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Language and learning: The challenges of primary education in India¹

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Introduction

I was a little bit intimidated at being asked to contribute to a Conference on Multilingualism and Development because it is well known that I know nothing about language. Nevertheless the conference organisers seemed to think that it was important to invite me, so I am very indebted to them for allowing someone who claims no expertise in language to make a contribution like this. What I would like to do is to put, at the end of my chapter, a list of recommendations for practitioners who are in the field and who often wish that they had more weapons, more strategies, more ideas and more resources.

What I would like to do first is to share some of the challenges which the Pratham Education Foundation (www.pratham.org/) has encountered in its work. I will do this by taking you to four different contexts. We work across India, we work in both rural and urban areas, and we work mainly with primary school children. We will look at a cross section of experiences in four different contexts. I will pull out some lessons and share with you how we interpret these situations. Next, I will tell you something about the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) and this is followed by a brief discussion of the strategies that we have begun to use in different parts of India. Then I will end with the list of recommendations.

Context 1: Multiple languages in a Mumbai slum

I will begin by taking you to a slum area in Mumbai. I started my life with education and children in places like this. Almost twenty years ago, a colleague of mine (from when I had worked in America previously) came to visit me. She was Rebecca Barr, an American scholar and an early literacy expert.² As we walked down the lanes in one of Mumbai's slums, Rebecca continuously tried to match the theory which she believed in with the context that she saw around her. At one point we had a heated argument about 'home language' and 'school language'. I argued that it is very difficult to say that, in places like this, there is a home language. There is certainly a *gully* language, a language of the lane, and there is certainly a mother tongue, the language the mother speaks. But sometimes the mother tongue and the father tongue are different as the mother and the father speak different languages. Sometimes older brother and

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older sister tongues are also different because they have different kinds of friends. Therefore the children that we saw in the lanes, at least orally, might not have been adept at any one language but they seemed to navigate easily between the many languages that they heard in their densely crowded slum environment.

I remember challenging Rebecca to say that her theoretical frameworks – which presumably are some of the theoretical frameworks used the world over – did not fit this circumstance. If that was the case, I asked, then whose responsibility was it to create the theoretical frameworks that would help people like us to work in contexts like this? Unfortunately, my colleague passed away a few years after that encounter, but this question has continued to haunt me. Every time I walk down streets like the one where we argued in Mumbai I feel ill equipped. I feel perfectly equipped to talk to the children and have fun with them, but I feel ill equipped to know what is the right strategy to deal not just with the children but also with their families, so that we can strengthen the richness of the environment they come from and not take away from it.

Context 2: Classroom language in a village in Jharkand

Let us go now to a very different environment far away from Mumbai. This is a school in a village in the Dhanbad district in the north eastern part of the state of Jharkhand. Because I spend a lot of time with children, I like to think I am good with them. But the great thing about working with children is that they keep you humble. Just as you think you are good with them, something happens to make you question your own abilities. It was in a classroom in a village school in Dhanbad that something like that happened to me. The class was a mix of Standards 1, 2 and 3 children (i.e. Primary Years 1 to 3). I started talking to them and I thought that I was talking in an engaging way. But the children's faces were completely blank and there was no response whatsoever, so I changed tack and said something different. Still there was no reaction. I myself am from Bihar so my Hindi was not very different from the Jharkand variety. Then it dawned on me that perhaps these children spoke another language altogether. Indeed, it turned out that they were more familiar with Bengali – which I also happen to speak – so when I started speaking in Bengali they warmed up and they began to react.

Then I wrote some Bengali sentences on the board and they went back to being completely non-responsive. What we saw there was that these children were comfortable in oral Bengali, but, if they had to read, you had to write Bengali words in Hindi script. As you know, good Bengalis would not want to write Bengali in Hindi script! But we had to adopt a strategy like this in order to take the children along with us.

Later, when we took a walk in the children's neighbourhood, we found that Bengali was the language of only one of the communities there. There was a big Santhali population who spoke Santhali at home; they also did not speak Hindi in school. As for the written scripts visible in the village, actually there was not much written language at all, but what could be seen was in the Santhali language written in the Devanagari script.

When I talked to the teacher, I found that the regular teacher was qualified and had all the right degrees, but she was a Hindi speaker and did not speak any of the languages of the children. I asked her, 'What do you do every day, because within ten minutes I was frustrated by being in that classroom?' The teacher told me very flatly, 'I do what good teachers are supposed to do, which is to teach from the textbook.' The textbook, of course, was in Hindi.³

Luckily for everyone, there were 'para teachers' (assistant teachers) in many of the schools in these states. Para teachers are local people, so the para teacher and the children had a whole subterranean life together, speaking their local language, while the regular teacher and her textbook had a lofty life in which none of the children were engaged. Consequently, thanks to the para teachers, the children orally knew a lot of things, but, in writing, they did not know very much because they were not being taught with the 'Bengali in Hindi' script with which they were familiar. Again, we left the village feeling that in this situation so much more needed to be done.

Context 3: The language of school books in Bihar

The third context which I would like to introduce you to is Bihar. There is a well-known cartoonist there called Pawan; everybody in Bihar recognises him because he has a cartoon every day in the *Hindustan* newspaper (www.facebook.com/Pawantoon). As it turns out, he also writes for children. We in Pratham asked Pawan to write some very simple children's books for us. We had an argument because he wanted to write one of the books in Bhojpuri. He had a daughter, about four years old, and the book was really about her. Her name is Chulbuli and the story was about Chulbuli making a drawing. So I said, 'Why don't we create two versions of the same story – one in Bhojpuri and one in Hindi – and give them to the children and let's see what the children say?' The cartoonist was convinced that the children would say that the Bhojpuri version was better. I was very keen that the children should have their own view, but I did not care one way or the other what their preference was.

What the children actually said was that the Hindi version is the way a book should be, whereas the Bhojpuri version uses the language that they speak to each other but that 'it should never be written like this'. So they actually made fun of Pawan. (Because many of them were his daughter's friends it was okay for them to make fun of him.) They said, 'You don't know what you are doing. You're not supposed to write books like *this* [in Bhojpuri], you're supposed to write books like *that* [in Hindi], but when you talk to us, you can talk to us like *this* [in Bhojpuri].' We left the issue unresolved for a while, but eventually I was able to convince Pawan to use Hindi because the book would have a much wider readership that way, both within Bihar and elsewhere. What we learnt from that case was that the children had a very strong view about what things should be like. When both versions of the book were available they did not even look at the Bhojpuri version after a while. What concerned them was whether they could read the story or not and that led them to choose the Hindi version.

Context 4: Complex patterns of language in Assam

The final context that I want to take you to is in Assam, in particular the district of Kokrajhar in lower Assam. If you Google Kokrajhar all you will find are pictures of

violence, because there has been so much trouble there recently (including ethnic violence tied up with language). A colleague of mine has been working there for some time and she started working there because she was very dissatisfied with the way that we in Pratham were dealing with children in Assam. She felt that we needed a much more nuanced view of what goes on there. What she did taught us a great deal. At first, she spent almost a year just mapping out the different kinds of language use found in the ten villages where we were planning to work. Some of these language uses I was already familiar with: what language does your mother speak? what does your father speak? what does your teacher speak? what is the language of the textbooks in your school? And so on. But there were many other uses that, frankly, we had not thought about previously. As we went from school to school, analysing these language uses, we realised that, although it is well known that this is an area where the Bodo language predominates, there was also much more going on there linguistically than we had anticipated.

The language of instruction in the school and the language of the textbooks were the most obvious ones. Some teachers could speak both the textbook language and the Bodo language, but some teachers had themselves been taught in totally different languages so their previous experience had not been in any of the languages that they were now having to use in the schools. But the most interesting finding for us was that there were schools where the children did not have a common language that they could use together in the playground. This meant that, even in the playground, they were segregated by language (and their languages were also associated with their other background characteristics). So, although the children were physically in the school together, they occupied completely different worlds. It took someone who did not speak any of their languages to come there and bring the children together, to cooperate, to try and help this outsider to understand what they were doing.

In one such school in Kokrajhar our colleague observed that the children did not share a common language. Moreover, she spoke Assamese but she could not speak any of the children's languages. Undaunted, our colleague noticed that there was a river right next to the school. Using gestures and pictures (she was also a graphic artist) she asked the children if they knew how to fish; of course everyone knew how to fish. Then my colleague managed to communicate that she did not know how to fish. So the children decided that they would show her how to fish by taking her to the river and demonstrating directly what needs to be done. When they came back to the classroom after the fishing lesson the children discovered that their guest was also unable to read and write any of their languages. To solve this problem the children drew an instruction manual on how to fish, then different children added words from their various languages which they thought were important in this business of fishing. The manual, therefore, was created by the children working together to rescue this poor woman who did not know the basic facts of fishing. Wherever we allow children the responsibility of creating something together, we find imaginative things like this emerging.

Here is another example from my own direct experience. I speak Marathi very fluently but grammatically not very well. In Marathi-speaking areas this is of great amusement

to children, who respond by saying ‘*aap itne bade hogye ho, abhi tak aapko theek se ayi nhi*’, ‘so let us teach you’. That often gets a whole group of children quite united in teaching you what you should have learnt: ‘How did you get so big and not know the basic things?’ So I strongly recommend knowing some language fluently but not accurately as a way of really getting close to children; it brings out the best in the children to take you along with them.⁴

As we went on, we also saw that there were different uses of language in the market, the newspapers and the police station (for example to file an FIR or First Information Report, when somebody reports a crime to the police for the first time). In the context of Kokrajhar the police station is a very important place and a much larger proportion of people have to deal with the police than you would find elsewhere. Add to all of this that Bodo is written in both Hindi and Devanagari scripts. This created a situation where – once we had become aware of all these complications – we were almost paralysed with indecision about what was the best thing to do.

The Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER)

Looking at all of the features which I have told you about in these four contexts we have come up with some ways of dealing with our current realities. I will discuss these in the next section. But first I would like to take a quick detour to tell you something about ASER, the Annual Status of Education Reports (www.pratham.org/programmes/aser), since it is ASER that was my passport to participation in this Conference.

Table 1: ASER’s reach and people involved

Reach	People involved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 577 rural districts • 16,497 villages visited (30 villages per district) • 341,070 households reached (30 households per village) • 600,000-700,000 children surveyed (all children aged 3-16 per household) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 500+ district level organisations • 1000+ master trainers • 25,000+ volunteers

As Table 1 shows, ASER is a big survey, covering between 600,000 and 700,000 children in nearly 16,500 villages. Pratham has carried out the survey every year for the last ten years, from 2005 to 2014. In 2015 we had a break, to review where we are.

The survey asks three simple questions:

- Are children in school? (In India most children are in school now.)
- Can children read a very simple text?
- Can children recognise numbers and do very basic arithmetic operations?

Now that India’s enrolment numbers are very high we can take a look at what is actually happening at school. The pattern that we find is clear and it occurs everywhere, all over the country, in all rural districts. Children are asked to read a

Table 2: Percentage of children enrolled in different grades who can read at least Standard 2 text (All India, rural areas)

Standard	Children able to read Standard 2 text (%)
3	23.6
5	48.1
8	74.6

simple story in one of twenty different languages, whichever is appropriate for their particular location. The difficulty level of the story is roughly at the Standard 2 level. As you can see from Table 2, by the time that children reach Standard 5, regardless of the language they study in, roughly half of them can read the simple story at Standard 2 level. By Standard 8 about three quarters of them can read the Standard 2 story. Our surveys show that over these last ten years not much has changed; if anything, there is a slight declining trend. So, whichever language we are operating in, we still have a long way to go in building this basic reading capability.

Furthermore, this is not the only capability which needs to be developed; there are many more things which children need to be able to do. This is just the tip of the iceberg, to give you a sense of what we do and how far we have come.

This issue of language is clearly very important for small children when they are beginning to learn to read. Therefore in 2011 we decided to explore what languages children experienced at home and in school. We showed children a list of the ‘Scheduled Languages’ (the 22 languages recognised in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India) and asked them which of these languages were used in school. We also showed them a list of 122 ‘major languages’ (identified by the 2001 Census of India) and asked them which of these languages were spoken at home.

Table 3: Percentage of children reporting that home and school language are the same (‘Hindi-speaking’ states only)

State	Children who say home and school language are the same (%)
Madhya Pradesh	96.7
Uttar Pradesh	93.9
Haryana	78.5
Bihar	47.0
Jharkand	38.8
Uttarakhand	33.5
Rajasthan	23.1
Himachal Pradesh	11.4
Chhattisgarh	0.6
Total	66.2

Table 3 shows the results just from the nine 'Hindi-speaking' states. Before doing this study we were very aware that in largely tribal dominated areas, in the North East and in places like Kashmir, children were using one language at school but speaking completely different languages at home. Therefore when our findings confirmed this pattern we were not surprised. But what did surprise us – as Table 3 reveals – was that even in the Hindi-speaking heartland many children told us that they do not speak Hindi at home, even though the medium of instruction at school is Hindi. In Himachal Pradesh, for example, only 11 per cent of children said that their home language was the same as the school language.

Now, we recognise that ASER is a rough and ready tool and that we have a very large number of surveyors collecting data for us, so we cannot claim that our findings are perfectly accurate. Nevertheless, our survey clearly reveals that, in some of the largest states in India, many children come from families where one language is spoken at home but their teachers speak a different language in school. This accounts for the fact that our children are making much slower progress in the early years of school than we would like.⁵

Undoubtedly, textbooks in India are created based on the latest knowledge and with the best of intentions, but they do not recognise where children are coming from. Unfortunately, I do not see any serious attempt to address this issue, especially in the early grades. We should all be trying to deal with this matter, to really understand what it is that the children bring to school and what it is that they are capable of doing. When you actually work with children, if you listen to them and read something to them, they replace the words that they do not know with words that they do know, so long as the two languages are closely related. But, if the home and school languages are very different in structure, then what happens is what I experienced in Dhanbad (Context 2 above), that is to say, blank faces and waiting for the bell to go and the lesson to end so that you can go outside and have a good time and leave these adults to their own business.

A few more facts revealed by ASER may be useful:

- 48 per cent of mothers of the children participating in the survey had never been to school
- 25 per cent of fathers of these children had never been to school
- more than 75 per cent of children have no print material at home other than their school textbooks (not even newspapers).

Regarding the mothers, we hear a lot about 'mother tongues' but we rarely hear about the 'mother's voice'. The mother is probably proficient in the language in which she operates at home – at least orally – but she may not be at all comfortable communicating in the language of the school.

Three quarters of children in India do not have any other print material at home other than their school textbooks. Therefore, parents' and children's attitude to printed material is the attitude which we would all have if the only print material to which

we had access was textbooks. I have nothing against textbooks; they are needed but they are not enough. I have to say that textbooks are not what I choose to read before going to sleep at night! Therefore we still have a long way to go in developing attitudes to reading and building a range of language capabilities. It is going to be difficult to achieve this if children do not have first-hand interaction or exposure to anything other than a textbook.

Some states have invested in producing books for children, but the need is still immense. Take Hindi children's books, for example: a 'large' print run is usually only 3,000 copies⁶ and yet there are 100 million children in the Hindi-speaking area alone. Even in many large cities it can be extremely difficult to find books for children which are not textbooks. Newspapers have a much wider distribution than books and we have had good experiences with some newspapers which are aware of children among their readership. Children are also aware of religious books, but we treat religious books very seriously; we tie them up and keep them away from children. Something of the same attitude can be found in schools; in one school after another we find that books are very carefully kept in libraries, away from children, because books should be respected and not allowed to get torn or dirty.

We need some radical new thinking regarding making reading materials available for children. First, it would help if we had a law that said that no children's book should be kept inside a closed cupboard! That might help to some extent, but then we also do not tend to take our laws very seriously. Then somebody needs to calculate how many books are really needed for 240 million children: if every child is to have one book to read every night then how many books need to be printed and how many need to be in circulation? Also, our National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme should be involved in building libraries rather than digging ditches. We need to take some brave steps like these.

Our procedures

I would like to tell you now about what Pratham has been doing in two of the contexts I have described above: Kokrajhar in Assam (Context 4) and the state of Jharkand (Context 2).

In Kokrajhar we found that many different languages were spoken. For example there are some individual schools where the children speak Rabha, Santhali, Bodo, Bengali and Nepali. Many of these children do not talk to each other because they do not share a language. In situations like this we decided that the best thing to do is to build the ability to talk. Each child speaks in his or her 'language of comfort'; in some cases, the language of comfort may be a mixed-up language. That does not matter. What is important is that the best place to begin is with whatever language is comfortable for the child.

Our teams in Kokrajhar spent a lot of time collecting stories. This meant that we had to talk to mothers, grandmothers, anyone who would talk to us, so that we could identify what was common in the narratives of that area. Our first job in such communities was not teaching reading, not teaching grammar, not teaching language. Instead we tried to teach the children how to communicate with each other, teaching

them how to understand one another, even if this meant speaking in languages that we only half understood. What was important was building confidence and convincing the children that we were going to make progress together (see Box 1).

Box 1: Steps towards reading	
Step	Activity
Starting point	Building skills in the 'language of comfort'
Materials	Using familiar stories, narratives, activities
Stages (oral at first)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • confidence • communication • comprehension • creativity
Process	Using known and practised building blocks to move towards less comfortable language

Sometimes I find that, in sticking very closely to what is commonly known as 'language', we forget some of these things. It is extremely important to build children's confidence in expressing themselves in whatever form and whatever way they find comfortable, so that they can move further with confidence. We used these 'known' building blocks and moved slowly, first in completely oral ways, towards whatever language was the less comfortable for the children (in this case, Assamese).

Many of the activities which the children carry out involve enacting, because it is possible to act without having to speak too much as well. In such activities, when children are acting in a play or doing something else together, there is comprehension. Sometimes this leads to misunderstandings: very often parents will tell us that we are not 'teaching' their children because the children are having too much fun. But perhaps one of the first things to do is to have some fun, because after that we can move on to the more serious business of whatever this 'learning' is all about.

We have been working in between 60 and 70 schools in Kokrajhar for three or four years. I can assure you that all the children there are very good performers by now! Some of them are not good readers yet but they can tell you a story and they can act it out for you in many different ways. I believe that these are important life skills to have and I am convinced that these children will learn to read in due course, even if they have not done so already.

Moving now to Jharkhand, I will describe briefly the work which we have undertaken in the district of West Singhbhum in the south of the state (not Dhanbad which was discussed in Context 2 above). Paschim (West) Singhbhum is an area in which many of the children speak Ho. We tried to develop both basic arithmetic skills and basic reading skills for children in Standards 3 to 5, as Table 4 shows.

Table 4: Number of children achieving Standard 2 level before and after 40 days of focussed learning improvement (Standards 3-5, West Singhbhum, Jharkand)

Reading			Arithmetic	
Skill	Before (n=46)	After (n=45)	Skill	After (n=45)
Story	0	15	2 digit subtraction with borrowing	36
Paragraph	0	11		
Word	12	19		
Letter	15	10		
Reading beginner	19	0		

After an intervention of 40 days of focussed learning improvement for children in Standards 3 to 5, the number of children able to read a simple Standard 2 level story increased from 0 to 15. Meanwhile, those able to read a simple paragraph (but not yet a complete story) at the Standard 2 level increased from 0 to 11. There was some progress in reading, then, but it was not overwhelming and we would normally expect faster progress than this. In contrast, in arithmetic, the same children made much faster progress; by the end of the intervention 36 of them were able to solve Standard 2 level problems such as two digit subtractions.

So the question we faced was why the children made only modest progress in reading while at the same time they made much faster progress in mathematics. What we discovered eventually was that these Ho-speaking children were actually experiencing problems in their first language. We tend to assume that, orally at least, children know their first language well enough. But what we found was that the children had a very low knowledge of vocabulary, even in Ho, so expecting them to have even a modest vocabulary in Hindi was unrealistic.

Our first job, therefore, was to help the children develop a much stronger language competence even in Ho before attempting anything else. Moreover, we noticed that some of the sounds that occur in Ho also occur in Hindi, so there was no problem there, But several Hindi sounds are not found in Ho and so of course the children could not even hear them. Therefore, in selecting the Hindi stories that we were going to use, we had to keep these things in mind. If we want children to become confident, to develop comprehension and to start building some reading skills, we need to think about what is familiar and what is unfamiliar for them. Thinking in terms of ‘comfortable language’ and ‘uncomfortable language’ then is more useful than thinking about a particular language such as ‘Ho’ or ‘Hindi’.

Conclusions

We in Pratham are a large group of practitioners who are very comfortable with children but we are not particularly savvy with theories about multiple languages. In that context and bringing together everything discussed above, what conclusions can we draw about what we should be doing and what are the big questions in front of us? I have five conclusions that I would like to place in front of you.

The first is that we find it very useful, in every situation, to listen carefully to what the children are doing. This is because there are so many clues from what they tell us that help us to take the next step. Also, there are many things that they can do and building from where they are seems like a more productive way to proceed (even if they seem to have a leg in several different languages at the same time).

Second, we find that ready-made material – anything that is printed and becomes like a textbook – seems to get frozen. It becomes highly valued and has high status but is rarely used. What we feel works better is to develop a healthy strategy which is alive and kicking, which can be taken into a situation and put to work. That strategy should lead us to what should be done next rather than a set of ready-made materials which then freezes everybody's initiative. Ready-made material is good for reference. However, very often ready-made material leads people to believe 'It is all here. Nothing else is needed. I don't need to think on my own.'

The third thing we find is that, in many discussions about education, we hear a lot of polarising of views. In contrast, in our work with children we tend to find that things fall into a continuum rather than black and white sharply distinguished categories. We feel that it is important to look for healthy and constructive ways in which to keep this continuum alive and avoid dichotomies. Children themselves seem to be able to navigate this continuum, for example with their mother's language at one end and English at the other end. In reality we are all at different points on this continuum and others like it and we are all moving at different rates towards our objectives. Our task as educators is to keep this richness alive and avoid getting boxed into two different places. Perhaps this is what is meant by James Simpson (2017) and other speakers in the Conference when they talk about 'translanguaging'.

Next, we need to help theory and practice grow together. In many cases we find that the theory grows in one place and practice grows in another place; we struggle to fit the two together. There are people – not many – who have grown theory and practice together, who have been influenced by the previous research but who are still open to the many ways in which things can grow. Should universities and people like us be closer together? Whether it is in teacher training, whether it is in universities, whether it is in communities, how can this process of theory building and solution making move together in a more effective way that really pays due respect to the richness we have before us? How can we come together in a way that is more integrated and cuts across the different situations in which we find ourselves?

Next, we need a huge reading movement in this country and we have to take it into our own hands to bring this about. By reading I do not just mean reading, I mean enjoying, engaging, and understanding; for me reading comes with all of that. So, we have recently launched what we call the *Lakhon main Ek* campaign (www.lakhonmeinek.org). Literally, this means 'one in a hundred thousand'. India has 600,000 villages and what we would like to encourage, over the next couple of months, is for ordinary people in 100,000 communities to see how many children in their neighbourhood can read. If they discover that there are children who cannot read or who are struggling with basic mathematics, then they can give a little of their time to help these children.

We have a peculiar situation in India where aspirations for education are rising tremendously but everybody feels that improving education is somebody else's responsibility, whether it is a private school, a tutor, a teacher, a government school, or someone else. We want to change this attitude and create a community-based approach which recognises that this needs to be done by all of us. We are looking for the most enthusiastic people in 100,000 communities. For example, these could be high school students who appreciate that they are able to read and wish to share their skills with others less fortunate. All kinds of people whom you would least expect seem to be showing great interest in this initiative. Then, having aroused this interest at the grassroots level, the next challenge for us will be supporting these enthusiastic volunteers. If we as common people see that somebody near us is not reading then we need to do something about it. And that something need not be boring, it could be fun! Policy makers can join us if they wish, but we have to stop waiting for policy makers to make the first move. I like to think that we can change India faster than the policy makers can.

Notes

¹ With the author's approval, this chapter is an edited version of a transcript of the author's conference presentation. The author's responses to questions which followed her presentation have also been incorporated into the chapter. The original presentation can be seen between 6.32.00 and 7.24.00 at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5-NQjIT9Yw&index=42&list=PLUwf3cy5FZzgBPbUCLKj_KGy9ezdXwKRy.

² For some examples of Rebecca's work see Barr 1985 and Barr and Johnson 1996.

³ On the issue of teachers and textbooks, we recently finished a study of about 5,000 classrooms in Bihar. No doubt there are some teachers who are extremely good at using textbooks, but what we found was that 'teaching the textbook' dominates over any other kind of behaviour. I use the term 'teaching the textbook' deliberately, because for most teachers their concern is exactly that, rather than 'teaching the children'. They feel that by a certain point in the school year they must have completed a certain number of lessons in the book. The lessons are taught one after the other as they appear in the book and children are expected to be able to tell the teacher what the content of the already taught lessons is. We found no active engagement strategies, no discussion of lesson content, no room for expression of any type. The teaching of writing is also completely driven by what lies in the textbook.

⁴ An example of drawing on what children know and what they can do can be seen in something we call *galti maaf sudharo toh sahi*. These are cards, each of which contains a paragraph with mistakes in it. Teachers often get upset if we show deliberate mistakes to their pupils because they believe that printed material should be error-free. But actually children love correcting mistakes. We use the cards as prompts for little competitions where children working in groups have to see how many mistakes they can find in the texts. We have not evaluated this formally but experience convinces me that this procedure helps children to improve their ability to write. There are many other ways of getting children to lead what happens in the classroom. They can do this without training. It is the teachers – not the children – who need training.

⁵ There is an important question here as to whether ASER test results confirm the widely held assumption that using the home language in school has a positive impact on learning. We have been looking at this, particularly in the early grades, but even a very preliminary analysis does not always show the one to one relation which we might expect between use of the home language in school and successful learning. There seem to be many contextual factors which intervene, such as the parents' language competence and the scripts that the home and school languages are written in. We are starting to explore these other influences, particularly in border districts where there may be two dominant languages. Once we have a deeper understanding

we will be in a better position to decide what our strategies should be. (This is an example of how, in all our work, we move iteratively: we have an idea, we test it, we come up with some action items and then we move on to the next step. We need to be on a continuous learning curve, taking nothing for granted.) A great deal of research has already been done, but much more is still needed, particularly in the Hindi heartlands where education indicators are often lower than elsewhere in the country.

⁶ Putting aside the National Book Trust (www.nbtindia.gov.in/default.aspx), which is a government publishing house.

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