

Vidhya Das

The children were bouncy and full of energy and did not seem inclined to being confined to their seats, though not all of them were running around. Just five or six of them were being playful and noisy. As I went and sat beside the quieter ones, the playful ones came to show what they had written. Many of them were in such a hurry to get my attention, they had not completed their work. I told them very firmly that I would come to look at their work when their turn came. The littlest one tried to pull me to her seat. Another child explained to her that she should not do this, as I was their *Guruma* (head teacher), and the little one stopped, and they all went back to their places.

I was in class II of *Aragamee* School which caters to first-generation school children, generally referred to as first-generation learners, in a tribal region. Children become learners from the moment of birth. School education for these children is a challenging task as their parents have never gone to school. In the government primary schools, they are very often rendered almost completely submissive and docile as teachers try to force and coerce academic skills on them. At other times, there is almost no learning, as teachers decide that they cannot learn and give up. It is also not rare that both situations occur simultaneously: there is almost no learning and, along with this, children are also forced into a sense of fear, inferiority and submission. *Aragamee* School seeks to help these children learn without fear or stress.

The many difficulties in helping first-generation school children build academic skills are being increasingly recognised today, even though the system still focuses mostly on enrolment, dropouts and toilets. These quantitative indicators have their importance if we did not treat most of them as the end we are looking for in education. For example, we now have near hundred per cent enrolment rates as per government records, but what is the point of enrolment if the learning levels are dismal? A large proportion of children are not able to read

even at the end of elementary school! Most others in that stage have only very rudimentary reading abilities.

Most school learning begins only after one becomes a fairly fluent reader. If one does not become a fluent reader, with fair comprehension of what one is reading, then school learning does not begin, as almost everything in school is from books. So, learning any subject depends on reading. If a child is not able to read well, in time, she is denied equal opportunities. Dhir Jhingran<sup>1</sup> underscores precisely all this, pointing out that reading is a foundational skill on which all formal education depends and that any child who does not learn to read early and well, will not easily master other skills and knowledge and cannot do well in school. He further points out that children who learn to read later, or read slowly, may avoid reading, are unable to understand the textbooks of their grade thus, developing negative attitudes about school and are less likely to complete school!

Thus, often first-generation schoolchildren (FGS) tend to drop out earlier even if they do join school. The difference becomes more marked in elementary school. Reports indicate that in school, FGS children have lower attendance, less consistent performance, interrupted studies and low self-esteem. Studies also report a range of problems faced by first-generation students regarding the curriculum, difficulties in completing homework, adjusting to the timetable and teaching. Compared with non-FG students, more than twice the number of FG students face such problems with school learning. It is also reported that none of the families of FGS children have an adequate standard of living. However, what is undeniable is that poor standards of living and the ensuing struggle to make ends meet for families of FGS children that lead to several constraints and hurdles in school, as these children may have to take time off studies for work, may not be able to afford course material, stationery and private tuitions classes.

<sup>1</sup>Retired civil servant, Founder Director of Language and Learning Foundation

Finally, FGS children face an adverse environment in school as compared to their more fortunate peers. Several comparative reports indicate that a greater number of them perceive higher levels of neglect and apathy from their teachers and principals. This affects self-esteem as also aspirational levels, which could be one of the reasons for higher dropout rates. This, then, becomes a vicious circle: FGS children do not get adequate academic support from their parents, so are unable to have good school education and so cannot help their own children do well in school and so on. With girls, the situation is even worse and is evidenced in tribal girls and women being the least literate section of the population.

How can one break this? In most non-first-generation families (in which the parents and/or grandparents have completed at least high school), the adults teach the child the first skills for school learning including reading, counting and numbers. Most often, this is done through one to one teaching at home, either by a parent or an older relative and could take the form of teaching the child alphabets, encouraging her to recognise and write the letters of the language, teaching spellings of objects, names of family members. In addition, there the presence of the printed word: books, newspapers, calendars with parents and other members of the family reading, snippets of interesting news being read out and so on. The persistence, guided by parental concern and care, in addition to the overall ambience more than any identified pedagogy helps the non-FGS child pick up reading and writing by the time she starts school and has a clear advantage over her FGS peers. *Aragamee's* experience indicates that this helps even second-generation school children have significantly increased learning levels in early grades as compared to their FG peers.

Teachers are, by and large, not equipped to teach children these skills. There is very little of the pedagogy of teaching reading in most teacher courses. Nor are textbooks for kindergartens and first grades designed to help the child develop the skills for fluent reading.

Given this background, the focus in *Aragamee* School has been on addressing the complex set of problems affecting school learning for FGS children. This evolving pedagogy seeks to help teachers understand the constraints and challenges faced by the children, perceive the various issues they have in learning (including attendance, health, comfort

levels, making sense of what is being taught, engaging, focusing attention), and develop the approach and methodology to address these. The pedagogy goes beyond the traditional approach and methods, encouraging teachers to look for solutions, while also seeking to help with the paradigm shift to understand and practice radical new approaches.

One such shift has been made in the area of language teaching. Language teaching in school begins with teaching a child to read and traditionally, this requires a child to memorise alphabets with their various shapes - a herculean task for a child. It means memorising the form and sound of some 50 odd symbols which are quite meaningless until the learner understands the relationship of the words she speaks with the letters. Much of early school learning is hampered by poor literacy primarily because literacy teaching begins with forced memorising of alphabets and does not engage the cognitive faculties of a child. Developing reading and language skills in a child through alphabets or alphabet centric methods is a negative and uphill task, as the alphabet symbols relate to nothing the child knows.

When this method proved its lack of efficacy over time (we had wasted years and years of many children by then) a shift was made to help children learn through word alphabet connections, like A for apple etc. Many rhymes have been written to facilitate this in languages with phonetically more detailed (and perhaps more precise) scripts than English yet, the learning to read did not happen as teachers found these methods extremely difficult to teach. This method also lacks a clear-cut logic of learning, as the letter 'A' only symbolises the first alphabet of the word and the child finds it difficult to make a connect with the phonetics of the rest of the letters in the word.

We then sought to address this through the whole language approach. When a child comes to school, she knows one language. This means she has a vocabulary of at least 1500 to 2000 words and knows how to select and sequence this vocabulary to convey, as well as understand, a whole range of meanings from commands to questions to emotions, narration of events, stories, etc. She can understand, enjoy and sing simple songs and rhymes, discern past, present and future tenses and understand and convey abstract meanings like anger, sorrow, happiness, etc. She can also remember names of family members and

villages and relate to these to identify the place or individual. These are skills which are far more complex than those required for basic literacy or reading and writing.

We asked ourselves: can one build on this knowledge and ability of the child when she begins school? Can the teacher help a child who is beginning school, progress from drawing simple shapes of flowers, vegetables, etc. on her slate to rhymes and action songs, to names familiar to her beginning with her own name, then word pictures, small sentences about herself and other things from her daily life, then, writing down rhymes familiar to her? If a child begins learning by writing out her name and then the names of her parents, siblings etc., she has an immediate connect with the school, the class and has a sense of excitement. When she goes home and writes these out for her family members to see, the positive affirmation she receives, makes the class learning immensely more meaningful, encouraging her to come back for more such learning.

These ideas were discussed over several sessions with the early grade teachers. The problems in helping children move towards effective literacy, the reasons for them, the children's response and the language problems tribal children face when they come to school formed the topics for formal and informal discussions for many months. Teachers developed vocabulary sets and teaching material to help children begin to learn through familiar words, rather than rote memorisation.

Yet, in the classrooms, teachers went back to the traditional alphabet-centric methods, leading to very little change. Why was it difficult after so much of discussion and understanding to change to a more creative, child-centred approach? It was found that teachers could not find the resources in this approach to engage the children every day. So, they fell back on memorisation. Some teachers did not believe that it was possible for children to learn without first learning all the letters. There were also classes which were bi-lingual, wherein almost half the children spoke a tribal language and did not understand the state language, Odiya.

Following further discussions, everybody got together and designed a book which could help teachers transition to a more child-centric teaching. In addition, teachers (whose first language was a tribal language) were appointed to teach in those classes which had tribal children. Several participatory training sessions were held, where

teachers shared how they were using the book, how they were helping children with different mother tongues use the word and picture games that they had improvised.

In addition, classroom problems were also discussed. These sessions also helped to identify resources within the children. Some of the observations that the teachers shared were the eagerness of children to support each other, for example, a child who had finished her work would often turn to help her companion do hers. They were also very willing to learn from their peers and listened to their peers more than to their teachers! These discussions helped to understand children better, as also improve our teaching and TLMs. Following the first book, a workbook primer was designed that would help engage students in constructive and creative ways and enable teachers to take up activities that could help children progress gradually towards literacy and reading.

The workbook which served as a pictorial primer in class I proved to be a great attraction for the children. Filled with colouring and drawing activities and word games, children were almost instantly engrossed in the most constructive ways. The primer helped the teachers as well, as it provided them with ideas for further games and puzzles to take up and blackboard activities in the classroom. Teachers found that children normally required two years to complete exercises in the primers, at the end of which they would have picked up the basics of reading. In the subsequent classes, steps were taken to improve children's reading abilities through reading aloud, blackboard reading, and reading and comprehension exercises.

All children do not learn at the same pace. At the Agramee School, every child is encouraged to learn at her own pace and, as mentioned above, help her peers learn as well. This creates an ambience of collective effort where no child is left out. Teachers do not explain lessons to the children, but help them understand the lessons in their textbooks by asking questions, identifying words, doing exercises like visual memory testing where paragraph-wise, self-reading by children is followed by the teacher calling out words for the child to spot, etc.

All this has helped in building up the reading and language skills of the children of Agramee School right from classes I and II through easy

and fun methods. Thus, now, children are eager learners in all subjects as they find it a joy to read and pursue various subjects and topics of their choice and interest. Equally, they have also become eager writers, keen on expressing themselves and reporting events and experiences from their school life through an annual report and a newsletter, *Dangar Katha* which provides glimpses of the children's lives in the village, their imagination, and longings and a vision of things as children see them. At a suggestion from the teachers, they have also begun to illustrate their writings with vivid and colourful drawings. In the area of drawing and illustrations, we are proud to say that *Aragamee* School has allowed the children's imaginations to run free and bloom as with very little teaching.

This experience has also helped *Aragamee* School reach out to government schools. In this effort, youth trained in the approach and methods, as above, were placed in eighteen government primary schools to improve learning in early grades. With prior experience, a lot of emphasis was placed on training and understanding basic concepts. The workbook primer that was provided to the children and trainees also had several observation sessions

of early grade teaching in the *Aragamee* School. The efforts taken over a period of two years in three tribal districts of Odisha: Koraput, Rayagada and Nabrangpur had outstanding results. According to independent studies, 83% of children could read by the end of class II.

While this experience has provided us with a really large learning field, one of the key lessons we would like to emphasise is the need for support and effective training for the teachers. There is a great need to listen to teachers, help them understand their problems and provide them with adequate support to move towards the solutions. In the government system, teachers are subordinates, required to follow the rules of the service and obey their seniors. This proves to be a major hindrance for developing good teaching methods and thereby, improving learning outcomes. It is essential to go beyond this and help government primary school teachers enter creative spaces with knowledge and skills. This might seem like an impossible idea given the system we have today. But perhaps if we could begin in a small way and expand our reach and achievements, then we could progress towards quality education for all.



**Vidhya Das** works in the non-profit organization, *Aragamee*. She is recognised for her work in the area of women's rights, education and livelihoods. Her writings on tribal education and tribal rights have been widely published. In keeping with *Aragamee's* vision, she is committed to a world without hunger and injustice. She can be contacted at [vidhyadas@aragamee.org](mailto:vidhyadas@aragamee.org)