloud from the textbooks with the children repeating after them. Vidhya Das, Joint Director of *Aragamee* was dismayed by what she saw. 'It was as if the teachers' droning voice made a blanket of sound under which the creative potential of children

was smothered!' she said. She wrote, '...school education, where children are not provided the stimulus and opportunity to use their minds and cognitive abilities in creative and engaging ways, where too much emphasis is given to mechanical memorising, affects children's mental development. It decreases interest and slows down learning, thus, necessitating more than double the time normally required to acquire even the basic literacy skills.' (*Aragamee* Annual Report, 2016-17).

It was this concern that let Vidhya Das to innovate and come up with a different approach to teaching literacy which was then called the *Creative Language Development Effort*, or CLDE. In this approach, the traditional process is abandoned for a more child-centric and whole language approach, whereby phonic comprehension is brought about through known words, objects, proper nouns, playful rhymes and songs which the child can remember. The learning is more organic and so quicker and much less stressful for the child and the teacher.

What is CLDE?

The Creative Language Development Effort (CLDE), based on the model developed in the MGK school, is an attempt to strengthen literacy in state-run schools in tribal districts. The goal is to improve reading and language abilities of first-generation school-goers in the tribal districts of Odisha. Here the community has no history of literacy or school education. Government primary schools in these pockets have poorly qualified and under-motivated teachers, resulting in a majority of students completing elementary school with almost no reading skills. The CLDE approach has several unique features. It seeks to make literacy learning as intuitive as natural language learning by reversing the alphabet-centric method. It equips children to learn the phonetics of reading through exposure and immersion in the written language through meaningful words, sentences, and ideas, beginning with the family and home, familiar objects, rhymes, and stories. Connections

between the sound of the word and the *aksharas* are established by encouraging the child to write. Thus, reading, writing and literacy development go hand-in-hand. The programme is based on a unique constructivist model of literacy and reading development.

Steps of CLDE

CLDE builds on the basic language and learning ability of children. By the time children enter formal schooling at the age of six years, they know at least one language. Research shows that at the age of six a child can use over 2000 words and can understand many more. They can express themselves in complete sentences and can talk about an event or narrate a story. Given that children are actively making sense of their world through spoken words, CLDE focuses on words to begin children's journey into written language. The steps followed are:

- Begin literacy instruction through meaningful words: Rather than begin by memorising the letters of the alphabet, in the CLDE approach children are introduced directly to whole words such as their own names, names of familiar objects, animals and birds. If the word for an object or animal is different in the child's home language, the teacher helps the child understand that there can be two words that mean the same. The child is helped to say the word as it is written while acknowledging that a different word is used by the child in her own language.
- Let children practise writing whole words: As part of becoming familiar with written words, children practise writing words that they have learnt.
- Use games and activities to enhance word recognition: As children begin learning whole words, their word recognition is enhanced through various games and activities such as picture-word matching, filling in the missing letter, word match and bingo games.
- Teach rhymes and songs: Children enjoy singing rhymes and songs and the same songs are presented to them in print so that they can follow along as they sing or recite the rhymes. The same rhyme or song can be translated and sung in different languages - when this is done, children who speak a different home language feel included.
- Introduce storybooks: As the children become familiar with written words through reading and

writing, they are also introduced to storybooks through read-alouds and other book related activities.

- Encourage children to express in writing: Reading and writing go hand in hand in the CLDE approach and children are encouraged to write as they read and also beyond what they read.
- Introduce *akshara* and *maatras* formally, after children have already learnt to read many whole words.

Pedagogy of CLDE

As part of their training, CLDE teachers are helped to develop a conceptual understanding of language and literacy. Literacy means being able to think independently, to make meaning of what one reads and being able to communicate ideas, thoughts or feelings through writing. In the CLDE approach, *meaning making* is given a primary role and decoding is introduced later. Teachers are helped to understand the nature of language as a sound-symbol system. They discuss the way in which children naturally acquire their home language. By observing children, teachers realise the importance of play in their learning. A CLDE teacher is expected to:

- Create a friendly and fear-free atmosphere by not scolding or punishing children.
- Encourage children to speak freely in the language the child is comfortable in. It helps if teachers can speak the child's home language. Teachers are expected to listen carefully to children and communicate with them in a friendly manner and to try and understand the child's language.
- Be familiar with the principles behind the CLDE approach and the supporting books. Use the books according to the guidelines given.
- Teach through play, including learning and reciting of action songs, drawing and colouring, taking the child's finger across the text of these rhymes in imitation of reading (even if the actual ability has not yet developed) and letting children play with picture cards. By using these methods, the teacher can help to acquaint the child with the text and commit it to memory effortlessly. Through play, children not only practice what they know, but they also learn new things. It is now well recognised that play actually facilitates cognitive development.

- To translate poems and songs into the children's home language whenever required and whenever possible. Since tribal Odisha has a number of languages it is not always possible for the teacher to do this.
- Create and use TLMs to support children's learning.
- Develop children's interest in books by using stories, read-alouds, role play, dramatisations and other such activities.
- Have a good rapport with the community around the school.

Supporting material

A workbook-cum-primer *Kau Dake Ka* (the crow says *ka*) has come to be much loved by both children and teachers in the CLDE programme. The basic concepts behind the CLDE approach is explained in the preface. The importance of drawing and colouring, the need for children to copy symbols correctly, the importance of understanding two-dimensional representation and the gradual stages of reading development are also explained. Along with this, the preface helps teachers plan their lessons and offers many suggestions for classroom activities. In addition to *Kau Dake Ka*, the programme has developed several other TLM that teachers can use to enliven their classroom learning.

Is CLDE effective?

A visit to MGK will serve to show how effective this approach is. During one of my early visits to the school, I was impressed by children in class I who were about six months into school for the very first time in their lives. These lively little girls did not hesitate to write each other's names when asked and further, they happily wrote out my name on hearing it. Many of them had picked up books from the library and were able to read out from them! It made me wonder why so many children in other schools were not able to read even after reaching class VII.

When CLDE was being piloted in 18 schools in various tribal districts, the impact was visible. Visitors to these schools would be surrounded by confident and curious children who were quite willing to engage in conversation in contrast to children in other schools who would often run away from visitors or be tongue-tied and silent. Reading levels improved

significantly wherever the CLDE approach was used as a supplement to regular schooling. The improvement was most dramatic in the case of older children who had until then been unable to read even simple words. Iswar Saunta, one of the CLDE project teachers, spoke about the changes he had observed in two children who had been studying at a residential school, but had discontinued. Both of them were unable to read at all when they joined Iswar's school. 'Now, after one year in my class, they are fluent readers and eager learners,' says Iswar. The CLDE pilot project in the 18 schools has come to a close, and one can only hope that the gains in reading and the positive attitude towards schooling that was created will remain with the children.

Meanwhile, the strong foundations in literacy and learning laid at MGK have many unexpected consequences. It is a lower primary school and the girls have to move on to a government school to complete elementary schooling. Only a few are able to continue beyond that. However, the strong educational base built at MGK serves them in other ways. One girl, for example, was able to question her employer when the wages she received were not the wages she was signing for. 'Oh, have you been to school - which one?' she was asked.

Since MGK was primarily set up for Adibasi girls, the neighbouring village of potters did not initially send their girls to the same school. However, on hearing that the Adibasi girls from MGK were learning well in school and that some of them had even managed to get into the Navodaya school, the potters' village also decided to send their girls to MKG. Perhaps good schooling can serve to change age-old mindsets!

As I conclude this article, my mind wanders off to the gentle hills of Kashipur. Every weekday, as the sun warms up the landscape and the cattle move out to graze, the air is suddenly filled with children's laughter as the little girls come laughing and chattering across fields and forests - happy to be at school, happy to read stories, happy to write stories and illustrate them. Just as the air is filled with their voices, so too are the walls of their school brightened by their art and writing. It is truly a remarkable experience to be at MGK and see the children blossoming.

You may like to read more about the teacher training part of CLDE at
http://ncert.nic.in/publication/journals/pdf_files/vtte_aug_2018.pdf (pg47 - 58)

A link to an article about MGK is here:
<https://thewire.in/education/in-odhisa-a-school-quietly-empowers-tribal-girls-with-its-empathetic-vision>



Indira's deepest concerns are about human well-being and the role of education in promoting or harming it. She understands well-being as a web of mutually affirming and sustaining relationships between all participants in an ecosystem - human, non-human and material. Her work as a teacher and teacher educator provoked a deep questioning about the processes of education and led her to start the **Poorna Learning Centre** - an 'alternative' school. Indira taught at the Azim Premji University and retired in January 2020. She continues to be actively engaged with Poorna at present. She has several publications in academic and popular journals. She can be contacted at indira502@gmail.com

Moreover, we must also be aware of and accept India's multilingual reality. Every Indian is a polyglot, with a world of oral utterances. Most children, as they grow and interact with the world around, get exposed to a unique linguistic fluidity in some way or the other. To build a solid foundation for literacy, space for a child's language and orality in the classroom must be created.

Saktibrata Sen and Nidhi Vinayak, Essential Pillars of a Comprehensive Literacy Programme, p 55.