

CASE IN STUDY

The Prince in the Classroom

Rukmini Banerji



It is afternoon in a government primary school in Bakshi ka Talab block not far from Lucknow. The Class 2 classroom is packed with children. In this school, like in many other schools in the area, the lower grades have many many children. At least half of them look like they are really too young to be in Class 2. We are busy with the language text book. The chapter is long. We start with the first paragraph. Except for one or two children, no one can read even a few lines fluently.

The name of our chapter is Siddharth.

"That is a hard name. Can you all say it?"

The class begins to say "Siddharth" loudly over and over again. The name rolls off their tongues in many different ways. Even after some time, some children are having trouble with the "d" and "ddh" sounds coming one after the

उत्तर प्रदेश कक्षा 2 पाठ्य पुस्तक

पाठ:- सिद्धार्थ और हंस, पेज नं.71

सवेरे का समय था। चिड़ियाँ पेड़ों पर चहचहा रही थी। रंग-बिरंगे फूल खिले थे। राजकुमार सिद्धार्थ बाग में टहल रहे थे। अचानक एक हंस ऊपर से गिरा। वे लपक कर उसके पास गये। हंस को तीर लगा था। सिद्धार्थ ने तीर को धीरे-धीरे निकाला। घाव को पानी से धोया। हंस अपने बचाने वाले को एकटक देख रहा था।

other. The air is full of energetic repeated thumping, sounding out of the name of the prince. Children seem to enjoy the sound of the word in their mouth.

"Rajkumar Siddharth baag mein tahal rahe the."¹ What does "tahal rahe the" mean?² I ask. There is a lot of discussion. Was "tahalna" just the same as walking or was it something else? Can everyone do "tahalna?" One boy had the final say. According to him showing what "tahalna" is, was much simpler than talking about it. The class clears space for him. The boy sticks

his stomach out and throws his head back. Then he walks forward in a leisurely fashion moving his arms very slowly. "Ah ha" says a girl from the back of the class, "Tahalna" is when you are a fat person walking down the street."

I begin to read the story and the children listen carefully. For most children in the class, the chapter is too long and too hard. For them to learn to read, they need simpler and shorter text to scaffold and support their journey. They need lots of colourful pictures in small story books. They need print to come alive around them. They need to be read aloud to. They need to talk and think about what is being read. The desire and the ability to read grow in an environment where reading, writing, talking, discussion is happening around them.

My children in rural Lucknow present a challenge. This is a challenge not only for me and my class but also for scores of similar schools across the country.

For many children, like those in Bakshi ka Talab, and their families, school is a new thing. School is a formal place: there are rules about the use of time and for how interactions between people happen. These rules and behaviours are different from that at home or in the community. There is a formal "school" language and style of expression which is different from how s/he speaks and interacts at home and outside school. Textbooks guide what happens in the classroom. All tests and examinations are based on what is in the books that are "taught" in class. This separation of "school" from "home" and of "learning" from ordinary "life" creates the impression for children and for parents that it is the "book knowledge" imparted in school that is the knowledge to be absorbed. This impression has far reaching implications as children get

¹Prince Siddharth was strolling in the garden.

²"Tahalna" means strolling.

older and move to higher classes. This perception has to be broken early. In many fundamentally important ways, books and discussions, letting children talk in their own way and in their own idiom, enabling them to link what happens in the classroom to what happens outside are very important activities. All these help children understand that school and home are not far apart.

Our textbooks or even story books tend to be in the mainstream language or the standard language of the state. But many children, often those from socially backward communities have a different language background (in terms of dialects, vocabulary and syntax). Such children need bridges. Not only is coming to school a new thing for them and their families - but often they have to learn a whole new language as well in order to properly inhabit the new world into which they have arrived. Traveling from the known to the unknown is a journey that has to be navigated with care. The teacher in Classes 1 and 2 has this special responsibility - the responsibility of supporting the child's language development as s/he moves from the world of the home to the world of the school and to the world of mainstream standard language.

Our primary school system is built on several assumptions.

Assumption 1: Children start school at age 6.

Assumption 2: Children attend school regularly.

Assumption 3: Each year they learn what is expected of them. Each subsequent year, the teacher starts with the first chapter of the textbook of that particular class. It is assumed that children make linear progress in learning. Each year the content and material for that particular grade is covered. Each year for each child, there is substantial accumulated "value" added in terms of learning.

Each of these assumptions is not applicable for much of India, especially for children in government schools. Many children enter school earlier than six and many others enter school much later.³ Attendance patterns vary across the country, but it may be fair to say that at least in several north Indian states, attendance in primary grades is sporadic and continuity across grades cannot be taken for granted. Mothers of half of India's primary school-going children have not been to school themselves; thus learning support in the family is far from guaranteed. Often no one knows when and to what extent a child has fallen behind academically or even whether s/he has picked up the basics in early grades. Through the academic year, teachers are propelled by the 'course' or by having to complete textbook material. That is what they are expected to do during the course of the year.⁴

But, what about children who do not make adequate progress? Our school system does not have any in-built remedial structures that recognizes, identifies or generates plans to help children who may fall behind. The pace of textbooks picks up substantially after Class 1 leaving many children far behind from Class 2 onwards.

For the past decade, Pratham has worked with government school systems and village communities in many states. We feel that concerted action is needed for accelerating reading in primary grades to give children a fighting chance to catch up and really have a shot at universal elementary education. Learning to read is the first and most essential step for education. Without being able to read fluently a child cannot progress further in any school or educational program. Similarly, without a solid foundation in basic arithmetic it is not possible for children to move ahead in school. Large scale focused efforts to strengthen and accelerate their learning need to be made, both

³See ASER 2008 report for age-grade tables for states www.asercentre.org

⁴The current version of the Right to Education Bill underscores this point by stating that entire curriculum must be completed within a specified period of time.

outside school and inside school, so that India's children can make satisfactory and sustained progress through the elementary stage of education.

The goal of Pratham's current Read India campaign is that all Indian children will read fluently and be confidently able to do basic arithmetic by 2010. Through collaborations with governments and village communities, this campaign is currently active in more than 300 rural districts. The aim is to catalyze existing resources and energize structures to strengthen children's learning. We hope that most children will go well beyond this level.

The key elements of the Read India campaign are simple: First, daily time is needed to focus on ensuring basic learning. Such time also needs to be created during holidays. Example: a "reading period" each day at school, and in summer months, a time each day for reading in the community. Second, children need a constant supply of appropriate reading and learning materials. Third, adults need to work with children; these adults are usually teachers and village volunteers. These adults get training and on-the-ground support as they work with children. Fourth, children's progress towards goals has to be tracked so that course corrections can be made.

After the intensive phase of a campaign, it is important to plan a follow up for the next four-six months so that the increased reading and arithmetic levels of children as well as their interest can be sustained.

The actual intervention is straightforward. We call it "CAMaL" : Combined Activities for Maximized Learning.

Story telling is a fun way to engage young children. Story telling helps children become familiar with characters, with plots and events, and with how these are held together in a narrative. Developing a sense of narrative flow is an important element for children even before they have learned to read. This helps children follow stories in texts and in books.

Reading aloud : Reading to children is one of the best ways for making "reading" come alive. "Modeling" reading is important so that children can experience,

first hand, what "good" reading is all about. Reading aloud with clear pronunciation, putting a finger under each word that is read, helps children to connect sound of the word with what the word looks like while also connecting to the overall context of the story.

It is best if the child and the teacher have copies of the same book and go through it together. It is very natural for children to want to be like the teacher and do what she does. So, it is not uncommon to see children doing "pretend" reading. This is an important first step towards actual reading.

Discussions and chats: Facilitating discussions and conversations by children about stories that have been told or heard helps to link the text/story with real life and with their first hand experience. "Talk" is not easy. Many teachers talk "at" children rather than enabling them to talk "to" each other. The scaffolding of talking activities needs planning and practice. Opportunities for oral expression need to be designed so that all children can participate. This strengthens comprehension and understanding.

Drawing and scribbling: From an early age, encouraging children to express themselves by putting pencil to paper helps to create pre-writing skills. At first, children will create shapes and figures that may not be easily recognizable. But a simple step of asking a child "what is this" helps him or her to think and to articulate. The adult can simply write down whatever the child says next to the drawing. Over a period of time, drawings become more recognizable and more linked to the story that has been heard or read. The important thing is that each child's expression should be his or her own and not copied and that each drawing is accompanied by some discussion between the child and the adult about what this is.

Decoding : Games with letters and words are an easy way to build basic decoding skills and help children connect sounds to symbols. There are many games that can be played orally with letter cards and alphabet charts. Decoding or learning to automatically decipher sound-symbol units is an extremely important

component of learning to read and of gaining the confidence and the capability to deal with known and unknown texts.

Libraries and reading corners - access to books: For sustaining an interest in books, it is critical to ensure easy access to a wide variety of well illustrated, age appropriate books and reading materials that children can easily and freely look at any time.

The challenge of early grade language development is how to design effective classroom activities for a whole year that integrate these fundamental elements.

Frequent and diverse opportunities for talking and for expressing themselves on paper are essential preparatory steps for writing and reading. For overall language development, it is effective to combine activities "do-say-read-write." Combination of activities such as reading aloud with finger on each word, discussing the text that is read, finding common words, writing them down, drawing pictures based on the story all together lead to a strong foundation for talking, reading and writing.

Children learn individually. They also learn well in groups. Sometimes they need to be left alone and given the opportunity and the materials to try things out on their own. At other times they need structure. All of these will go a long way in transforming today's young children into becoming confident, capable and curious speakers, readers, writers and learners of tomorrow.

Can rapid change happen on scale? In the last few years, we see substantial change in basic reading levels in several large states like Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh and Maharashtra.⁵ These significant and substantial changes are a result of several factors: focused and clear learning goals,

resolute leadership within the government, alignment of teacher training and field support to achieve these goals and large scale participation at village level to support the reading campaign. If some states can bring about big changes in basic reading levels in a short period of time, then we know it is possible even with the resources that we currently have.

In our class, we have moved to the next paragraph in the Siddharth story. I read the paragraph aloud first. Then I read it again putting my finger under each word as I read. The class can see what I am doing. There are some difficult words here too. We sound them out. We talk about what I have just read. "Devdatta has come into our story. He says to Siddharth that the swan is his because he shot the arrow and made the swan fall to the ground". Just like Siddharth and Devdatta in the story, the children in my class argue about whose swan it is. I listen to them. Then I read the paragraph out loud again. Children listen and follow the sentences in their textbook. Their fingers move across the page word by word as I read. "Mere jaise kaun padhega?" I ask. One young man comes up to the front of the class, holds his textbook up and read. Half of it is reading and half of it is pretending to read. But the effort is laudable. One by one, children come up and attempt to read. We finish for the day. Everyone packs their bags and gets ready to leave. As I watch the children leaving the school compound, several children are pretending to carry bows and arrows and aiming for invisible swans in the sky. A few others are strolling, just like we read, like Prince Siddharth in his garden.

Rukmini Banerji has been with Pratham since 1996 (www.pratham.org). She is also Director of the ASER Centre (www.asercentre.org). She can be contacted at rukmini.banerji@gmail.com

⁵See ASER reports from 2005 to 2008. All reports are available on www.asercentre.org