

Reinforcing Learning Through Local Knowledge

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We routinely say that ‘Students are active learners, not passive listeners’. Since most of the students in public schools in rural areas face socio-economic challenges, teachers need to try out multiple pedagogies to ensure their involvement and reinforce learning.

As part of the Associate Programme,ⁱ we have been visiting two schools in the Yadgir district – Government Higher Primary School, Ashnal, and Government Higher Primary School, Kanchagarahalli. These two schools have classes I-VIII, with the strengths of 228 and 202 students, respectively. Each class consists of 30-40 students, most of whom are first-generation school-goers. Children come to school with a huge knowledge base and a very intimate understanding of their surroundings but learning processes are usually limited to the classroom and do not extend into their daily activities. The impact of this is seen on the expected learning outcomes, both in terms of how many children attain it and to what level.

Keeping these factors in mind while preparing lesson plans, we prioritise the engagement and involvement of children, comprising aspects like creating space for oral expression, comprehensive reading of posters and picture stories, writing for expression, and connecting day-to-day events to mathematical operations. The activities also keep a balance between time and space within and outside the classroom.

At the beginning of the 2023-24 academic year, we organised a five-day Children’s Creativity Workshop for all the children in the school with a variety of activities to enhance children’s enthusiasm and interest in schooling. The objectives of the workshop were:

- Bringing children back to school (in this context, children take up to several weeks to return to school after school holidays) by engaging them in activities requiring creative and critical engagement
- Improving community interaction with school through student and parent involvement in

activities

- Conducting activities that integrate aspects of foundational literacy and numeracy
- Encouraging teachers to participate in the activities and extending these into their teaching practices

A few examples of activities that were conducted in the community space before school hours to encourage student and community participation were – simple games, art shows (*Yakshagana*, drama, puppet show), bird-watching, creating simple arts and crafts using local materials. Parents and youth were invited by us and the children to join or contribute to the activities.

We realised that while the community did not show immediate support or participation, they were observant and encouraging in their own way. Although we had visited the community with children before this workshop, these five days helped build an entirely different understanding and relationship. The visits helped us understand the setting of the houses of different communities, places of worship, places for leisure and gatherings, etc.

As we were there to conduct activities each morning, we also became aware of certain social complexities, such as children refusing to go to certain parts of the village and those who did, experienced conflict with members of the village. These moments required a degree of sensitivity that could only be managed with the support of parents and teachers. Most importantly, this experience helped us realise how much children observe, learn from, and engage with their surroundings; how wonderfully acquainted they are with their knowledge systems; and how little of this is part of their learning at school.

To bridge this gap, we supported children to conduct simple interviews of people in the village and develop a village map and village newspaper. Everything children created or developed was displayed on the last day as an exhibition hosted by children for their village.

Village newspaper

To begin with, we tried to ensure that the students understand the usefulness of a newspaper and the various types of its contents. We probed them to think about how a newsletter of their village could be created. Then, the content (list of news and other items) to be included in the newspapers was listed by the students. The list of news collected was diverse and interesting. For every news item listed, the students had so many things to tell us about that we encouraged them to create short write-ups by assigning them different news stories. Village newspapers have been brought out. Designed by students, these include information about events that have occurred in and around their school and village. Students of classes VI and VII carried out this activity in both the schools. Each edition also includes students' art, puzzles, quotes, photographs, and riddles.



Figure 1. Students explaining their work to community members

Enhancing literacy and numeracy skills

Bringing out the newspaper helped in reinforcing several aspects of literacy, like a probing thought

process; development of skills around listing, prioritising, and filtering information; collecting and consolidating data; writing about their experiences; describing a series of incidents; reading and writing to develop questions; representing information in multiple modes, like art and craft; and explaining it to a varied audience.

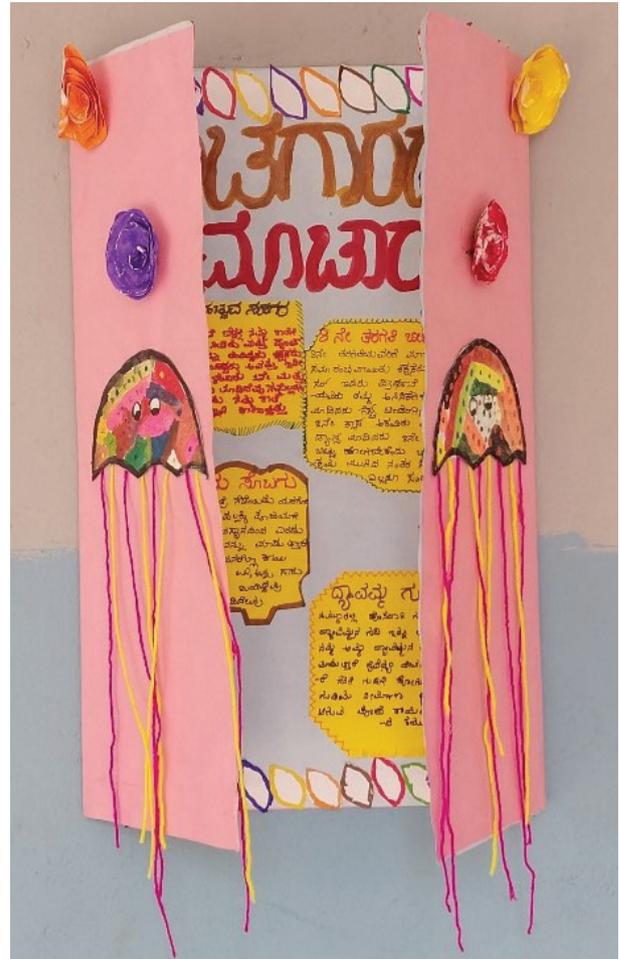


Figure 2. The Village Newspaper created by students at GHPS Kanthagarahalli

Commonly, the content delivered to the students is limited and they are expected to read and write in formal Kannada. So, when they were given the chance to access content from local resources involving incidents in the village and school etc., and writing in the local dialect, it created a platform for independent writing. This allowed them to prioritise news, such as 'New Teachers getting appointed to school', 'Declaration of holiday due to rain' etc. These news items are of their interest because of which their write-ups were more detailed and informative. Similarly, one of the students wrote about an indigenous food *hundi*, its method of preparation and the reason why it is prepared only once a year during a festival.

Evolving different methods of collecting data

We observed a few instances where students developed the skill of collecting data in a unique way. For example, a student had chosen the news of 'Ongoing temple construction in the village', for which the student sought the help of trusted sources (elders, teachers, and Temple Trust members) to collect authentic details, like the type of stone being used for construction, source of funds, expenditure till date, etc. In another case, a student was seen briefing the news of 'Cabinet formation' by clubbing a series of incidents that took place during the process. From the teacher explaining the cabinet formation process, nomination, campaigning, exercising vote, result announcement up to the oath-taking ceremony – the entire process was perfectly put in writing by the student which indicated improvement in the student's skill in independent writing. Above all, we noticed students' critical thinking on contemporary problems, like potholes on roads creating havoc during rains and ceiling seepage in classrooms etc.

Representing findings in multiple ways

In addition to the write-ups, the newspaper also provided students with opportunities to represent contents in different forms, like artworks, pictorial

riddles, quotes, word puzzles and food recipes. This ensured the participation of students from different learning levels. For instance, a girl faced difficulty in writing but expressed her thoughts on water conservation well through a drawing.

When comparing the two editions of the village newspaper, we could see the improvements, for example, the number of news items collected increased, and the write-ups were more descriptive in the second edition. Sentences were not well-formed in the first edition, whereas, in the second, there was a clear focus on sequencing and maintaining coherence in sentence structure along with descriptions of incidents in an illustrative and expressive manner.

Village map

Generally, when maps are introduced in the EVS classes, outlines of a particular country or state are given and the process of locating places is mechanical, in which students are required to memorise and mark major cities and landmarks. Creating a village map was a way of making this process more relevant to their context and focusing on important aspects, such as geographical representation and usage of directions and signs.



Figure 3. The Village Map created by the students of GHPS Ashnal

Representing what they see

To begin with, a map of their school was designed in which students were able to identify landmarks, like flagpole, stage, volleyball court, drinking water taps etc., and drew these precisely in their correct locations. Extending this outside the school, they identified the landmarks, like waterbodies, places of worship (church, mosque, temple), bank, shops and *anganwadi* centres that they see on their way home from school. When told to look down at their village by imagining themselves as a flying bird, they visualised the aerial view of the village and designed the final map.

This activity reinforced learning skills like visualising a geographical area, knowledge of direction and signs, mind mapping of distances from landmarks and marking the spots, also, reducing the whole village to fit into a chart, etc. Estimation, a major goal of mathematics teaching was also addressed here. Overall, the graphical representation of the village was neatly done by the students with minimal support from us.

Aesthetic features of representation

A unique thing we observed was the colours students chose to represent a building and other structures and the special signs they used for shops, places of worship and fields. Normally, people visualise places by looking at a map, but here students constructed a map by visualising, thus making their learning inductive.

When we planned for an exhibition of students' artworks from the workshop, students took a leading role in mobilising the community by inviting people from every house. Approximately a hundred community members participated in the exhibition at both the schools. In GHPS Kanchagarahalli, along with the community, support from the educational functionaries was significant. Whereas, in GHPS Ashnal, where the exhibition was held in the community space, the community participation was greater. Students were seen explaining the village newspaper and map to different audiences, like educational functionaries, college students, parents, and village elders while being mindful of those who can and cannot read. We noticed that students were consciously choosing the areas to focus on while explaining, such as pointing out the roads or houses of the villagers who were visiting, telling them the process they had followed, and sharing anecdotes. A fascinating feature was the community and educational functionaries encouraging the students to work on the second edition of the village newspaper.

We understand that there can be a learning shift through any mode of teaching. As we see frequently with the teachers in the schools where we practise, it is believed that children learn through rote memorisation, and this is used as the only form of learning reinforcement. Activities conducted in the classroom are mostly for concept introduction, but activity-based learning is rare, and multiple forms of reinforcement are not seen at all. This comes



Figure 4. Visitors spotting places on the village map.

from a belief that the end product where children write answers or solve sums is the only place where reinforcement is required.

With this initiative, we have noticed the significance of working on each aspect of learning that would bring an overall improvement. For example, language learning is improved when we simultaneously work on asking good questions, giving creative assignments, scaffolding students' writing with prompts, helping them plan and revise their writing, and finally, presenting their work. If we had only given students a homework

assignment to write about their village festival, the write-ups would have been very different, and the number of students engaging in this process, limited. The advantage of the approach we have used here is the scope for multiple opportunities and exposure, reinforcing wider participation, better engagement in the activities, and community involvement in the teaching-learning process. Retrospection throughout this process leads us to an understanding that when a suitable platform is created through multiple pedagogies, it brings the learning shift more effectively in a limited time span.



Figure 5. Students showing the Village Map to Education Department functionaries at GHPS Kanchagarahalli

Endnotes

- i As part of this programme, Associates of the Azim Premji Foundation spend one year in a government school observing and learning to engage with classes. They try and understand the school processes, contribute to children's learning, and the environment to develop a holistic understanding of public schools and the public education system.



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