

WHAT IS STD 4 ?

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It is winter. The day starts cloudy and cold. But soon the sun breaks through the haze. I am in a government primary school in a village in Dadri block in western UP. Just outside the classroom window, there is a sea of mustard fields. As the sun gets stronger, the mustard flowers become more yellow and the stalks more green. The sun warms up the children as well. They begin to throw off the mufflers and caps that they have been wrapped up in for coming to school. Red cheeks and bright eyes, they are ready for the day.


There are about 30 boys and girls in the room. More girls than boys. They vary in size. “What class is this?” I ask. Many hands shoot up and lots of voices answer together. There are children here from several classes - some from Std 3, some from Std 4 and a few from Std 5. The younger children in Std 1 and 2 are in another room. There is no teacher in this class today. Apparently there is only one head teacher and two *shiksha mitras* (parateachers) in this school. With the census only two months away, both *shiksha mitras* have gone to attend census training. The head teacher goes between the two groups. The children tell me that there are more children in their classes but because it is cold, because teachers are not there, because there are things to do at home, children often stay away from school.

This not an unusual situation. Across rural India, it is very common for children of different classes to be sitting together. The national ASER 2010 report shows that Std 4 children were sitting with children from other classes in about 45% of the approximately 13,000 government schools visited. Further, the age range that I see in my class in Dadri is also common. The Right to Education Act refers to the age group 6 to 14. If children are enrolled in Std 1 at age 6, they should be around age 10 by the time they reach Std 4. ASER 2010 indicates that in UP government schools, in Std 4, 60% children are 9 or 10 years old, 15% are younger and 15% are older. So, like my class, a typical Std 4 class in a rural government school in India also has wide age variations.

“Will you read for me?” I ask a boy who said he is in Std 4. He nods his head a little hesitantly and opens his school bag. Out comes his language textbook. I ask him to read from his favourite lesson. He rubs his nose, scratches his ear and seems to be really thinking hard about what he likes in the book. Finally he starts. It is a lesson about the bravery of the epic hero, Abhimanyu. The chapter runs to three pages. The boy tries to read, struggling and stumbling over hard words and long sentences: “*chakravuh, chakkardaar, yudh, aagraha, varnan, vidhi, vishesh*”... It is almost impossible for him to move past the first one or two sentences. The other children are listening. The class has become very quiet. They are not sure who will be asked next.

वीर अभिमन्यु

“आप इस तरह सोच में क्यों बैठे हैं महाकाव्य ! युद्ध के क्या समाचार हैं ?” सोलह वर्ष के अभिमन्यु ने युधिष्ठिर के चरण छूकर पूछा।



“समाचार अच्छे नहीं हैं, बेटा ! लेकिन तुम क्यों चिन्ता करते हो? हम लोग तो हैं ही” युधिष्ठिर ने कहा।

“मुझे सी बलाघ्नर” अभिमन्यु ने आग्रह किया।

युधिष्ठिर बोले - “यह तो तुम जानते ही हो कि अभी तक इन्द्रो जीव हो रही थी। कौरव सेना के बगुह से वीर मारे गये हैं परन्तु आज जब अर्जुन यहाँ नहीं हैं, जब कौरवों ने चक्रव्यूह की रचना की है और हमें सलकारा है।”

Lesson from Std IV UP Language textbook

मैं और मेरी बहन रीता छत पर खेल रहे थे। अचानक आसमान में बादल गरजने लगे। बिजली कड़कने लगी। बारिश की बड़ी- बड़ी बूदें पड़ने लगीं। मैं और रीता भागकर जल्दी से नीचे आ गए। तभी भैया गरम-गरम पकौड़े और समोसे ले आए। हम सबने नीचे बैठकर समोसे और पकौड़े खाये और बारिश का मज़ा लिया।

ASER 2010 Std II Level text

I change my mind. “Put your textbooks away”. This time I bring out the ASER reading tool. This is much simpler. The font is large and the text for the “story” is only about eight sentences long. It is about a girl named Rita and her sister and the fun they had on a rainy day. “I can do this”, says the boy. He sounds out spellings, sometimes repeats the words he has just read but reaches the end quite soon. A big smile appears on his face. Not all children fare this well. In my class, more than half the children in Std 4 and at least a third of the children in Std 5 have difficulty with the ASER “story” which is at the readability level of a Std 2 level text.

The ASER report for 2010 gives a bird’s eye view of the reading levels of Std 4 children in rural UP. About a third of all children can read Std 2 level text fluently, another quarter or so are comfortable with the simpler Std 1 level text. So about half of all children in Std 4 cannot even read even the four very simple sentences of the Std 1 level text.

“Do you like playing games?” I ask. “Yes, yes, yes” shout back the children. “Okay, this is a number game. It is called “double-double. Let’s start with any number, and then we must keep doubling it. You know what double means?” “Of course”, say children.

A girl with a bright blue sweater says “when we have parathas at home, my brother eats double parathas than me”. We begin the game with the number “2”. We begin to double and double... 4, 8, 16... lots of voices vying with each other to be first. The numbers increase: 32, 64... now the voices are becoming fewer, softer and more tentative. The time taken between numbers is getting longer. By the time we reach 128, there is only one voice left - a tall boy sitting near the window. As a class of thirty children we are unable to go beyond 256.

सुम शी करो -

१. रोहित के पास ४८४६० रुपये हैं और राजू के पास २६३६० रुपये हैं। किसके पास अधिक रुपये हैं और कितने अधिक हैं ?

२. पाँच अंकों की सबसे बड़ी संख्या क्या है? उसमें से चार अंकों की सबसे छोटी संख्या को घटाओ।

३.
$$\begin{array}{r} ६६००३ \\ - ४६२३४ \\ \hline \end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{r} ५०००० \\ - ४६६६६ \\ \hline \end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{r} ६०४६६ \\ - ५६८४५ \\ \hline \end{array}$$

परमना अम्बाला हो जाने के बाद प्रचार की शिकायत को भौतिक रूप से करने का अम्बाला क्लबका उत्तर।

Lesson from Std IV UP Math textbook

घटाव	भाग
$\begin{array}{r} ८३ \\ - ३४ \\ \hline \end{array}$	$४ \overline{) ६५३}$
$\begin{array}{r} ५४ \\ - ३५ \\ \hline \end{array}$	$८ \overline{) ८५९}$

ASER 2010 Math tool

For the last six years, the ASER findings in math show that by the middle of the school year, only 41% of children in Std 4 in rural UP can do a two digit subtraction with borrowing. In UP, this is expected of children in Std 1. This means that after four years in school, two thirds of children are not even at the level prescribed by the Std 1 textbook.

Textbooks are important. They are everywhere; in every home and in every child’s bag. For most children in India, the textbook is the only book they will ever have a firsthand encounter with. But like many other states, in UP too, textbook content becomes difficult quickly and the pace accelerates fast. In the first lesson in the Std 2 math textbook in UP, children have to deal with 3 digit operations. By Std 4, children are expected to do addition and subtraction with numbers in thousands, multiplication and division problems with three digits, fractions, decimals, and a lot more. Our textbooks are a reflection of how quickly curriculum and expectations accelerate impossibly out of reach of almost all children in government schools very early in their educational life.

Even if we did not go far with our double-double game, the children want to play it again. “Let’s start with “3” this time” says a little boy with a thick mop of hair. By this time I have forgotten who is in Std 3, 4 or 5. It does not seem to matter. Children in my group range in size, age and ability but are very similar in terms of wanting to do more!!!

I look out of the window at the bright yellow mustard fields and start a new conversation. “What grows in the fields around here?” I ask. The children are very knowledgeable about this topic. “Ghehu (wheat), ganna (sugarcane), tamatar (tomato), aloo (potato)... They jump and down shouting out names of vegetables and of grains. One child goes further. “In our village we make gud (jaggery)”. That starts off another train of conversation. “My grandmother makes achar. Can I tell you how it is made?” Talking about their own lives is fun. I suggest that they make a list of the things that grow nearby. In groups, children immediately begin to write. I suggest that they write on the floor. “That is a good idea”, say the children. There is no furniture. Mats and school bags are moved out of the way. Within minutes, the entire floor is a carpet of words. Words, names, names of crops, vegetables and fruits. Some children could not resist writing their names too. (I suppose that is fine too. The children too are growing in this neighbourhood).

I walk around the class, careful not to step on energetically written words. The spellings are interesting, some traditional and some creative. But almost no one has trouble writing words that they want to write and know. And in the rush to participate, children are not worried about writing incorrectly. Within each group, I notice children chatting with each other and rubbing out what a friend wrote and writing it again.¹

“Now can you make sentences with the words that you have written?” My new instruction is enthusiastically absorbed, but the children’s ability to execute it is much shakier. Composing sentences to write seems to be harder than just saying them. It takes us much longer to convert word lists into meaningful complete sentences. Once a good sentence is constructed, others want to copy it immediately. And not everyone can participate fully now. Still, as a big group we make progress. Our carpet of words in some sections of the floor has turned into a pattern of sentences.

¹ For a short video about how children write see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpPJ1phyZpU>



Clearly, there are many challenges for my group of children and for me. Similar challenges are faced by teachers in many schools and classes across the country. For instance, in real terms, I am not sure what is a Std 4 in India? (This could be said of any class - I am simply using Std 4 as an example). In the school register, children's names are written down based on the year in which they were enrolled in school. Each subsequent year, in the school registers, the children's names move linearly forward into the next page and into the next grade. Like we saw earlier, in many states, Std 4 children range from age 6 to 11. In many schools, there is no classroom exclusively for this class: more often than not, they sit with children from other classes. In most cases, there is no specific teacher responsible for teaching Std 4. Among the children enrolled in Std 4, there are children of all ability levels - ranging from Std 1 to Std 5. As in my class, the reading and math ability of most children is at least two or three grades behind where they need to be. In their school bags, children carry textbooks, usually of a level that is far higher than what they can cope with. But these textbooks are the only thing in our schools that allow us to clearly distinguish between children in Std 4 and everyone else.

The children are sad to see me go. I too am sad to leave them. Their energy and enthusiasm to learn is infectious. With enough sunshine and water, the mustard fields will continue to grow taller. Our children will grow too. But how can we help them to grow better?

As a country of planners, policy makers, pedagogy experts, practitioners and parents, we must take a serious look at our current reality and at the evidence around us. Where are we today? What is possible for tomorrow? Children may not know what is expected of them in textbooks but they do know a lot; and more importantly they want to learn. We must start with where they are and build from there to where we want them to be. Only then can we think realistically about how to organize learning in schools.

As I am walking down the road leading out of the village, the children are going to their houses too. A small group of boys and girls is just ahead of me. I can hear them still playing the double-double game as they turn off towards their homes.