Room to Read

#IndiaGetsReading

Make Room for EARLY LEARNING

September 10, 2024

National Seminar Report

Introduction

Child development is crucial for community and economic growth, as capable children contribute to a prosperous society. Recognizing this, Room to Read India in partnership with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) organized the 6th edition of its annual literacy campaign, **#IndiaGetsReading**, from August 15 to September 8, 2024, under the theme "Make Room for Early Learning." The campaign culminated in a National Seminar on September 10, to explore innovative practices for strengthening early learning opportunities for children aged 3 to 8.

The seminar brought together government representatives, policymakers, and civil society to discuss strategies aligned with the **National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN Bharat)**. It featured key addresses by leaders like Ms. Poornima Garg (Country Director, Room to Read India), Mr. Aaron Schubert (Acting Deputy Mission Director, USAID-India), and Dr. Venita Kaul (Professor Emerita (Education) Ambedkar University Delhi), and highlighted state-level case studies from **Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Karnataka, and Telangana.** These discussions emphasized the need for collaborative efforts to improve foundational literacy, as evidenced by The World Bank's 2022 report showing 70% of 10-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries struggling to comprehend basic written text, up from 57% pre-pandemic.

Key Pointers from the day

1. **Prioritizing Early Learning**: Early Learning (ages 3-8) builds critical skills like problem-solving and cognitive development, forming the foundation for future success.

2. **Importance of Play-based Learning**: As recommended by the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023, adopting play-based learning methods promotes holistic development, helping children transition seamlessly from informal to formal education.

3. **Integrating Indigenous Orality**: Incorporating local storytelling enhances language skills, making learning relatable and bridging the gap between dialects and formal language.

4. **Gaps in Teacher Education**: Comprehensive teacher training programs focused on early literacy and play-based pedagogy are needed to fill gaps in teacher preparedness.

5. **Collaboration and Parental Engagement**: Strengthening collaboration between departments, like the Women and Child Development (WCD) and Education Departments, along with increased parental involvement, is key to effective early learning outcomes.

Excerpts from Key Speeches

The seminar emphasized creating an environment conducive to reading and highlighted the scientific foundations of early literacy. Key insights included:

Education is fundamental to personal and community development. The COVID-19 pandemic has limited access to early childhood education, highlighting the need for a comprehensive educational approach that fosters problem-solving and critical thinking."

Mr. Aaron Schubert, Acting Deputy Mission Director, USAID-India

We urgently need systemic reforms to enhance collaboration between departments responsible for early childhood learning. It's crucial to prioritize comprehension in literacy development, especially for children aged 5 to 8. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) provides valuable guidance on transitioning from play-based to formal learning."

Dr. Venita Kaul, Professor Emerita (Education) Ambedkar University Delhi

The scarcity of quality children's literature, especially in Indian languages, remains a significant challenge. We at Room to Read are trying to bridge this gap by co-creating good quality books in regional languages and advocating for the importance of reading for pleasure in the foundational years.

Ms. Poornima Garg, Country Director, Room to Read India

Highlights from the Discussions

Panel Discussion #1: Realizing the Continuum: Emergent Literacy to Literacy continuum needs a policy landscape and support for implementation

The discussion emphasized the need for a supportive policy framework for emergent literacy to achieve our goals. The panel noted that differing definitions of reading readiness, emergent literacy, and school readiness among stakeholders exist within the ecosystem, highlighting the necessity of building synergy. The panel highlighted the need for **inclusive curriculum development** aligned with the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), addressing diverse needs through images, games, and hands-on materials. **Knowledge gaps in teacher education** need clearer training modules and **challenges in assessment implementation** call for policy changes.

Panel Discussion#2: Snapshot of early grades: a practitioner's gaze

The panel discussed on **phonics in Indian languages**, noting disparities in early literacy between wealthier and underprivileged students, with structured pre-school programs suggested to bridge this gap. It emphasized **inter-departmental coordination** between the Women and Child Development (WCD) and School Education Departments to develop co-located Anganwadis. Challenges in monitoring and evaluation were helpful. The government has implemented initiatives to **strengthen parental engagement** including parent involvement in educational materials and teacher training to communicate effectively with parents. The panel also advocated for **practical training in early childhood** education, highlighting hands-on practices and collaboration among parents, teachers, and communities for comprehensive support.

*Read more about panel members in the Annexure

Case Studies

This India Gets Reading campaign witnessed collaboration at its best. The state governments were forthcoming to take the initiative forward, and in some states completely led and drive the initiative. As part of the national seminar, state government officials from **Telangana**, **Karnataka**, and **Rajasthan** shared their experiences, along with successful initiatives from **Uttarakhand, Jharkhand** and **Madhya Pradesh**, highlighting collaboration and commitment towards foundational literacy.

1. **Jharkhand**: *Represented by Ms. Parul Sharma, Education Specialist, UNICEF, Jharkhand:* The state's Reading Campaign addressed the existing gaps in reading in government schools by promoting activities like Read-a-loud and parent-child sessions. Over 150,000 children participated in the **"Read Turn"** session, easing their fear of books. The campaign focused on **parental engagement**, transforming homes into learning spaces, and improving access to reading materials through the NIPUN initiative.

2. **Telangana**: *Represented by Ms. B. Karunashree, Extension Officer, Women Development & Child Welfare Department, Telangana:* The Women and Child Welfare Department shifted its focus to preschool education, rebranding Anganwadi workers as "teachers". The curriculum was updated with cultural elements, and over 35,700 Anganwadi centers received storybooks.

3. **Karnataka**: *Represented by Ms. Prameetha Adoni, Program Officer, SSK, Karnataka:* The focus shifted from fluency to comprehension and enjoyment. A campaign, propelled by the Read-a-thon, engaged government officials, teachers, and families. Activities included library renovations and storytelling sessions. The state collaborated with Room to Read to create original Kannada stories and introduced a parental calendar for daily activities, engaging approximately 2.6 million parents.

4. **Rajasthan**: *Represented by Ms. Om Prabha, Deputy Commissioner, Rajasthan School Shiksha Parishad:* To enhance critical thinking and comprehension, the education system introduced a daily reading period. The initiative supports NEP and NIPUN Bharat goals, tailoring objectives by age group. A state wide Read-a-thon participation was ensured, promoting reading at scale through both online and offline formats.

5. **Uttarakhand**: *Represented by Dr. K.N Bijalwan, Assistant Director, SCERT, Uttarakhand:* Spoke about collaboration among the Education Department, WCD, Room to Read, and NGOs driving reforms under NEP 2020 and NIPUN Bharat. The state introduced a **School Readiness Module** and launched the Balvatika Handbook and Teacher Manual. Uttarakhand became the first state to implement a **State Curriculum Framework** for foundational literacy.

6. **Madhya Pradesh**: *Represented by Dr. Lokesh Khare, FLN Coordinator and Language Expert, RSK, Madhya Pradesh:* Spoke about significant strides in Early Learning made in partnership with Room to Read. The state developed ECCE content aligned with national frameworks and introduced teacher handbooks. A large-scale FLN Mela engaged over 1.7 million children and parents through interactive activities, complemented by play-based learning initiatives featuring educational games.

Opportunities Ahead

- **Revisiting Early Learning:** Delays in social and academic development highlight the need for early interventions. Strengthening early learning with play-based methods and focusing on comprehension can bridge gaps. Books and cultural contexts should be integrated into learning to make it relevant and engaging.

- **Enhancing Teacher Education:** The Integrated Teacher Education Programme (ITEP) should unify arts and sciences. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2023 *should* include hands-on materials and diverse tools like games and audio to prepare teachers for holistic learning.

- **Strengthening Monitoring and Oversight:** Co-locating Anganwadis in schools aids transitions to Grade 1. Improved monitoring and support for teachers in Balvatika programs is also crucial.

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