



Stories of Change

Start Early: Read in Time

December 2018



ABOUT CARE INDIA

CARE has been working in India for over 65 years, focusing on alleviating poverty and social exclusion. We do this through well-planned and comprehensive programmes in health, education, livelihoods and disaster preparedness and response. We also focus on generating and sharing knowledge with diverse stakeholders to influence sustainable impact at scale. Our overall goal is the empowerment of women and girls from poor and marginalised communities, leading to improvement in their lives and livelihoods. We are part of the CARE International Confederation working in over 90 countries for a world where all people live with dignity and security.

CARE India's Girl Education Programme (GEP) focuses on improving the conditions by which girls, especially those in the marginalized communities can access quality education. Education is an important tool that enables women and girls to participate in decisions that affect their lives and in improving their social status. GEP provides technical support while working through the formal school systems as well as through the integrated programs of CARE India. Following the enactment of the Right to Education Act by the Government, CARE India has been actively engaged in several forums and consortiums along with other international agencies and the larger civil society to support the implementation of the Act in its true spirit. GEP is committed towards enabling effective implementation of education provisions and policies for rights, entitlements and empowerment of girls from most marginalized sections of the society in safe and secure, inclusive and gender responsive environments.

CONTACT INFORMATION

CARE INDIA (Delhi NCR)

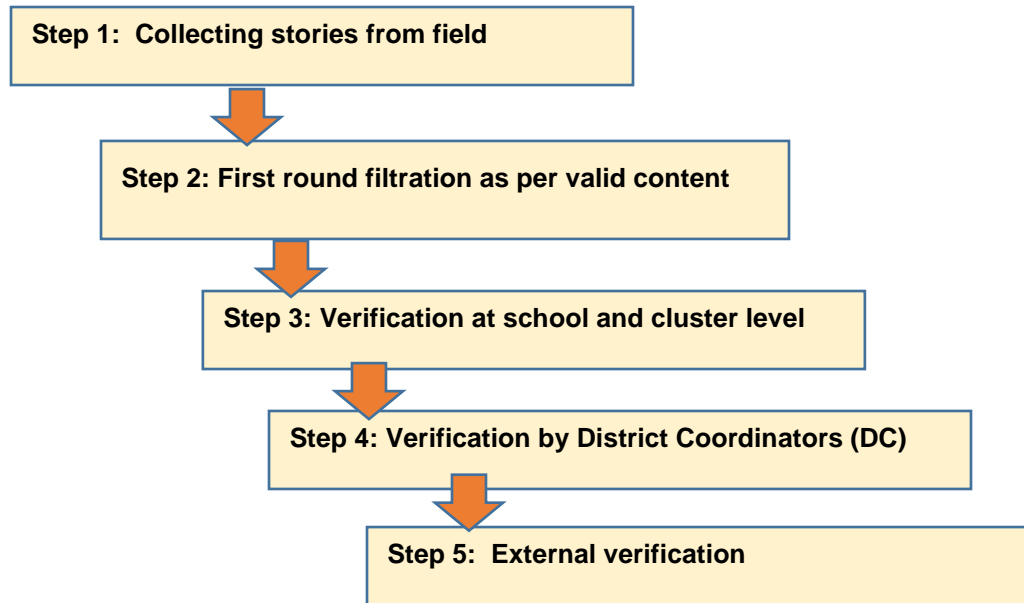
A-12, Bhilwara Towers, Third Floor, Tower II

Sector 1, NOIDA, Uttar Pradesh 201301

Phone 0120-4048250

Email: contactus@careindia.org

Stories Selection Steps



Contents

- I. Change is Possible**
- II. If only Teachers Would Teach Properly (36 stories)**
- III. The Learners and their Literacy Achievements (14 stories)**
- IV. Evidences on Leadership Development (7 stories)**
- V. The Mechanism for Participatory Learning and Capacity Building of Teachers: NPRC (6 stories)**
- VI. Engagement with Print (3 stories)**
- VII. SMC: Parental Participation and Empowerment (4 stories)**
- VIII. Gender Perspective in EGR System (3 stories)**

I.

Change is Possible

In Lieu of an Introduction

*The destiny of India is being shaped
in her classrooms.*

Kothari Commission Report (1966)

(i)

In the midst of the usual ideas about improvements in the schooling system largely characterized by techno-centric wisdom, CARE India's 'Start Early: Read in Time' program for early grade learners, with peculiarity of their childhood formations rooted in productive process and development of cognitive skills of oral language structured around their material culture, distinguishes itself by principally articulating its interventions (collectively known as 'Early Grade Reading' or EGR) from an epistemological standpoint.

The problem, therefore, with which the interventions begin, was not how to teach literacy to mostly first generation learners, with no familiarity with print, no experience of scribbling with a pencil and paper which most of them had hardly ever seen in their 'field hands'. It was rather an initiative to help them out, using their experience and knowledge to lead the process of learning from spontaneous, reasonably unorganized to more structured, organized and standardized form of knowledge – the literacy, in the given context.

Thus, from the perspective of a theory of knowledge, literacy, with some organic resemblance with Paulo Freire's ideas, appears as a form of knowledge and, in the meantime, as a tool for more perfect and advanced learning. This also explains the preoccupation of EGR with the comprehensive process of schooling, in so far as it deals with the child as a whole in the totality of her context of being. Seen from this perspective, entire focus of literacy learning – that is reading and writing skills, in addition to comprehension – goes beyond the basic lingual abilities and takes in all of the enterprise of schooling, as an effort to totalize the means of communication and development of personality attributes in the child, besides, of course, the transformation of community and the society.

Perhaps the most important component of what has been named as EGR pedagogy, is the critical unity of teacher and her pupil, as against the most enduring dichotomy of educator-educatee. And, it is this unity, visible in quite emphatic manner at certain locales, which results in the creation of knowledge, that also learning, in the process of dialogue. Further, the process of creating a

dialogical process takes the literacy learning activity beyond the realm of reading and writing skills by establishing it in the context of broader, more comprehensive process.

But, this does not, in any way, seek to downplay the fundamental role of a teacher in enabling the children to speak and learn the standardized language of instruction, besides reading and writing. The teacher cannot be equated with her pupils. She is always different. What the EGR pedagogy emphasize is that the relations between the two cannot be mediated by the authoritarianism of teacher at the cost of the freedom of pupils. In fact, the EGR process entails that the teacher goes beyond the school children and encompasses their parents as well as community members to develop a larger school community by providing an elaborate frame of reference to initiate and consolidate a dynamic dialogical relationship.

(ii)

Before addressing the question of change, it would be prudent to look into some more pertinent aspects of government schooling system the five districts – namely, Bahraich, Balrampur, Shravasti, Hardoi and Gonda – in eastern part of Uttar Pradesh, where the field work was conducted. The significance of the system could principally be seen against the backdrop of bringing primary education within the reach of poorest of the poor. It implies saying that attainment of primary education, at least in theory, is no longer the privilege of an elite minority; and the goal of universalization is no longer a distant dream.

There has also been marked improvement in physical conditions of school and their maintenance in select cases. The most endemic problem of teachers' absenteeism has indeed been arrested to a large extent. The proportion of female teachers has seemingly been improved even in remote areas and they are doing good work. This has also contributed in some way to female-access to the public domain despite restrictive and unequal nature of gender relations.

But these landmarks cannot be taken as cover up for the bleak picture of the schooling system, so much so that public spending on this is often questioned. There is a most universal vicious circle of neglect. The teachers feel that they are caught up in most hopeless situation. Worst happens to be demotivation of parents for their children's education, with more severe implications for girls' education. On top of it, the state which has major responsibility in both initiating and nurturing schooling transition lacks the basic commitment and propensity.

(iii)

Some methodological considerations are also in order, as we proceeded at several levels. The survey work encompassed extensive studies for mapping the distribution of socio-cultural and economic traits in a historical frame of reference, besides identifying problems in realizing the outputs of socio-economic pursuits of the people. Moreover, the generalized information thus gathered, was further enriched with most features of life and material culture in concrete detail. In fact, we have relied most on the narratives of personal experiences as the best context to bring out reality. This illustrates the process of change or, to say, schooling in transition from a state of

inertia and vicious circle of neglect to a situation of nearly self-sustained progress. It would, however, be interesting to see how far the progress is really sustainable.

And while presenting the findings of direct observation and of respondents' statements on the one hand and, the inferences of the author, on the other, we have opted for the 'success story' format without adhering to any rule. This has given us the liberty to upkeep the flow of each story, all of them clubbed together and classified in seven emerging themes in respect of teachers – background, orientation, concerns, accountability issues etc.; learners and their literacy achievements; the development of leadership attributes among young children; the mechanism of participatory learning and capacity building of teachers (NPRC); print rich environment as the opportunity for young children to interact with many different forms of print; the School Management Committee in the context of improvement in the system, besides the parent – teacher relationship and, the last; the gender perspective in EGR (Early Grade Reading) pedagogical system.

The main issue, however, is not to resolve the finer points of a possible impact study of EGR interventions, but rather to find out why even more basic things proved to be resilient – resistible to change. That is what the study is roughly all about.

II.

If Only Teachers Would Teach Properly...

Obvious things, like education, are not neutral. In the same vein, the experience of EGR interventions also tells us that obvious is not so obvious that we generally think, unless it is unfolded into its elements. Given this stance, it becomes obvious that teachers are not neutral either. The personal experiences of children, as the first generation to see a slate and a pencil in hands, provide testimonies about the teacher's attitude to each one of them as one which depended on her own social, precisely caste, background. The hatred and the attitude of damnation against most children excluded by the Verna system was such a commonplace experience among the teachers with explicit caste-conviction that they could hardly see it. The depressed class of pasmanda Muslim children also share the experience of their out-caste peers in other socio-religious communities. And the teachers themselves from the social margins, tend to alienate themselves from the overall situation by opting for the path of Sanskritization. It is because of their lack of training in holding enlightened social ideas or worldviews for the development of society. Resultantly, they amuse themselves by being absorbed in the englobing system as its exponents.

With such an awareness of oneself and the world among most teachers is not purely the matter of private choice, but the historical process of the development of society. But there are also moments, under the influence of the simultaneous process of transformation – both ideological and structural, when one reflects upon oneself and experience independence from systemic bondage during one's youthful days. These are also the moments which create a new worldview, a new lifestyle, building on the critique of existing social order. But that may not necessarily be a long-lived euphoria. This backdrop points to some interesting lessons that the EGR interventions taught us.

Most teachers find the children as difficult to handle. They are difficult indeed, but primarily because of the lack of trust in teachers and, secondarily, owing to the lack of non-conducive environment for educational pursuits back home. Often the sincere teachers face the arduous task of beginning all over again after every vacation. But they cannot locate their experience in the frame of reference, where most children are the first generation learners, armed with just one book and one pencil. Further, the learning difficulties have also much to do with their nutritional levels and the drudgery on the fields or household work. Moreover, the parental apathy towards the education coming in the way of their regular attendance and their irresponsiveness to children's needs and progress – these together often become the cause of teachers' concern, among others.

The 'Star Early: Read in Time' program of CARE India directly addressed the specific learning needs of these children which add to the worries of many teachers; and oriented them to the

casteist locus of their concerns in respect learning failures of pupils. Over and beyond, the program created a continuous mechanism and reflective platform of 'cluster meetings' at NPRC (Nyaya Panchayat Resource Centre) that supported the teachers in building their perspective through a contemplative process of peer learning and review. The following success stories provide credence to the effectiveness of the program in transforming the teachers' collective inertia into proactive actions with a sense of accountability and civility.

1. A Teacher's Tread to Show What Education Brings to Change the Lives of Girls

Sanjay Chouhan

Head Teacher,
Upper Primary School, Gajadharpur, Fakharpur Block,
Bharaich

Human motivation is many sided – almost any act can be seen in good or bad light. Whatever other negative interpretations may also apply, there is a level at which part of the motivation for many actions is to help others, to make things better for those who are less fortunate or in need. The then head teacher of Gajadharpur upper primary school in Bharaich, Sanjay Chouhan, invoked his altruist conduct with an aspiration to support the girl students who are victims of unequal gender relations within the family. Chandni Upadhyay of class seventh (presently at eleventh in a local private school) was one amongst many girls whom he found living under filial restrictions on freedom of participation in schooling and its activities. One crucial aspect of her orientation in the family as a Brahmin girl was suppression of her *agency* with extreme implications not only for her well-being – that is, the experience of good quality of life – but also for learning progress in the classroom. She would always come late in the class; kept herself away from participation in collective activities and occupied only back-benches to elude the sight of her teachers. Chauhan knew it well that gender relations create a mind that can be manipulated, controlled and structured, without any scope for questioning, debate and discourse. She was, therefore, being groomed as subjects who only cook and serve.

For in the domain of family, schooling had no coveted place. It was rather secondary. The Brahmanical families generally have a tradition of defining knowledge in their own image. In fact, she had her 'will' subsumed into the 'being' of family patriarch.

Beyond these filial constraints placed on her persona, the demographic evidences in the village also afford multiple female disadvantages. Crucial role of literacy in reducing mortality and fertility rates is well-documented. Achievement of women on this front is but innocently low (44.46%) on par with that of men (44.16%) in the state aggregate of 53.54%. Considerable difference in female and male population (45.83% and 54.16%) is again revealing of basic female deprivation in survival, which is enhanced by gender disparity in death rates, in addition to other forms of female discernments.



Chandni and Khushnuma: Enjoying the freedom to read and lead

Further, as regards the issues of safety of girls as the basic aspect in constraining their schooling achievements and, largely viewed as construct of caste-based power relations, are not all that pronounced owing to typical settlement pattern of the diverse village population, with about fifty percent share of Muslims – largely comprising depressed classes (*pasmanda*), the so called backward communities and, about eight percent Dalits. The upper-caste landed families are few; neither could they form a coalition to establish their hegemony in the village politics and appropriation of state resources that could have armed them with the necessity of power play against the poor people on the social margins.

The head teacher's altruism as the construct of his own socialization and training (for which he duly acknowledges the contribution of CARE India) presented before him new opportunities for action. He could duly sense the potential of democratic ruling dispensation. On top of it, the small team of committed CARE campaigners and lobbyists frequenting the school, and the village community had an influence far out of proportion to their numbers. He also learnt that community practices are not fully determined; that they can be changed; that they flow from accretion of individual decisions about what to say and do. And more importantly, the issue with which he was essentially concerned was between the priorities of the powerful and those of the weak.

Also, he was able to understand the potential for deliberate, chosen change. The CARE trainings could place him in more advantageous position and reasons to act, and act in favor of girls like Chandni, Afroz, Khushnuma and a few more in the spirit of 'protective discrimination'. His resolve was real – there was always an agenda of personal fulfillment on the basis of his innate generosity, vision, commitment and courage. But the problem was how, in conditions of

continuous and accelerating change, to put these girls first and; how to enable sustainable well-being for all.

But, basic to his kind of professionalism in the garb of altruism has been his primacy of the personal – the personal choice, the prevalence of error and generation of resources for doing better. In other words, his personal, professional and institutional challenge was learning how to bring about learning among the children, girls in particular, learning how to change or affect the continuously reinforcing the unequal gender relations of power and, learning how to organize and act. Some of the achievements from the personal and professional change are discernable from the analyses of present profiles of his students, particularly those named above.

The quest for bringing about learning among the girls failed by unequal gender relations in hierarchical families led him to take on the physical reality that exists within the family and extends well beyond to the community and the society in the first instance. He judiciously used the 'Parent-Teacher Meeting' and 'Mothers Meeting' to bring home the most universal problem of denial of a girl's right to education guaranteed by enactment of a Constitutional amendment – Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009. In other words, it was a task of *changing* the commonplace of ordinary practical life of a people. In effect, it amounted to disturbing the rhythm of living on the basis of physical reality. On the other hand, the act substantially influenced the parents', mothers' in particular, behavior towards the girl child. The performance of many girls went up each time in self-esteem such meetings were organized.

Then, there was the question of reorganizing the personal reality of children which they construct for themselves – something what is perceived, known and believed – generally as individuals. It is how a child construes her experience, and the framework with which coherence is made of the world. These realities, despite being individualistic in nature, have a caste character at the core. They are, therefore, more complex and diverse.

The head teacher moved ahead to squarely face the question: He brought couple of such children with suppressed *agency* role in the forefront. Chandni was thus inducted in the *Bal Sabha*. The platform opened windows of opportunity for the young Chandni to nurture her inner strength and articulate it with a sense of confidence and clarity. With these discoveries about herself, she could gather the courage to write her own script of participation in *Bal Sabha* with subtle urge for questioning the unjust hierarchies of knowledge and power. This experience was essentially an empowering process to handle challenges and influence the direction of participatory process, including collective decision-making.

2. The Making of a Motivated Teacher

Ankita Dwivedi

Assistant Teacher,
Primary School, Kapoor Pur, Kaiserganj Block,
Bahraich

Ankita Dwivedi, presently at Kapoor Pur Primary School, has been at helm of Early Grade Reading (EGR) program at Firozpur Primary School since 2016, the year she got into the teaching profession. Her choice of the profession after graduating in science and education from Urai in Jalaun district of Bundelkhand region was due to reasons tend to be intrinsic and altruist together. She had faith in her perceived teaching abilities and the core value of teaching. Moreover, as small town upper caste girl, it was natural for her to cite reasons as varied as, for instance, the desire to make social contribution, shape the future of upcoming generations of underprivileged children, worth of teaching, intellectual stimulation etc. Our interaction with the spirited young lady teacher revealed that the inherently philanthropic and child-centered stimulus was quite discernable in her persona. Then, there were equally strong extrinsic motives in respect of 'gender security', 'salary structures' and, above all, manageability of the job along with household chores. She can easily come with her toddler to school, giving him the opportunity to socialize with children of different culture, language and background, something which she doesn't like because of her childhood formation in an exclusivist and purist tradition. But her recurring experiences of positive events emanating from orientation in EGR program at the behest of CARE India fulfilled her basic urge that kept her active throughout her tenure at Firozpur School.

Her first impression of the children she found at the school is still vivid in memory. Looking at the children from her vantage point, she found them unclean (perhaps because some of them were from unclean caste background), uninformed, possibly unpleasant as well. It was, therefore, her own 'upper-caste' background that came to define her attitude to children with field hands. They were only taught to go to the fields, or to look after the cattle and the crop. A girl knew how to handle a two-three-month old baby while mother leaving home early in the morning. For an 'upper caste' teacher with no experience in holding ideas or in analyses, all this was against her own image of knowledge reinforced by the text-books.

Besides, on her first day in school, she found only 12 out of 150 students enrolled – and some of them loitering around. Still she realized that the initial disposition of children towards schooling was very positive, despite the discouragement they face from the family. She could sense that children want better school, better teaching – something joyful and creative, not humiliating. Certain teachers were known for less teaching and more beating. There are many instances of drop-outs just because of humiliation and social discrimination. Lack of comprehension and classroom boredom were other factors discouraging the children to discontinue schooling intermittently.

These discouragement effects were common among children drawn from underprivileged families. In fact, the first generation learners and their parents, she found, highly vulnerable to discouragement effect. For the illiterate parents could not make out what goes on in the classroom. They found it difficult to get a hearing from the teacher and, of course, to help their children with their studies. Not infrequently, they would end up blaming themselves or their children for the failure of school system.

The EGR, as indicated above, as an intervention 'to tackle all the systemic, pedagogical and learner-centric issues', came her way by extending handholding support through trainings and exposures, besides creating 'reflective forum' like 'cluster meeting' for peer learning and 'parent-teacher meetings' (PTM) so as to be able to interact with parent of individual child. There was

nothing new in these arrangements, except the fact that their significance for effective teaching and child-learning was established as something inevitable. The teaching materials and tools made available to the teachers were judiciously used by Ankita. The encouragement came in the form enhanced learning practices and outcomes among the beginners. The EGR interventions also brought library to her school. The accessibility of books of varied genres and simple child-friendly language also contributed to the development of a reading culture having implications not only for their accomplishment, but for the empowerment of newly recruited teachers like Ankita Dwivedi.

The SMC (School Management Committee) and PTM etc. have principally been helpful in influencing her orientation. Repeated interactions with parents, mainly mothers of girls' students, helped to shed some of her casteist moorings and appreciate the fact that the girls in production-based family-culture fail to get recourse to values she was made to value by the fact of her birth. Even their language was adapted to production-based communication. Therefore, one could not expect them to speak the language of socially advanced castes (SACs) or exhibit behavior which is undemocratic and builds upon unequal gender relations of power.

The majority of children, on the other hand, because of fundamental equality among several relations in a non-SAC family, loved to interact with teachers at equal plane. Ankita tried this out in her domain of work. In fact, it came naturally to her, as an implicit part of the whole package of EGR interventions. In the process, she became more and more trustworthy among the children. And initial progress in attendance and attentiveness, over and above, the learning outcomes became explicit. The sense of readiness for learning, reading and writing, drawing and sketching, singing and dancing – was all pervasive, mainly during the period of programmatic interventions. The program also highlighted the significance of correspondence between the spoken *Awadhi* dialect and written text in standardized language(s) throughout the primary level of schooling among children growing-up in an environment with no or little entry of written words.



Ankita Dwivedi engaged with students at PS Kapoor Pur

It may be appropriate to say that the teachers from SAC background have continued with the concerns specific to non-SAC children after the discontinuation of program. This is principally true in case of Ankita Dwivedi.

3. Transforming Education as an Act of Knowing

Saroj Maurya

Head Teacher
Primary School - I, Dihwa Sherbahadur, Kaiserganj Block,
Bahraich

The Dihawa Primary School-I at Kaiserganj touches very strongly. Apparently, here education has transformed into an act of knowing – knowing one’s inherent potential and articulating it in diverse artistic and cultural expressions. And all this is going in the process of organizing the schooling of children and transforming their reality.

The person guiding the efforts is the head teacher, Saroj Maurya, who knows more than anyone else in the school campus that what to know – and it has to do with the content of the subject. And to know for what – this question comes to define the objective of schooling process. The next question most naturally be asked is how to know – that is the method of knowing brought here by CARE India’s Early Grade Reading (EGR) interventions which had to do with cultural and social elements, while leading to the development of knowledge, of understanding of their reality, as something which cannot be transferred but only created and recreated.

The children do in their classes what they can do. Meanwhile, according to Maurya, it is important for the teacher what really one can do: Sometimes one can go beyond one’s expectation and, sometimes the capabilities restrain the child really looking forward to do. But as a teacher, she cannot afford to be indifferent. Only thing is that one must avoid being manipulative, neither being spontaneous is likely to serve any purpose. Spontaneity, Maurya says, places demand on the teacher to leave her students to themselves. That is why she accepts neither spontaneity nor manipulation. Then what remains for the children to be given free hand with a vigilant eye of the teacher as guide and director.

We have largely found that most of teachers participating in this ‘Star Early: Read in Time’ program tend to end up by trying to get self-satisfaction, as a kind of ‘Daughter of Mary in the Catholic Church’. And sooner or later, there is no channel for them to continue working and experimenting. For SMCs will no longer hold their significance. The Cluster meetings, parent-teacher meeting – nothing really works for most of the teachers after achieving a certain level of self-satisfaction. Even Saroj Maurya doesn’t have any vision of her educational activism. For the vision comes from participation at community level. One cannot work alone. Transforming the reality of schooling is essentially a social act. It cannot be realized in isolation. In this sense, like many others, Saroj Maurya may not be able to escape her potential isolation. It may, therefore, be prudent for these teacher having had gone through the EGR processes to collectively exercise

a kind of reflection on their experience as if they are really professional teachers, which in any case they are. They must be able to realize this fact. And this is a moral question before all these teachers.

They have been meeting with community, mainly mothers, on various forums. But those meetings are barely more than manipulation, telling them what you consider as standardized norms for children, without listening to them, or endorsing what they say, their own difficulty in abiding by the prescribed norms. The teachers, constituting a privileged class in rural setting, can only see their lack of interest in child education; but what comes from the side of parents and the community is denial – a form of protest against the system for its failures to accommodate their concerns, their issues. Elucidating the point further, Saroj Maurya adds: 'Sometimes we as a teacher working with poor and socially marginalized children are unable to perceive the oppressive conditions they live from their perspective. Perceiving their problems in their perspective should, therefore, be our need. And some of us are really striving to do the needful from within our own intellectual and material resources'.

The schooling experiences of children in Maurya's school are full of fun and creativity, which she illuminates with personal touch and demonstrates with curiosity, activity, interest, pride and, above all, sheer confusion. It is the confusion which enhances the versatility of thinking and improves problem-solving skills. And the sense of joy that this process generates, in our own experience with the school children, nourishes their social and communication skills. Further, with the children being at the helm of activities, learning prevails in the atmosphere by default. The smaller ones are guided to play to learn – and to learn she needs freedom to feel her sense of being. The school environment – much like a chaos – ensures all this.

Evidently, the head teacher has structured (or, to say, de-structured) learning in the form of process. This may not be her conscious effort, but she is very well aware that the sense of enjoyment comes from the achievements, from the skills that are developed with practice, from the secure environment where one enjoys one's own freedom, from her curiosity and interest through which a child realizes her capability, her *agency*, but, of course, with the support of her teacher.

Inside the classroom as well, the children have a certain level of comfort: they talk freely with each other in local dialect, even in the presence of teacher. The head teacher sometimes chose to communicate in the same language to invoke the sense of *personal*. And that is perhaps essential for the children coming mostly from a background in which they have to struggle for all petty things associated with day-to-day requirements. A welcoming, supporting and interesting place for them is not only their need, but it creates the temptation for learning and excelling.

Little things like taking classrooms outside refreshes learning routines, says the head teacher. The children are inspired by simple tweaks they themselves do in the classroom. The idea of 'print-rich environment' – where children get the prospects of interacting with many different forms of print, besides its aesthetic value, essentially promotes their literacy experiences. It may invoke learning to learn about certain exhibit or posters. And those made and displayed by children with their names is indeed empowering. Not only that. The print-rich classroom environment has been particularly useful for younger children in making use of the elements of literacy in most functional

ways by establishing a strong correlation between the level of print in the classroom and children's writing ability. More important thing is that the teachers in classroom ensure that the print environment is made functional by encouraging children to use it as a reference.

Children feel happy to have reading resources and TLM in their school



4. Tryst of a Teacher with EGR

Rafia Begam

In-Charge, NPRC, Dihwa Sher Bahadur and
Head Teacher, Upper Primary School, Ainy (Retired)
Kaiserganj Block,
Bahraich

Rafia Begum was retired as the Head Teacher of Upper Primary School, Ainy after forty-two years of eventful government services on 31 March 2018. She has also been in-charge of *Nyaya Panchayat* cluster at Dihawa Sher Bahadur Singh village in Kaiserganj block. She represents the elite class of government functionaries in-charge of organizing and disciplining efforts of the society. And, as a head teacher, it was incumbent on her part to control school and encourage the students to accept their future roles – as compliant and obedient workforce - ordained by the overarching system of education. The values transmitted through this school system, including the curriculum, (dis)empower the children from the social margin to toe the line in menial jobs required to maintain or manipulate the so called social equilibrium.



Rafia Begum brought changes in her clusters' schools and inspired others for change

The submissive subservience of children to the teachers corresponds to the acceptance of hierarchy exemplified by the official authority and social status of very few teachers like Rafia Begum. Such behavior patterns reproduce inequality between teachers and students, in the first instance; existing social divide among the students also gets reinforced by default. The unequal relationship between teachers and students match up with hierarchical relations between parents and children, between boys and girls and brothers and sisters also find a pattern in SAC (socially advanced castes) families. There also children from the *Dalibahujan* castes, who fail to find such a hierarchical pattern of relationship within their family system are, therefore, naturally pushed out to the margin. They generally become the target of wrathful attitude of most teachers.

In other words, the school legitimizes and reinforces the inequality central to caste-family norms. And this is being realized through the system of merits and rewards. In fact, it is a truism among elites to believe and to affirm that whatever is different is intrinsically inferior, sometimes illegitimate. And this is intolerance at the core. The interesting fact about most the teachers, social elites like Rafia in particular, is their irresistible preference to reject 'differences'. For instance, the production-based language which the children from marginalized communities speak is out rightly different from that of the advanced caste families. And it is sometimes overruled for no substantial reason. That is why there is generally a counter-culture of children from the margin. They are given to understand that the schooling has no real opportunity for them to succeed.

While talking to Rafia Begum, she transpired all the attributes and behavior patterns characteristic of her class with clarity that builds on a clear vision of a hierarchical and stratified society as natural or divinely ordained system. Yet she was open to new trends and willing to go by them. And for this reason she stood out among her peers. She always remained source of comfort and motivation of teachers. She could disarm difficult situations by her readiness to give an attentive

and inquisitive hearing. With her own kind of righteousness and sense of justice akin to her understanding of hierarchical relation of power in the family and the society, she had good connect with children and the community. And that was because of the fact of her sensitivity to their needs and demands, according to her own submission.

With her roots in hierarchical system of Sacs's values, she has been selective in her language, speech, conversations and choice of subjects – together giving shape to her ideas and beliefs about educational process. And with these personal resources, she did her best to elevate her *Nyaya Panchayat* as a 'model' of educational efforts. Meanwhile CARE India came her way with its EGR interventions. The two district-level workshops she had a recourse changed her perception about learning as cognitive development process among children and came to the understanding why children from the social margin lag behind in mastering the literacy skills in the first instance. This may not have changed her 'idealist' approach; the EGR unquestionably equipped her with reason to suppress her intrinsic point of view on public platform and speak in egalitarian and democratic language.

The new vistas shown by the program in diverse domains of pedagogical principles and contributed to her perspective building process, particularly in respect of learners from excluded and marginalized communities, besides arming her with renewed energy and sense of purpose to encompass the learner-centric issues as the focus of her attention in a systemic frame of reference. The idea essential to the program, that is, the development of a reflective platform for peer learning, has indeed been the energy behind her efforts to restructure and empower the *Nyaya panchayat*-level formations of 'cluster meetings'.

It was ensured by Rafia Begum as cluster in-charge to have a functional 'committee' in each school to work towards improving the quality of education and learning achievements of children. For the first time the *Nyaya panchayat* committee (NPRC) of Dihawa Sher Bahadur Singh village became a center of academic support and guidance for the teachers. The managerial issues also became frequent on the agenda of NPRC meetings. But her primary focus remained on the development of literacy skills in larger view of the problem which the children specially as first generation learners face because of their childhood formation in an environment where written words had no recourse.

The academic meetings of school cluster (NPRC), which she used to lead from the front, proved to be a vibrant platform where teachers of cluster network would meet with their respective school-level issues in quest of tenable solutions through a process of collective reflection. Also she initiated a process of decentralized educational or academic planning on the basis of the performance of children. As and when necessary, school visits were also undertaken by her to ensure certain things, motivate teachers and support them in their pursuits for inclusive development of school. Her inner motivation and professional urge ultimately showed off in tangible improvements in respect of almost all the dimensions of teaching and learning environment, besides infrastructural facilities in couple of schools of the cluster.

5. Teacher Learning from Real Life Situation of Children from the Social Margins

Pratibha Tiwari

Assistant Teacher,
Primary School - II, Matera, Sirsiya Block
Bahraich

While joining the Primary School, Matera-II in Sirsia block of Bahraich as an assistant teacher, Pratibha Tiwari brought together the attitude of a socially advanced caste (SAC) woman owing primarily to her childhood experiences in a system of patriarchal hierarchy - the hierarchy of boys over girls, elders over children - establishing sex and age as the determining and measuring rods of status within the family. And secondarily, in her attitude to children, especially those from social margins, she was intolerable, always prone to describe them in the language of damnation and mistreatment.



Pratibha is determined to enhance the learning outcome of children

And there was nothing unusual about it. It is the pattern of outlook the so called SAC teachers hold towards their students. And they justify it on the pretext of their dirty habits & clothes, supposedly unhygienic lifestyle. For they work in muddy fields, eat impure food. All this is, in their opinion, because of the evil times – the *Kaluga*.

With two more colleagues – one head and another assistant teacher, the educational atmosphere of school, with good proportion of Muslim children, was far from being satisfactory so as to influence the low-motivation level of parents, particularly the parents of girl students. Even the Muslim parents with certain amount of motivation for girls' schooling as important part of upbringing, along with essential to *Maktab* education, were discouraged by the whole school atmosphere and the attitude of teachers.

For the parents need education – quality education, but never at the cost of self-pride, the pride in one's community. That's the reason why private schools are always preferred option for the depressed class people. And while going for relatively costly private schools, the question of girls'

education goes into oblivion. That bias against the girls' education thus becomes explicit. For the most parents (mother no less than father) tend to have much stronger interest in the education of sons than the daughters. And this is so resilient that it makes little sense to lump girls and boys together while discussing the parental motivation for education. As a matter of fact, in the perception of most depressed class people, the questions of female and male education have little commonality. They should, therefore, be addressed separately.

But when we say parents need 'quality education' for their children, the commonplace understanding of education involves what is heavily influenced by the dominant system of values which have historically been the force behind their pauperization and exclusion. In fact, Pratibha Tewari herself epitomized these value. Here lies the complexity. A possible explanation could be that what these poor parents know as 'ideal' is *only* the *enlightened* world view of the dominant class. They want to see their children as one amongst the ranks of them.

Pratibha's issues concerning the children were enormous. At academic level, most important happened to be the challenge of regular attendance, besides their so called poor reading and comprehending abilities. Parental apathy was another issue discussed above. Neither there were windows for the capacity building of teachers, except the DIET, which was also not very effective. On top of these, the sense of animosity and hatred against her own pupils was perhaps most powerful in generating and sustaining not only her own, but collective inertia of all the teachers, including the head teacher in the school.

With the onset of EGR interventions of CARE India with explicit focus on the question of 'early grade learning', the signs of change began to appear right since the beginning. With the programmatic accent on the process of dialogue, that of participation and collectivism, democratic and secular values and, the quest for gender justice, she got the programmatic impulse to move out of her centripetal outlook and learn from the real life situation of poor and excluded children thronging the government schools.

And she did: moved out to the community, established rapport and won their confidence. The discouragement effect of the prevailing situation upon the children started waning by the air of change in the school atmosphere. Gradually it began showing in the of increasing regular attendance level.

Cumulative experience of participation in 'cluster meetings' enabled her to understand the significance of the oral language in bearing the burden of learning reading and comprehending, reinforced by print-rich school environment and children-friendly library facility at the helm of learning activities. These improvements, as diverse dimension of the EGR pedagogy, have far reaching consequences in influencing parental views on girls' education and, consequently, their increasing induction to the process of schooling.



6. EGR Pedagogy – a Call to Teacher’s Action

Manish Pathak

Head Teacher,
Upper Primary School, Tulsipur, Gilaula Block,
Shravasti

Way back in 2016, when he reached the Upper Primary School at Tulsipur in Gilaula block after being promoted from the Nevada Jamadar primary school, Manish Pathak was a thoroughly disgruntled man; resentful with himself and hapless as teacher, but value-laden, seeking to realize his worth as an individual – an idea which came to reckon only after the advent of liberal democracy in our contemporary times.

Hailing from a privileged social background, his individualism duly embedded in family pride, nurtured in a cultural setting. In the pursuit of his professional Career as a teacher, he drew upon the tradition in formulating his altruistic individualism as the construct of his educational background and exposure to modernity. But in essence, he has been in search of *atma-tushti* or self-validation, which comes close to Gandhian notion of ‘moral sense’.

With this orientation, he entered the job after some heartbreaking failings and made it as his vocation, that is *seva* - selfless-service, particularly of the needy and the oppressed; in his case,

school children. In this sense, his individualism was oriented towards others, that is, altruism, not utilitarian, or self-oriented, which guided his action and approach to teaching vocation.



Manish practicing the learning from cluster meeting

His ascendance to the position of head teacher of upper primary level school also brought many issues - most important was the regular attendance: only ten out of forty-three enrolled students were consistent in the beginning. Because of poor maintenance and reckless infrastructure of school building, only one room was used for all the grades. Besides, he was all alone as teacher in the school. Moreover, as regards the community or parents, the situation sounded like death-knell of parent-teacher relations. In fact, the most common pattern was one of meagre interface between them. The parents, on their part, were sure of no scope for impelling the teacher, who neither has any inclination for interacting with the parents. He was also worried about the weight of non-comprehension that the children were carrying along. The description may go infinitum. And in the midst of these, he was struggling to find ways to live with them, rather than facing straight – head-on.

Meanwhile, he happened to come across a 'cluster meeting' by virtue of his position as the head teacher. The monthly 'cluster meetings' at the *Nyaya Panchayat* Resource Centre (NPRC), armed him with intellectual and material resources to tackle all the systemic and pedagogical problems and learner-centric issues. Himself a man of letters, he was particularly motivated by the idea of print-rich environment, supplemented by child-friendly library, and initiated the process of translating them into the reality of his school. These developments worked well in soliciting the interest of children. And the parents, sensing good educational environment and teacher's sense of accountability, also got motivation and prompted to send their children, particularly the girls, to school.

7. Teacher as the Agent of Deep and Lasting Change

Pratibha Tripathi

Head Teacher,
Primary School, Gujarwara, Gilaula Block,
Shravasti

The goal of CARE India's program, 'Start Early: Read in Time', is singular: to disseminate information and to create and recreate knowledge, or more specifically, to impart literacy skill – teaching the early grade learners, creating among them independent and motivated readers. That is why her teaching could take any form: singing, dancing, painting, drawing or even a dialogue, a performance, a recital, anything that communicates effectively. She asks her pupils to be creative: How could what they have learnt be effectively be brought in use – this remains her dominant concern.



Making Morning Assembling interactive, expressive and joyful

Beginning as a reluctant teacher, Pratibha Tripathi opted out of teaching to concentrate on administrative paperwork and deputed her junior teacher to take CARE of teaching. Yet an ebullient educator in her was always active, seeking to find expression. It succeeded at the instance of CARE India team working with primary schools under its above mentioned program meant for 'Early Grade Learners' (EGR), which also rolled out a set of interventions with focus on teachers' trying in the use of learner-centric EGR pedagogy and its implementation requiring total transformation of the system of schooling. The trying experience enabled her to develop an

amazing sense of freedom and flexibility in her approach to the engagement with children, besides motivating the teacher hiding in her vibrant persona.

Her initial reluctance was because of an alternative image of a teacher and her role. She didn't want to be mere provider of knowledge; thinking that could better be accomplished done by machines. She started discerning about teaching as a moral profession, rising to awareness that teachers have moral responsibility to shape the intellectual or cognitive development of children. In the process, she came close to the understanding of impending methodological issues through the impulse provided by her orientation in the EGR pedagogy: that it was possible to do that, provided there is readiness and willingness on the part of teachers to go beyond the set pattern of curriculum.

The confidence that her participation in monthly 'cluster meetings' at NPRC (*Nyaya Panchayat Resource Centre*) enabled her to explore herself and her latent attributes of a teacher as a performer, as a guide to lead the collective search for knowledge through the reflective process of peer learning. She was able to see teaching as transformative, that is, to say, the classroom processes must lead to transformation of both children and their teachers. In pursuit of this idea, she initiated a process that could go beyond the individualistic outcomes and transform the village community.

She herself provides testimony to fact that how reluctant parents with lowdown in their motivation particularly for the education of daughters got transformed and became prone to insist on girls' schooling. That eventually changed the most popular moral narratives on girls' education under the patriarchal garb. Her *open* classrooms in the vast sunny school grounds during winters were filled with spaces not only for language and literacy development, while simultaneously engaging with print that thronged all the school walling. Her classrooms are indeed spaces requiring a close watch for the civility and difficult conversations to obviate the possibility of gender and caste discrimination and injustice by just learning together.

8. Personal Impulse Translates into Professional Excellence at the Behest of EGR

Anita Kushwaha

Head Teacher,
Primary School, Khagai Jot – II, Balrampur Block,
Balrampur

Way back in 2000, when she got first posting as an assistant teacher in Harvanshpur primary school in an alien setting, there was a strong sense of idealism as a guide to pursue her job as a vocation. Her source of strength was the *Dalitbahujan* family background, with roots in production-based material culture. And this awareness of the background was principally the awareness of

'self', but *relatively* free from established patterns of thought. At the back of her mind, she perhaps knew that she was not rightly educated and trained, but *only* to teach the same mechanical knowledge she herself was brought up with. In her experience, therefore, the problem was not the child, not even the parent, but she as the teacher herself. As a beginner with full of moral impulse, but no support or appreciation from the seniors, she was looking forward to new kind of education that goes beyond stuffing the child with information to enable her to score marks in class tests and examinations. But not really sure how to bring that new education. There were pupils waiting for direction, but the guide, the teacher was reluctant, value-ridden, then her pupils would be what she was.



Positive behaviour with students: feeling free with teacher

Although she had a good understanding of her 'self', her understanding and awareness, yet it was a difficult undertaking to educate herself. Why to single her out, in fact all of us are crystallized in a system, given ourselves to a particular conduct that it is difficult, if not impossible, to reeducate ourselves by freeing from a certain kind of mindset.

In the midst of sheer uncertainty, she started with engaging children, initially by opening a line of communication with them. It was followed by home visits, meeting community members with idea of increasing attendance. It took three long years, but nothing really changed. And she got promoted to her present position of the head teacher in Khagai Jot primary school – II. But she continued the process of dialogue with pupils and their parents; this time with a colleague by her side.

Notwithstanding her own issues – the cumulative fears, unhappiness and frustrations of the time in the service, she tried to fit into the disempowering pattern of schooling, but with the difference:

She brought the sense of accountability among the teachers and, with their support, tried her best to build the culture of teaching and learning by, first of all, building trusting relationships with children in order to create safe and encouraging environment. Immediate impact was seen in the form of new enrolments of specially girls and regularity of enrolled children as indicated by existing



Anita motivated children and parents for attending school regularly

average of 95% attendance. Further, her own sensitivity towards the young children and inquisitiveness about individual child, an informed understanding and knowledge of their cognitive, social and emotional development – all these personal resources she applied to the learning and development of children.

The 'cluster meeting' processes, moreover, catalyzed and corroborated by CARE India's 'Start Early: Read in Time' program, the opportunity of peer learning thus made available – these together enabled her to appreciate the bearing of her engagement with children and the engagement of children with a print-rich school environment, besides the use of child-centric methods of teaching known as EGR (Early Grade Reading) pedagogy etc. contributed in varying degrees to the development of literacy skills and learning outcomes of children. *She cites the selection of increasing numbers of children for Navodaya Vidyalyay as the most important indicator of the educational standard of teaching in her Khagai Jot school.*

9. Learning Evolution of a Teacher

Urmila Devi

Head Teacher
Primary School, Agarhwa
Balrampur

The opportunity to realize her dream of building a learning environment and operationalize the pedagogical principles and methodology of ‘Early Grade Reading’ (EGR) interventions to address the problems of children from the social margin having no recourse to written words, came the way of Urmila Devi, the head teacher, after the award of three new teaching positions to her school. Even when all alone in the midst of administrative and teaching responsibilities, she was never short of energy and dynamism to handle all the students – numbering 265 – in the classroom single-handedly. It was her sense of professional commitment that never let the students to be the victims of circumstances. She could upkeep their spirit and motivation for learning.

As a motivated teacher, Urmila Devi made best use of ‘cluster meetings’ with funds of resources in informing her own perspective, refining pedagogical skills & knowledge, and humanizing the approach to the young learners in the classroom. The teaching-spaces became more learner-friendly with print-rich environment and diverse activities supported by judicious use of learning material highlighting the learning process.



10. Recounting on the Literacy Pedagogy of EGR

Shalini

Teacher

Primary School, Kharhargadhi

Balrampur

Shalini commenced her journey as a teacher in Kharhargadhi Primary School. Soon after, she was led to participation in couple of ‘cluster meetings’, which in a little while became a fixture of her monthly map of activities. These meetings came her way as an opportunity to learn from the experiences of her peers in the business and share her own issues emanating from her own experience of classroom processes involving the children of first, second and third grades.

She would, therefore, take her pedagogical lessons from this platform and roll them out in the classroom by engaging the children in certain standardized forms of educational activities keeping in mind the coveted goal of creating independent and motivated readers in the ranks of her students. Her classroom experiments thus commenced with focus on oral language – imparting skills like phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension etc. in mutually complementary ways - essential for literacy development. As a follow-up, there has been the efforts to familiarize the children with ‘print’ as forerunner to reading. Creation of ‘print-rich’ environment in classrooms was one such exercise. Further, reading aloud the stories and verses by the teacher also fashioned interest and enthusiasm among children to become readers. The sound effect of aloud reading also contributed a bit in developing foundation for phonics and spellings, and subsequently, the meaning. Meanwhile, she introduced letter knowledge or alphabets to contribute to subsequent reading abilities via the skill to recognize words before arriving at comprehension of the text at a certain advanced level. Additionally, for writing skills, she found the use of symbolic representation of meaning as helpful in the process, in which the children become prone to construct their own spelling. The invented spellings by children also help them to discover the relationships between sounds and letters. And, while reading the text, they arrive at the point of comprehension.

The experiment, in her own perception, cleared her mental blockade that children from social margins are poor learners; that they tend to fail in retaining much of what is taught to them. Her success as a teacher in her classroom experiments also made an empowering impact that elevated her to the level of a trainer in EGR pedagogy.

11. Schooling Accomplishments

Vijay Tiwari

**Teacher,
Primary School, Boodhipur,
Balrampur**

Vijay Tiwari, a native of Gorakhpur district and a post-graduate degree in sociology with B.Ed., joined the Mahadeva primary school in Rehra block of Balrampur with a missionary zeal and sense of accountability. Soon he became so popular in the community that in the event of his transfer to Boodhipur primary school in 2014, a strong group of influential people and opinion leaders approached the District Magistrate for withdrawal of his transfer order.

The situation in the new school were different, marked by collective inertia of those at the helm of affairs and dismal performance. There were very few – just fifteen – regular children and he himself as the teacher in the school. Even the enrolment was equally low. He took it as a challenge and set himself to face it straight – head-on. A campaign was, therefore, organized with the support of only those children in the school to cooperatively solicit each family and involved them in conversations on the necessity of education not only as the right of a child but an obligation of parents. In the process, he tried to forge personal bond with everyone, took mobile

numbers of parents and kept up live contacts that grew into a relationship. The official 'School Chalo Abhiyan' also contributed in reinforcing his solitary efforts.



It was thus in a short span of three months the attendance drastically improved from fifteen to eighty and, the enrolment figures were also greatly enriched: By March 2015, there were as many as 115 children enrolled in school. The next three months were dedicated to showcase the learning achievements of his pupils so as to assure the parents that their wards were not being wasted in the name of schooling of their perception and experience.

It was made possible primarily because of his own resolve and commitment, but with the support of EGR (Early Grade Reading) pedagogy that initially empowered him to appreciate the necessity of clean and print-rich classroom ambience, bearing of children's platforms like *Bal Sabha* on their personality development, judicious use of teaching-learning material (TLM) and, above all, the propensity to endorse the fact of their lineage in illiteracy and to use it as the starting point of his pursuit. On the other hand, the EGR pedagogy entailed continuous support and handholding



through the process of peer learning and reviews. Ajay also tried to go beyond and made the Block Education Officer to issue I-cards to individual student in a get-together.

12. Closer to Learning, the Realities of Life

Deepika Mishra

Assistant Teacher
Primary School, Purushotampur,
Balrampur



Deepika, making the classroom print rich

The litany of inadequacies in terms of child-friendly and gender-just learning environment was no one's concern until May, 2016. The subsequent period after the onset of CARE India program, Deepika Mishra emerged as the vanguard of change desired to improve schooling experience as worthy of its purpose.

The 'Start Early: Read in Time' initiative of the organization, as it has been focused on cognitive development processes with special reference to learning activities and their tangible outcomes among the children particularly from the social margins, essentially triggered the process of change with due regard to learning imperatives encompassing a conducive environment, besides the pedagogical issues. The initiative also created opportunity for teachers by rejuvenating the defunct platform of 'cluster meetings' and elevating it to a level of peer learning and sharing forum.

Deepika Mishra was the one to get inspired from the early grade reading program in order to enhance her own competence as a teacher, above and beyond removing the staleness from the school ambience. Accordingly, she embarked upon the project of developing teaching-learning material (TLM), clay-modelling, school library and reading room, print-rich environment etc. with the support of her colleague, Chetna. The duo took several rounds of home visits in order to motivate the parents for the schooling of their children by making the impending changes in overall system. The basic idea was to bring about enhancement in the existing level of attendance and regularity, beside, of course, improved learning outcomes. Deepika Mishra ensured that the sound emanating from the classrooms are not cacophonous chorus, but happy hums of joyous laughter, creative composition, active participation, curious questioning etc.

13. EGR as Morale Booster

Preeti Singh

Head Teacher
Primary School, Rehra Bazar,
Balrampur

The Rehra Bazar Primary School, with 291 students on the roll, came to prominence with the inspired leadership of its head teacher, Preeti Singh, supported by two assistant teachers and a *Shiksha Mitra*. Together they have ensured 85% attendance over a period of time.



Right since she joined the school in 2010, Preeti has embodied a positive attitude and commitment to the promotion of education in the local community. Most significant was her resolve to give a hearing to the aspirations of poor and socially marginalized parents. Perhaps one crucial issue was the self-perception of her role as a teacher and the set of attitudes which she brought to this function

as a head teacher. Her real inspiration came with the onset of CARE India initiative, which helped her to nourish her love for teaching as a pedagogical or social endeavor. Had the CARE India not been there, the school environment being what it was, a person with such a vocation might not find any scope for her skills to flourish.

Her experience with the promotion of students' committees has been quite promising in terms of making them vibrant and meaningful. From the vantage point of children, their participation in various committees has often resulted in self-assurance and sense of collectivism. In the same manner, she has been very upright about the potential of print-rich environment as morale booster for the children. It, therefore, remained her prime concern to increasingly engage children in the preparation of charts for display in the classroom. Looking at your own work on the display is always an empowering knowledge, she says. Recalling her interaction with the then District Magistrate, KB Pandey, she says it was he who first introduced her to the idea of print-rich classroom ambience, which the CARE India duly enforced in subsequent course.

Preeti Singh was one of the very few teachers who not only appreciate the 'cluster meeting' sessions as a mechanism of continuous support and handholding, but remained eager to translate the learning in the form of live demonstrations both for fellow teachers and students. It may, however, be prudent to say that the Rehra Bazar Primary School is the institution where EGR pedagogy has found its feet largely.

In fact, the issue at work is high level of her motivation and faith in the EGR pedagogy in the absence of which she might not be able to retain her intrinsic attributes like many other people with genuine enthusiasm, whose morale is battered day by day.

14. Setting the Ground for Personal Accomplishment

Ram Jiyavan Mishra

Assistant Teacher
Primary School, Bhairampur,
Balrampur

Ram Jiyavan, who was officially felicitated as the 'ideal teacher' of the district from *Nyaya Panchayat* Imiliya in Utraula block, came to this level through an arduous journey dotted by intermittent drudgery of fields and domestic chores of organizing livelihoods for the family of three sisters four brothers, besides parents, at the cost of his studies. While all the brothers were enrolled in primary school and no one was actually interest in sisters' education. Distant locale of school (about 12 km) and lack of any means of communication was one reason why the girls in the family could not attend school.

Prompted by his inner impulse to acquire education against all odds, he took up tuitions to sustain his living and pursue education. This is how he passed the intermediate examination from Gonda, followed by BTC training certificate, that got him the teaching position in primary school.

Soon he emerged as a missionary, dedicated his life to the service of education of girls in his own right. His initiative to give tuition to non-school-going girls and boys pushed them to attend school. The onset of CARE India's initiative, 'Start Early: Read in Time', gave him the sense of accomplishment, besides creating opportunity for his promotion to the level of junior school.

15. Removal of Casteist Bias in Teacher through EGR

Suman Nanda

Assistant Teacher,
Primary School, Johra, Chitaura Block,
Bahraich

Suman Nanda of Johra primary school in Chitaura block was one of the teachers – greater numbers of them – coming to school with casteist mindset. Their attitude essentially depended on the caste background of children. There are many stories of teachers using abusive language against the children of poor and untouchables castes and cursing the evil times that they were condemned to teach those children. Much like her, a great majority of them hold the most intelligent opinion that they are good for nothing; for their field hands – that is because of working in fields – they are seen as dirty and unaesthetic.

Moreover, most teachers, Suman Nanda is no exception, believe that caste lineage and upbringing are the factors in the development of positive attitude education. There are also the people reflecting from the practice the casteist ideology of segregation of people on the basis of the fact of birth – having long standing implications for learning and educational achievements, and hold it with great sense of belief. Suman Nanda, however, belonged to the elitist group of practitioners of exclusivist ideology.

The idea of 'Start Early: Read in Time' program encompassing the EGR (Early Grade Learning) activities essentially builds upon the critique of National Curriculum Framework for School Education (2000) in terms of its failure to take into cognizance the historical nature of social deprivation, especially of Dalit and Adivasi children, who are mostly first generation learners and by virtue of the circumstances of birth face exclusion and discrimination right since the school level.

The challenge of upholding the mandate of EGR was enormous. It, therefore, became essential to consciously make demonstration for the teacher to learn from the responses of these children in group activities. And she did. The cumulative experience of encounters and reflections among the peers in the monthly 'cluster meetings' gradually changed her mindset and she emerged as a good teacher with all the sensibilities of a lady teacher.

16. Connecting with Children through EGR Interventions

Dharmendra

Assistant Teacher
Primary School, Rudaen, Jarwal Block
Bahraich

Dharmendra got her first posting at Rudaen primary school in Jarwal block. This was the year of 2016. But his beginning was marked by failure to connect with children, mostly first generation learners from the socially marginalized and excluded communities. There might have been something in his attitude to which the sensitive mind of young children was not been ready to accept and used to respond in the mode of protest by refusing to listen to him, making noise in the class and, sometimes, denying his presence altogether.

Yet he was worried and looking at them with sheer disdain. The problem was not so much the failure in conducting the class, but its likely impact on his new job. His apprehension, therefore, was well placed.

Then the EGR (Early Grade Learning) initiative of CARE India came to his rescue. He contacted the head teacher, Miraj Ahmad, who was on sick leave. And told him his version of the problem. He guided him to go



through huge number of children's books piled in the shelf, besides teaching-learning material made available to the school under the CARE India's educational support program for early grade learners.

Meanwhile, he started attending the monthly 'cluster meetings' and learnt much more about the EGR's ingenuity in addressing the first generation learners, with no exposure to written words, in the classroom. The platform of cluster meeting gave him the opportunity to learn the use of resource material from his peers participating in the reflective sessions of 'cluster meetings'.

The impulse of 'cluster meeting' worked wonders: An abandoned room was opened, cleaned with the participation of children and, developed as a library, organized as per the requirement of children so as to facilitate its use by school children of all grades. The classrooms were draped with works – posters, paintings, drawings, poems, models etc. – of students of respective grades.

The new seating arrangement was made with due consideration of diffusing the caste and gender identities of children. Their dialect – the spoken language was given legitimacy in the classroom setting so as to develop their cognitive faculties, besides safeguarding their self-esteem. In the meantime, they were also exposed to standardized language of communication by reading aloud the relevant text, carrying out formal and informal conversations.

It was thus with changes in classroom processes through the engagement of students with a personal connect, the entire schooling scenario was transformed for better learning and educational outcomes.

17. 'Cluster Meetings' Show the Way of Accomplishment

Ram Saran

Assistant Teacher
Primary School, Athaisa,
Bahraich



The challenge of regular attendance was of profound concern for the newly promoted head teacher, Ram Saran, of Athaisa primary school in Jarwal block of the district. Even the parents not really 'discouraged' by schooling system were finding it difficult to push their children to attend school on regular basis. One reason for this parental reluctance was their limited material

resources and the necessity of its apt management for livelihood pursuits. Generally, in families with good number of children, their economic wisdom requires *safe* and *selective* investment in education. These families tend to focus only on most promising children and allow the rest to drift out and contribute to family labour to upkeep the livelihood. In fact, all the children work part-time on the fields with parents. In households with working mothers, girls are often required to look after younger siblings. In Ram Saran's school with 123 children on the roll, their attendance could never exceed the 30 to 40 percent mark. Even those who were regular, would refuse to stay after the meals.

Worse is the lack of the awareness among policy-people to create harmony between the demands of family labour and schooling.

Then the 'cluster meetings' showed him new vistas of achieving professional competence. He learnt the need of motivating the children to come and stay for the entire duration of day's educational proceedings. Therefore, accordingly, he changed the interior of classrooms by putting posters, paintings, pictures, drawings made by children on the walls. Some of them were provided by CARE India. Poems were written on chart paper for use as wall-hanging, besides contributing to the 'print-rich' environment of the school. The teaching-learning materials provided under the EGR initiative, in addition to those developed by students and teachers together, were displayed. The library was reorganized and made accessible to students. *Bal Sabha* acquired a sense purpose and became a crucial platform for children's participation and development of communication skills. Toilets were made functional. Even the parents were motivated to compromise on the demand of family labour in favour of schooling. Resultantly, the attendance level got a high fillip and attained 65-70% mark. Above and beyond, Ram Saran had a sense of accomplishment.



18. Homely Feelings Precursor to Learning

Pragati Sharma

Assistant Teacher
Primary School, Basbhariya – II, Nawabganj Block
Shravasti



The three years of her job at the Primary School, Basbhariya – II under the Jamunha Babaganj NPRC (cluster centre) has given her the learning that the early grade children be given the opportunity to understand the relevance of entering into literate or print world. It implies saying that children should see the oral exercises like learning poems, hearing stories, doing theatrical activities etc. as meaningful, with relevance for life in the school and outside of it.

Much of this understanding and articulation depends upon her periodic recourse to academic sessions meant to prepare the teachers with perspective and pedagogy for teaching the young learners organized by CARE India's

program on 'Early Grade Learning' at cluster level. She has been regular participant in these monthly 'cluster meetings' since 2015.

It was the spirit of her participation that prompted her to invigorate the *Bal Sabha* and make it regular and significant with creative participation of girls and boys and giving them the chance to be able to express themselves among the peers and teachers. The interest thus generated among children ensured their attendance and regularity. In a short span of time, the participatory process empowered them to the extent of organizing the *Sabha* or morning assemblies on their own. Sequel to it was the growing interest of children in the library, initially to find a good poem or a story to read out in the assembly. Slowly that turned into a pattern of habit. Pragati was very particular about bringing new books from the resource centre to the library.

As a keen learner herself, Pragati would share her experience of initiating her pupils in processes highlighted above. Moreover, her approach to the engagement of children in academically useful works was exemplary. In her approach to work, it was important for children to find homely feeling and experience the ownership of school as a precursor to learning.

19. Quest for Excellence

Priyanka Devi

Head Teacher In-charge,
Primary School, Bhopatpur Chowki, Risia Block
Bahraich

The promising story of Priyanka Devi, the young head teacher in-charge of Bhopatpur Chowki primary school points to some motivating lessons and highlights the crucial role of a teacher in fulfilling the potential of a village school. It teaches us that if any single factor could make the difference between a good and bad school, it was the commitment and motivation of teacher.

Before she joined the school, it was a typical government school, suffering from inadequate number of teachers – only two. The question of their motivation was also an issue. Neither there was any sense of excitement among the children in respect of teachers and the school activities.



She made a point to take up the responsibility of class fifth, in addition to routine official job of a head teacher, including the supportive supervision of other classroom processes. But the challenges were enormous – most formidable being that of regular attendance. Withstanding the problem of teachers' inertia due to demotivating environment and deep lack of accountability in the school system, parental

motivation for schooling – if not education *per se* – was very low. In totality, the system of schooling in the village had largely failed to provide any education, irrespective of its quality. Even children were always reluctant because of discouraging environment.

She made home visits: engaged the children for conversation, built rapport with parents and convinced them to send their wards to school. At the school level, she took the teachers along and started collectively the improvement process, beginning with up-keeping the campus, making it neat and tidy, with maintained furniture, decorated classroom walls with relevant hangings and posters made for the purpose by the students.

Then came the question of pedagogy: How to teach the young children from very poor village communities, mostly Muslims, already engaged in *maktab* education. Keeping this in mind, she would attend the 'cluster meetings' with sheer keenness and share the learning and problems with her colleagues in monthly 'cluster meetings'. Her consistency and steadfastness of purpose ensured that the teaching system become child-centric. She invoked the values of gender justice and ensured democratic and secular practices. The school developed as an EGR-supported venture provided for the essential resources to cultivate children's interest in reading. The process is still on. Priyanka is satisfied with her progress, but looking forward to achieve what could be the best for her pupils.

20. Change is Possible

Yogita Mishra

**Assistant Teacher,
Primary School, Matera, Risia Block
Bahraich**

Yogita Mishra, an assistant teacher at Matera primary school, has come long way in pursuit of her quest for improving the schooling system with the support of her colleagues in the school, Ejaz Fatma, the senior teacher, and Vinay, who joined with her.

Both the teachers were impressed by her commitment and the approach to teaching exemplified by personal connect with each child and playfulness in classroom processes. Her gender, besides the courage and dedication, was an added advantage. Yet there was something amiss in her own perception: She shared her quest for finding some novel ways of teaching to capture the attention of children with colleagues. The field in-charge of EGR (Early Grade Reading) intervention of CARE India finally led



her to the NPRC (*Nyay Panchayat Resource Centre*) and enthused her to join the forum in its monthly meetings.

While satiating her quest for improvising on her understanding and knowledge through a process of peer learning, she made prudent use of reference material on pedagogy of early grade learners and teaching aids (also known as teaching-learning material or TLM) that she could obtain from the resource centre and started working straight with children, with proper lesson planning.

Her participation in 'cluster meetings' and the opportunity to share her experiences with peers and *vice-versa* cleared all the bottlenecks emerging in the process of implementing the EGR interventions. The desperate refrain heard from scores of parents in the village has become history with the advent of Yogita Mishra on the horizon of school.



21. Transition from Oral Dialect to Written Language

Saryu Prasad

Assistant Teacher
Primary School, Bardaha Bazar, Shivpur Block,
Bharaich

Cramming has no place in his thought structure. Saryu Prasad, the assistant teacher at Bardaha Bazar primary school has left behind his traditional approach in which he himself was instructed by his school teachers. To him, the teaching of alphabets, that is, taking children into literate world precedes the task of establishing its relevance. In other words, it is essential for children to know the ability to read and to write as *significant* in the context of their lives' circumstances before their initiation to literacy world. This knowledge or understanding, in his experience, creates impulse for literacy learning. And then, it becomes a matter of ease and application of mind.

Prasad's exposure to the specific teaching methodology for early grade learners has enabled him to appreciate the necessity of familiarizing the children – mostly being the first generation learners – with school setting. It is important because of the difference of school setting from the home environment where interpersonal communications involve a dissimilar context and the use of colloquial language or dialect.

With this consideration, he moved on to strengthen the participative and reflective platform of morning assembly or *Bal Sabha* and ensured increasing engagement of children in group-tasks so as to develop in them the spirit of peer-learning and learning by doing. The school library again contributed to the development of print-rich school environment. Even the classroom walling were draped printed material, besides those created by students.

In the light of EGR methodology, he introduced the system of reading aloud in small groups that served the purpose of connecting the oral tradition with the world of letters. Moreover, it enabled the young children to feel the necessity of knowing words in order to comprehend the story. And while modelling the enjoyment of good story, book reading, by implication, turns out to be an exercise in merriment and fun. And after reading aloud, the children are led to think, learn and grow on their own. And it allows the teacher to make out what worked and what didn't. Prasad also learnt in the process that greater engagement of children in group-work like this tends to strengthen the connect between children and teachers and build up the confidence and trust as prerequisite to foster learning.

22. Language Teaching Builds Upon the Skill of Oral Dialect

Vandana

Head Teacher,
Primary School, Nimnihara, Nawabganj Block,
Bahraich

As a head teacher at Nimnihara primary school in Chaugadwa *nyaya panchayat* based cluster, Vandana took to 'cluster meetings' way back in 2014 and got introduced to the pedagogy of early grade learners (EGR) as part of CARE India's programmatic intervention, 'Start Early: Read in Time'. The stimulus of the new pedagogy with accent on specific learning issues of children coming from non-literate social and filial background brought her close to the necessity of their participation as prelude to orientation in an altogether different setting of schooling. She discovered the importance of the forum of *Bal Sabha* in venting out the learning concerns for the young learners joining the school. Once the participative institution of *Bal Sabhas* were made a fixture of daily school activities, the enthusiasm it generated among the children resulted in gradual improvement of regular attendance.

The process also accompanied some more significant changes in the school environment and classroom activities.



The print-rich environment for children without a foundation in literacy – language and listening skill, familiarity with books and early childhood experience in drawing and scribbling – also assumes significance in acquainting them with the hitherto strange world of print. The establishment of school library also serves the same purpose of providing abundance of print-material to the students. Having had ensured these conditions to condition the nascent minds of mostly first generation learners, she moved on to roll out the EGR pedagogy which builds upon – rather than undermining as implied in traditional teaching methods – the skills of oral language to introduce the letters and words from the domain of print, that is, textbooks and other reading material. The strategy of reading aloud in groups has been of crucial avail in early grade language learning.

Thus, beginning from a situation when there was hardly any teaching activity except finding semblance to avoid trouble, the improvements have reached to a point where teaching and learning as complementary processes go without reckoning, but show off in the performance of children and development of their personality.

23. Critically Engaging the Child, rather than Creating Joyful Environment

Lalita Kumari

**Head Teacher,
Primary School, Kudwa, Mihinpurwa Block,
Shravasti**

As the head teacher of Kudwa primary school in remote – 65 km away from the district headquarters – block of Mihinpurwa, she had scores of concerns, some as formidable as the inadequate number of teachers, adding to the problem of uneven pupil-teacher ratio. It is generally seen that teaching positions are often lying vacant in less attractive locations. The problem intrinsic to her school were often culminated into classroom inactivity, especially those concerning the facilitation of library use, group-tasks etc. On top of it, they were considered as trivial by most informed and wise people in the community as well as teachers. Instances of intermittent theft were also the reason contributing to her worries.

Her preoccupation with these issues often formed the excuse for her initial lack of participation in the cluster processes. But after the arrival of EGR interventions, she was made to prevail over all the odds and concentrate on her position as the head teacher.

It all begun with ‘cluster meetings’ in which her participation suddenly became self-motivated. That necessitated building perspective on the teaching of first generation learners drawn from socially marginalised communities. The perspective thus armed her reasons for poor language and early literacy skills development against the backdrop of social and cultural background of these children, besides the need of sensitivity towards them. Sequel to it was the new pedagogy, again for these children, which builds on the understanding that children be given opportunity to participate in the educational process first as listeners, then readers and writers for over an



extended period of time. This pedagogy essentially sought to create the relevance of print in the specific context of their material culture, to bring about motivation for language and literacy and to develop the comprehension abilities.

Over and above, her engagement

with the new pedagogy went along with training in the development of teaching learning material (TLM). And then, there are follow up school visits to ensure the process of implementation and address the emerging issues through a process of dialogue involving the rendezvous with children and teachers.

In addition to language teaching, Lalita took up the issues related with maths teaching to the 'cluster meeting' and came back with elaborate solutions, which she readily applied in the classroom with encouraging results. The focus on maths teaching nevertheless undermined the language teaching efforts, including the TLM. In today's situation, Lalita's Kudwa primary school has a different activity level and the nature of activities is more 'engaging', rather than 'joyful'.

24. An Assay of Peer Learning and Review

Saleha Begam

**Head Teacher,
Primary School, Veeze Gaon, Nawabganj Block,
Bahraich**

Saleha Begam, the head teacher at Veeze Gaon primary school in Chaugadwa *nyaya panchayat* or cluster in Nawabganj block, recounts on her journey through the 'Early Grade Reading' (EGR) process by counting down with her learning that cramming was no way to enable children to learn the letters. They should rather be given chance to know its relevance for their immediate context of living.

Saleha had her first encounter with CARE India in 2014. This was the time when the organization was carrying out its interventions as part of the cluster process at *nyaya panchayat* level and, she happened to be a regular participant as head teacher of her school. Thus she was introduced to the essential aspects of early literacy development: Most important being the creation of independent and motivated readers, at the outset.

The task of mobilizing and motivating the children was realized by the head teacher in her school, as elsewhere, by building upon their own resource of oral language. The thrust for engaging the children with print involved aloud reading of stories, recital of poems, enactment of plays etc. Her idea was that the school should not only provide the homely feeling. They should also be abounding in print. Wall-paintings, posters, hangings, besides the existence of library etc. too serve the purpose.

Today, whatever she does or experiments builds upon the learning from her peers in 'cluster meetings' and her own learning therefrom she takes back to them, for peer-review. This approach of learning and sharing has yielded good results.

25. Facing the Challenge of Regular Attendance

Vandana Shukla

Head Teacher
Primary School, Dikauli – II, Gilaula
Shravasti

Vandana Shukla came across her first challenge in the form of regular attendance after joining the school as a Head Teacher, as it never exceeded 30-40% mark on an average.

Keeping that in mind, she was led to 'cluster meeting' in search of finding some way out to this most general problem of schooling. Instead, she got to know about the arrangement of children's committees and their meetings as a prop to generate the spirit of participation, collectivism, leadership etc. Besides, she was given an orientation of what is known as EGR (Early Grade Reading) pedagogy.

Leaving aside the question of regular attendance, she channelized her energy in reorganizing the children's committees from afresh and holding their periodic meetings with a sense of purpose. The morning assembly – *Bal Sabha* – fancied her most. She involved herself in preparing the content spread over variety of genres and subjects. There were thus poems, songs, stories, one-act plays – almost everything that could have led to *meaningful* engagement of children and prepare them for the classroom processes.



Further, she took along the children and the teachers to develop print-rich environment in classrooms as well as the entire campus. In fact, all that learnt in the academic sessions of 'cluster meetings' was implemented in her school with her own hands, also recreating the learning by initiating dialogical process among teachers with the idea of expediting the

cognitive development of children.

The spirit of participation - central to her approach – has been of certain critical avails in respect of orienting the children in the schooling system, besides fostering learning and nurturing reading and writing skills. And it was this spirit which, after due course, became *the* factor in enhancing and regularizing attendance: today, it has touched the 60% mark. Notwithstanding these outcomes, she is all set to introduce the use of TLM in the classroom. The agenda of library development is also on the anvil.



26. Learning to Share and Use EGR Pedagogy

Rahul Sharma

Assistant Teacher

Primary School, Ramadi, Gilaula

Shravasti

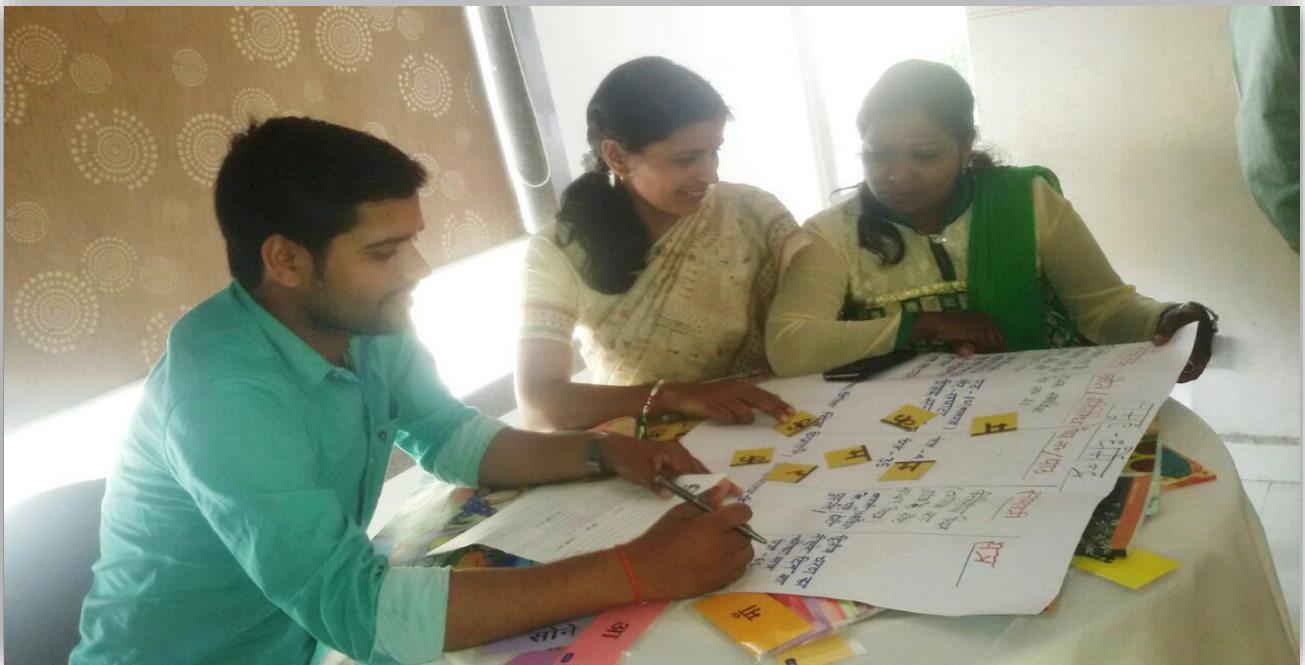
Rahul Sharma was one of participants in the training program of CARE India on ‘Early Grade Reading’ (EGR) organized for *Nyaya Panchayat* Coordinators at Lucknow. The four-day long sessions of the training, according to his own testimony, equipped him as a teacher to address scores of issues linked with cognitive development process of children as precursor to imparting learning skills. He himself learnt to appreciate and endorse the specificity of children coming from diverse linguistic backgrounds, which is generally ignored in the classroom communications in the existing system; highlighting an explicit bias in favor of standardized universal language of instruction.



The ambience of the training hall, marked by skillful display of learning aids and information material, showed him the significance of what is defined as 'print-rich' environment and its bearing on learning process in the classroom. Moreover, the activity-based learning sessions brought home the idea of EGR interventions aiming at *facilitation* – rather than thrusting - of learning. Besides, he also made use of the opportunity of participating in a workshop on the development of teaching-learning material (TLM).

With the experience of these two training programs in his kitty, Rahul emerged as a potential resource person. His newly acquired skills and propensity

to creatively share them among his peers in the 'cluster meetings' with a sense of perspective



might have a ripple effect in the process of widespread diffusion of essentials of child-centric pedagogy.

27. The Sole Campaigner to Keep the Show Going

Ramapati Nishad

Assistant Teacher
Primary School, Parsaura, Hariharpur Rani Block
Shravasti

Ramapati Nishad has been the only educational resource in the Parsaura school, which is a stark illustration of the inadequacy of infrastructure beginning with one functional classroom, in addition to a kitchen and boundary wall without a gate. There are two more partially-constructed rooms lying abandoned to obtain a perfect picture of dilapidation. Recently, one more *incomplete* teaching position was awarded to the delight and enthusiasm of Nishad.

Given the disempowering environment in which Nishad works, it is indeed surprising that he maintains a decent schooling standard. All good teaching, as per the convention, requires enormous reserve of spirit, which he sources in from the 'cluster meetings'. His propensity to change, improve and substantiate the learning activities with inputs from all quarters is what has kept alive his motivation, while being trapped in a ramshackle village school, surrounded by disgruntled parents, irregular pupils and overbearing inspectors. In the midst of such a situation, he manages to meet the parents and the community to promote and regularize attendance.

In addition to the 'cluster meetings', the mechanism of supportive supervision led to the organization of *Bal Sabhas*. Subsequently, couple of more children's committees were organized and activated. A small library developed with the support of CARE India is duly been used under the observation of the teacher. It is also worth noting that Nishad, out of sheer commitment, has always *managed* to run all the classes simultaneously by distributing children in small groups and giving lessons and instructions sequentially. This is what he learnt from his peers in 'cluster meetings' and doing it with exemplary ease and effectiveness.

28. SMC for Triggering Cooperative Action

Kapil Deo Tripathi

Assistant Teacher
Primary School, Bhinauni, Hariharpur Rani Block
Shravasti

Kapil Deo Tripathi commenced his career as a *Shiksha Mitra* at Primary School, Akara in Gilaula block of the district Shravasti, before joining Bhinauni Primary School in the year 2015. This Bhinauni school was part of the domain of CARE India's programmatic intervention: 'Star Early: Read in Time'.



During his stint as *Shiksha Mitra*, he was in direct contact with CARE India field activists; had fairly good idea of their program and its interventions. It was this association that enabled him to objectively look at his own approach to teaching in a holistically as provided under the 'Early Grade Reading' framework.

At the instance of CARE India, therefore, he resolved to break his inertia captivating him because of his involuntary slackness in consolidating his accountability on the one hand and, demotivating environment on the other, by striking a cooperative rapport with the community – particularly that of parents.

The structure of School Management Committee (SMC) had that in-built system of bringing together parents and teachers on an even turf where they can go beyond playing the blame-game together in search of constructive action. One aspect of private grumbles between the two stakeholders has been their scant interaction. For the parents saw little scope to influence the teachers and, the teacher, for his part, had limited or no interest in active interactions with parents. The SMC was, therefore, brought in the reckoning to bridge the hiatus.

The process commenced with reorganization and activation of the committee (SMC) - with dominant (75%) membership of parents – by holding a meeting. Even a community level convention was also organized as a



strategy to educate and mobilize the community for better schooling system and its outcomes.

29. Educational Strides of a Teacher

Shahid Husain

**Head Teacher,
Upper Primary School, Semri Chak Pihani, Hariharpur Rani Block,
Shravasti**

As a Head Teacher of Semri Chak Pihani Upper Primary School (UPS), Shahid Husain has been in-charge of Kisunpur Chorwabhari cluster. He began his education from the Naubasta Primary School. After graduating from this school in 1963, he moved to Bhinga and passed junior high school certificate examination in 1966, did intermediate in the year 1971 before accomplishing the BTC teachers' training program from Bahraich in 1972-73.

Immediately after graduating the certificate course, Husain got his first posting in his *alma mater*, the Naubasta Primary School. Therefrom he moved to Semri Chak Pihani UPS in 2002 as Assistant Teacher, got promotion in 2009 to become the head teacher and retired from the service in 2015 from the same school.



While holding the charge of *Nyaya Panchayat* Cluster of Kisunpur Chorwabhari during 2011-15, he was introduced to CARE India's educational development program in the year 2013. And since then, he remained in the business of developing school library, creating a conducive ambience for learning in holistic frame of reference. Children committees were organized and made vibrant. *Bal Sabhas* became a regular feature of schooling. He himself was amazed to see the outcomes of these

processes among the children in diverse domains of learning and creativity. The school-experience was replicated at the cluster level.



The success of the experiment recharged his creative and organizational energies. And gradually he became the key source of cluster-strength and its effectiveness to deliver at the level of children. The monthly 'cluster meetings' were regularized and substantiated with programmatic inputs concerning the pedagogical developments most

essentially through experience sharing and peer learning etc.

His efforts were hailed at the state level by the State Project Officer and Joint Director in the Dept. of Education. The district and block level education officers have always found him praiseworthy. The development of science laboratory was the highpoint of his commitment and determination.

30. Trajectory of a Motivated Teacher

Bachcharam Verma

Assistant Teacher,
Primary School, Kohilawa, Sirsiya Block,
Shravasti

Hailing from a well-to-do agrarian family of Ambedkar Nagar district, Bachcharam Verma was one amongst four sons and three daughters of Ram Charan Verma, the family patriarch, who managed to educate all his male offsprings. Besides two brother in teaching profession and one serving in health sector, Bachcharam joined the Koilahwa school in Sirsiya block as assistant teacher in the year 2009 with a M.Sc. degree in plant pathology, supplemented with B.Ed. Before becoming a teacher, he missed the chances to join police and state administrative services.

As a man of strong conviction characteristic of his agrarian background, Bachcharam manages his school with the strength of 150 enrolled children with a sense of commitment to the promotion of education in the local community and sensitivity to their aspirations.

Perhaps one crucial aspect is the self-perception of his role as a teacher. And this is what enables him to bring the set of attitude to the profession, with which he teaches all the classes both simultaneously and sequentially. The best thing about him is that nothing could deter his genuine attraction to teaching as a pedagogical or social endeavour during past nine-ten years of his service.

Over and beyond the reasonably good standard of teaching-learning processes and their outcomes in terms of reading, writing and comprehension skills among his pupils, the overall school environment – ‘print-rich’ classrooms, a functional library system, judicious use of teaching-learning material (TLM), in addition to vibrant participatory platform of morning assembly etc. together underline his exeplary efforts.



31. Inspired by the Sense of Accountability and Involvement

Seema Singh

Assistant Teacher
Primary School, Sachauli, Sirsiya Block
Shravasti

Seema Singh had a long journey of struggles before arriving at her destination, the primary school at Sachauli in Sirsiya block of the district in 2015, about ten years after finishing her M.Sc. and B.Ed. degrees in 2005. But she started working – giving tuitions – after writing High School examination to earn for her education.

During these couple of years in a remote setting of Indo-Nepal border, she has been able to retain her motivation; never allowed her morale to be battered day after day in the disempowering environment. She exhibits enormous reserve of spirit, and even considerable physical energy in



dealing with young children in activity-based child-centric teaching for which she has been striving right since the beginning.

What kept her away from the impending inertia of the majority of teachers was the institutional participatory mechanism, that is, the monthly 'cluster meetings' – serving as the reflective platform of peer learning and capacity building. These meetings not only helped in giving her a perspective, but empowered with the understanding of factors curbing the young children studying in early grades at government schools.

With the appropriate learning material (TLM) and books made available from the cluster – the resource center (NPRC), she could manage to use them with efficacy and interest in classroom sessions. Even puppetry became one of the most favorite engagements of children. A small school library was also developed.

As a part of the CARE India's EGR (Early Grade Reading) intervention package, she took on the task of reorganizing and strengthening various children committees as a platform of their interaction, learning and sharing. In her pursuit for ensuring better attendance, she spared no chance of engaging the parents and the village community, here and there, both formally and informally to solicit their cooperation, to know about their issues, their complaints. The idea was to translate them into constructive action, particularly in respect of



teaching. But the real challenge was to achieve the greater involvement of village community, including parents, in schooling issues, besides energizing the existing forums.

32. Breaking the Inertia of Inaction

Narendra Pratap Singh

Assistant Teacher,
Upper Primary School, Shahpur Bargadwa, Sirsiya Block,
Shravasti

Narendra Pratap Singh, a native of Semra village in Shravasti, got his first placement in 2009 at Atrapri in his home district after completing his education (M.A. and LI.B). Then he moved to Shahpur Bargadwa as an assistant teacher in the upper primary school in the year 2011, also holding the charge of the *Nyaya Panchayat* cluster.

Singh comes from a traditional *guruji's* family – father being a teacher, relatively privileged in terms of class, caste and gender. On the contrary, the social background of his pupils was increasingly shifting in the direction of underprivileged groups, because of major swing towards private schools among privileged sections, which contributed significantly to the social distancing between the teacher and his pupils. This is evidently a key factor in his low level of commitment to the betterment of school and enhancement of their education.



His initial reluctance to put in efforts for maintaining the dilapidated structure of cluster room so as to give it an institutional setting of a resource center (NPRC) was the reflection of the mindset characteristic of his social background. But sustained efforts from all quarters – particularly from the side of CARE India resulted in his motivation; and he moved ahead to take up task of maintaining not only the cluster room but changed the whole ambience of the school – ensuring clean and print-rich ambience by generating resources through his personal strivings. Sequel to it was regularization of cluster meetings and transaction of teaching and learning activities. His own leadership role in the NPRC and willingness to translate key learning in the classroom situation contributed to the improvement of educational standard of the school.

33. Building Perspective and Attitude to Work

Kusum Kumari Mishra

Assistant Teacher
Primary School, Sirsiya, Sirsiya Block
Sirsiya

Kusum Kumari Mishra, presently at Sirsiya primary school as assistant teacher, owes her graduation degree and subsequent appointment as *Shiksha Mitra* in 2006 to her husband, also a teacher in Hariharpur Rani block.



She is one of the few teachers who see their work as vocation. The set of attitudes which she brings to this function elevates her to the level of a role model for upcoming generation. For she is one who perceives her role as extending beyond the classroom to the welfare of the community. That explains that despite all odds for a lady in the remote setting, she was able to garner resources to flourish her skills as a teacher and sustain her motivation by engaging herself with children, the village community and the school.

Most significantly, it all had a beginning with her consistent recourse to 'cluster meetings', which equipped her with perspective and methodology of child-centric teaching through extensive use of teaching-learning tools (TLM). The efforts begun to show off in improved classroom processes specific to early years of education, besides ensuring value-added learning among children. The 'print-rich' classroom and school environment, the morning assemblies etc. contributed in most significant manner in generating children's participation with implications for leadership development. The school library developed with the support of CARE India program on 'Early Grade Reading' (Start Early: Read in Time) helped the children in making good initial progress in reading. The program of grade-wise teaching became one of crucial avails in substantiating the learning achievements. The whole process, in turn, also contributed to achieving improvement in the level of regular attendance of children.

34. The Spirit of Participation in Learning Excellence

Pawan Kumar Pal

Assistant Teacher
Primary School, Auraiya Nidhan, Gilaula Block,
Shravasti

Pawan Kumar Pal, presently an assistant teacher at Auraiya Nidhan primary school, was born and brought up in his ancestral village, Kalyanpur in Gilaula block of the district. He came in teaching vocation or job, whatever, in 2012, after accomplishing graduation (2003) and post-graduation (2005) degrees from Kisan Degree College, Bahraich. He also got the BTC training certificate from DIET, Balrampur (2009). That followed his posting at a primary school in Ramwapur village.

Pal's stint with 'Start Early: Read in Time' program started with emphasis on *Bal Sabha*, which empowered him to shed his inhibitions and squarely face the challenges of educating the diverse group of children. The *Bal Sabhas* exposed him and his two *Shiksha Mitra* colleagues to the ideas of participation and collectivism, and their bearing on the learning of children. The experience helped him to forge a connect with the children and parents, in addition to the village community. Gradually, *Bal Sabhas* became a permanent fixture of school activities, allowing an interactive space for both teachers and children, so much so that no one would voluntarily opt for being absent.



The interactive and participatory spaces were progressively institutionalized, as reflected in the formation of vibrant children committees, parent-teacher meetings etc. A time-table was developed to facilitate all the school activities. This showed significant increase in attendance of children from 40-50 % to 70% on an average. Teachers' voluntary absenteeism also lost its possibility to a major extent. Even after the completion of day's educational proceedings, the joint



team of teachers and students used to stay back for TLM (teaching-learning material) development. Throughout the process of these developments increasingly on the line of EGR ('Early Grade Reading'), Pawan Kumar Pal continues to remain the source of inspiration for achieving excellence.

35. Harmony of Efforts

Rashmi

Head Teacher
Primary School, Bhikharipur Masandi, Gilaula Block
Shravasti

Rashmi, the head teacher at Bhikharipur Masandi primary school, has not only directly faced the challenge of improving the schooling system, but has been on the forefront of the process of systemic change in the light of CARE India's early grade literacy and cognitive development program. And in that process, she has broken several myths and archaic mindset of the community, particularly in respect of girls' education.

To begin with the stark reality of extremely poor teaching and management standards, she was the one to find the situation as one of the basic factors in persistence of low attendance levels. Also, she could analyze the myth that parents are not interested in education and unfolded the fallacy of such a commonplace perception, particularly of class society. There was significant level of motivation among the poor and socially marginalized community to build upon her campaign



of improving attendance. In the same way, she took positive note of teachers' concerns in respect of poor infrastructure, perceived parental apathy towards the child education. Then, there were also issues of unwanted postings, excessive paperwork and unsupportive management.



The only thing she could do with her personal and official resources was opening the line of communication with each and every stakeholder in the schooling system and continue moving ahead with them in realizing the goals of 'Early Grade Reading' (EGR) interventions.

The teachers were motivated to participate in the monthly 'cluster meetings' with

preparedness for building their capacity in terms of perspective and know-how on the advances in pedagogy of the depressed class children. Not only that, the head teacher also ensured that the learnings are grounded in the actual classroom situations. It implied radical divorce from the existing pattern of teaching, which was slated to be an activity-based process. The participation of teachers in morning assembly was made mandatory.

In the same vein, motivational means were employed to ensure proactive participation of children in morning assemblies, allowing them space necessary for their blooming as leaders. The efforts to promote learning culture reflected in the form of library development were also succeeded. An assessment register was developed to record periodic progress of pupils. And finally, as a district sport teacher, school-based sporting activity also came to occupy a prominent place on her map of activities.

36. Reversal of System

Omendra Pal Singh

Assistant Teacher

Primary School, Damavan, Gilaula Block

Shravasti

Omendra Pal Singh teaches at Primary School, Damavan, functioning with four teachers on the roll. He is one of the many teachers having had made full use of the reflective, participatory and peer-learning platform of NRPC, meant for supporting teachers in their conceptual understanding and orientation in alternative teaching methodology in larger view of systemic and operational problems generally failing the poor and marginalized students in achieving learning outcome, particularly during the early grades of schooling. The processes of 'cluster meetings' essentially enabled him to appreciate the necessity for teachers to participate in morning assemblies along



with children; he thus laid the foundation of teachers' improved involvement with children in all the school activities.

He also grounded the EGR's mandate of reading aloud good literature to generate children's interest and motivation to pick up books on their own from

the library, purposefully developed under the CARE India's program for early learners. Over a period of time, the teaching system was duly programmed with details of the use of learning aids (TLM) inscribed in teachers' diary, which they carry along with them. He also brought a students' assessment register in the system to document their cumulative progress.

These developments have contributed in regularizing the attendance, as the outcome of free and joyful learning atmosphere and increased confidence of the community in the school system.

III.

The Learners and Their Literacy Achievements

The accent on enrollment – also termed as ‘enrollment explosion’ – at the primary level has accompanied the questions about the standard of these ‘enrolled’ students processed through government education system. But all the concerns about falling standards of government schools are expressed by those who oppose mass schooling and consider the public spending in the system as wastage: that the poor children should not be forced to attend school; for the system cannot provide them neither jobs nor work opportunities. The schooling, in their opinion, fails the children to prove their worth in the family. On the other hand, there is most pervasive casteist stance on this question questioning their inherent literacy or learning capabilities shared by the teachers, including their peers from privileged family lineage.

A child from a depressed class background, having denied the entry of written words in her home, is most likely to be reduced to nothingness by the school for reasons of her birth. Moreover, she is measured as ignorant, ugly and unclean. How could then she learn? And if she cannot, there is no justification of public spending on her. This is how the case against mass schooling is given shape.

The most obvious phenomenon of low-performance and drop-out is, however, not so much the function of low-learning capabilities. It is partly due to casteist ambience in the school system exemplified by the upper caste teachers’ attitude. Then there are text-books - with their casteist and idealist content having no feeling for the material or productive culture – which alienate the nascent readers drawn from the working castes. Their learning, therefore, becomes problematic in the sense that the text-books fail to strike a certain connect with them.

The rationalization of school system through integration of concepts like participation, representation, equality of opportunities etc. has indeed been an educationally relevant policy initiative. Under such an environment, it is likely that a student’s mobility may be less than incidentally contingent upon the teachers who certify her with negative attributes. But the point of worry is that such initiatives have hardly been made functional beyond furnishing the mandatory requirement of paperwork.

The policy environment thus created nevertheless informed the process of the development of EGR interventions by building upon the intellectual and cultural resources of particularly the first generation learners in early years of schooling. Focused on early language and literacy development, the interventions were initiated with the goal of creating independent and motivated readers, who are able to participate in meaningfully in the society. They are, therefore, planned to tackle learner-centric issues like regular attendance, the burden of non-comprehension, among others having ‘discouragement effect’ on young learners.

The EGR interventions have gone quite far by improving upon the learning material, including the so called textbooks and, disseminating these improvements reasonably far and wide. Teachers are also offered access to teaching material to enhance the vitality and relevance of classroom processes during early years. Further, the establishment of school library, and above and beyond, the capacity building of teachers in the use of new pedagogy have shown tangible results in surfeit of cases of initially apprehensive and alienated children.

1. Learning Accomplishments of a Girl against all Odds

Shazia

Student

Primary School – I, Matera, Risia Block,
Bahraich

The fact that Shazia (12), presently at Matera primary school in class fifth, was a slow learner in the beginning of her schooling, could be seen as a gender issue with Muslim slant; for she had to perform the drudgery of household because of being eldest among six siblings – four sisters and two brothers. And in the bargain, the societal reality of her deprivation and discrimination would allow the civil society and the state to shift the blame on the community and their religion, while absolving themselves for the neglect.

Diminishing lack of motivation for daughters' education during past couple of decades, and resulting over-engagement in the household, is the direct consequence of the 'siege' to which the community find itself being subjected. This also explains why the familiar orthodoxy tends to define the 'safe' spaces for the girls.



Shazia's native Matera village in Risia block, located 25 km North of district headquarters is heavily populated by Muslims, is a typical example of the fear of the community with respect to

accessing well intended programs of the government. The poor response of the community to the polio drive, for instance, in Muslim majority areas is a case in reference.

Similarly, it is also an unfounded perception among the development activists and academics alike that girls' education is not valued among Muslims because of the sway of religious conservatism; this does not imply saying that the interpretative religion of Islam is progressive. It has rather been regressive under the garb of feudalism.

There are surfeit of indicators, as evidenced by internal debates among different *pasmanda* communities, like the one Shazia comes from, pointing to the increasing awareness of their educational backwardness. The misfortune is that they can only trust private Muslim denomination institutions and *maktabs*. Shazia's presence in the school in lieu of an Islamic seminary, along with majority of Muslim girls of her Matera village, is a point in reckoning.

True to her innate perception about the outside world, there was no one in the school to give her a helping hand in facilitating her cognitive and literacy skill development. For the language of school instruction was Hindi, and she could only speak Awadhi dialect, in addition to familiarity with Arabic and Urdu alphabets and elementary texts forming the basis of *maktab* education. But it was her determination and belief in her prowess, besides the blessings of the poor father, that empowered her to prevail over all the odds. Ever the mother's firmness for putting her into the household chores, was not because of her rejection of school education. It was rather the way girls are brought up or, to say, 'educated', in depressed class families. Holding or handling a three-month old baby, or cleaning eating utensils and sweeping home – these are as important for a young girl as her ability to memorize a couple of *Quranic* verses and learning the grammar of prayer and *namaaz*. Here lies the difference between a depressed class Muslim *pasmanda* and *Dalitbahujan* culture, where letter-learning was generally prohibited by the system of governance till the advent of Ambedkar. There was a sure way of not letting the religious text enter their lives and homes.

Shazia's tryst with learning accomplishments commenced with one of her teachers', Yogita Mishra, rendezvous with language and literacy development program of CARE India in the form of cluster level trainings. In the first instance, she initiated her in phonics, then vocabulary and comprehension for developing skills of spoken language of instruction. Sequel to it was the process of engagement with print. The 'print-rich environment' developed for the purpose was of critical avail in initiating the process of learning to read a given text. In other words, the efforts lied in familiarizing the text, and it was seen as precursor to reading.

It also became part of classroom activities to read aloud some good text to invoke children's interest in books and other reading material out of curiosity. The comprehensive and well-structured material made available to the learners served this purpose in most effective manner. There are many such books in the school library published by NCERT, Book Trust, National Centre for Children Literature, Eklavya and other publishing houses specializing in children literature. Shazia remained the part of the select group of children with flair for print-world.

She could achieve that level because of her ability to learn very quickly to recognize written words, and sequentially, to spell them while writing. Her teacher still recalls how she used to be attracted by rhythmic words during initial days. An inquisitiveness about the word she could read and write

led her to unfold its meaning. Relatively exemplary engagement with words gradually cultivated an interest in their meanings. Then, the symbolic representation of meaning by the teacher also helped her in learning the process of reading and writing. Yet the question that remains is how far these developments in her persona would be withstanding after she leaves school in a couple of months from now!

2. Encouraging School Atmosphere as the Key to Parental Motivation

Priya Sahu

Student
Upper Primary School, Begampur, Chitaura Block,
Bahraich

Priya Sahu, one of the four daughters of a vegetable-seller, Ramkishan and his wife, Sushma, has come a long way to reach seventh grade of schooling at the Upper Primary School, Begampur. The primary force behind her ascendance to the glory of being educated has been her parents, who despite crippling poverty exhibited exemplary motivation and courage in the schooling of all their daughters. If there is one reason singularly responsible for up-keeping the parental motivation is the encouraging school environment. One hardly hears about any private complaint about the school that would have led Priya's parents, along with many others, in the state of collective inertia.



The fact of Priya's positioning in school and her continued education is not so much ingrained in her parental motivation *per se*, for the general pattern of daughters' upbringing in the region is significantly linked with marriage as its goal. In other words, girl child's nurturing has an accent on her future marital prospects. That is the reason why most parents, even if they allow for their daughters' schooling, are prone to hold an attitude of indifference, for the simple reason that they are not going to stay with them

after marriage. Neither there are sound employment motives for investing in daughters' education, particularly among non- socially advanced castes.

But Priya's ongoing schooling has an important social dimension built around the faith in the institution, because of its quality of education, evidenced by print-rich and engaging school environment, amiable pupil-teacher relationships and opportunities for girls to flourish.

From the point of view of parents – the literate and disempowered parents with no wherewithal, it is more than inspiring experience to see their children with almost no foundation in literacy - that is, language and listening skill, familiarity with books or print or scribbling experience. But the Begampur primary school with Usha Pathak, the then head teacher, at the helm of affairs, wherefrom she started her schooling, was an educational setup epitomized by the occurrences of teachers talking to children and encouraging them to express themselves in joyful and engaging environment, read out stories, sing songs, recite rhymes, encourage dramatic play and provide for scribbling and drawing activities.

Moreover, there were, and continued to be till date, specific places all around the campus to explore connect with reading and writing. The library happened to be one such place for children to explore books, including picture books, which they like most. The classroom-walls hang scores of posters and drawings the children themselves keep making and show-casing. Not only children, but parents visiting the school in their neighborhood were made to see for themselves that reading and writing serve the real, everyday purposes. Priya, now in class seventh with lot of exposure, amply testified that her parents never experienced what is known discouragement effect of schooling. For in her reminiscence, there has never been an occasion when her father, with middle-level of schooling, if not mother, had ever said that her schooling was drain on his scarce earning as vegetable seller. Neither she ever had any such dissuasion which the children of her background experience in primary schooling. All these situations worked together to develop positive opinion about schooling among the parents and the village community, especially that of girl child.



Seen from this vantage point, it is to be reiterated that the Begampur primary and upper primary schools changed the existing social norms for the lack of parental motivation to invest on girls' education. At least in this village, most parents consider some education as an important part of daughter's upbringing.

It was this change of parental attitude as the most significant outcome of CARE India's educational program, 'Start Early: Read in Time', that Priya continues to be in school and excelling in studies as well as extra-curricular activities. She passed the previous class distinction, scoring 93% marks, with

keenness about studying computer sciences – an understanding of her interest and potential that consolidated after her participation in Science Fair. Her visit to one of the premier institutions of

scientific research, the Central Drug Research Institute (CDRI), Lucknow added to her aspirations of becoming a computer scientist

3. Silence Springs into Narration and Singing

Aman Kumar Soni

Student,
Primary School, Auraiya Nidhan, Gilaula Block,
Shravasti

The story of Aman Kumar Soni, son of a farmer, Anjani Kumar and Shanti Devi, presents a example of the development of awareness in a child, and subsequent orientation in the world of letters and words – that of book and, above all, freedom from the oppressive school environment. It accentuates on the context of his living, socialization in the family and the community and engagement in learning process by building upon the resources of his own childhood formations. And provides credence to the EGR (Early Grade Learners) pedagogy developed and administered on early grade learners as a part of CARE India's 'Strat Early: Read in Time' program. The EGR pedagogy has not only been the source of critical learning outcomes, ventures with liberating impact on the learner. With its pupil-centric stance, the pedagogy engages the young learners in concrete social practices and deepens the question about reading and writing abilities with a sense of gender and social justice.



Aman began with positive disposition towards schooling. But he always carried along the image of oppression and despair on his face; always reluctant to open up, withdrawn in his own world.

He was like one of the numerous children with failure to learn anything despite several years of schooling. This picture of dismal achievement of the child is consistent with a number of studies. Central Advisory Committee's report, 'Learning without Burden', prepared under the Chairmanship of Prof Yashpal (1993), notes, while commenting on the use of obtuse language in textbooks and the tendency to bundle as much information in as few sentences and, to target children with condensed shells, '*...our textbooks are not written with the child's view point, neither the mode of communication, nor the selection of objects depicted, nor the language conveys the centrality of the child in the world...Words, expressions and nuances commonly used by children in their milieu are absent...and the artificial style dominates, reinforcing the tradition of distancing knowledge from life. The language used in textbooks thus deepens the sense of 'burden' attached to all school-related knowledge*'.

Informed by these concerns, the EGR interventions took him to a different world of learning and empowering. His initial orientation in morning assemblies (*Bal Sabhas*) and the windows of opportunity opened by this participatory formation helped him in most significant ways to share his fund of resources in forms like poems, stories, riddles etc. and, learn more from his peers. This generated his interest and inquisitiveness about the vast treasure of literature found in the books. The process that built upon the resources of oral language yielded in the development of literacy skills quite early. It contributed to his knowledge of vocabulary before being introduced to the world of print. In fact, this engagement was right since the beginning, through the print-rich environment of the school. He was the one in his class who learnt letters by recognizing them with respective sounds and, subsequently, with the help of phonics. And today, he is an accomplished narrator and singer, takes interest in all forms of cultural expressions.



4. Achieving to be the 'Pride' of School

Shamim Ahmad

Student,
Primary School, Bishunapur, Balrampur Block,
Balrampur

Schooling for most children, not just the one like Shamim Ahmad of Bishunapur village in



Balrampur block belonging to a depressed class family, turns out to be the primary institution of their oppression in the name of feudal values and morality, not learning *per se*. They segregate young children from each other on the pretext of caste, and within that, there is the most inescapable basis of gender for setting apart the children. Schools are well known to train the young people for an informed social role by reinforcing casteism, and within that, sexism and gender-based injustices. Many of the young teachers begin their work with children with a sense of idealism, but the oppressive system sooner or later makes them the agents of oppression.

If Shamim, presently a fourth grade student, could not find his home in the school after initial recourse to *maktab* system, it was simply because the school set-up was not meant for natural way of learning:

Having to sit all the day and listening to a teacher. And, in the event of any failing to 'behave' and to conform to the authority of teacher, the punishment happens to be the consistent form of her reaction.

As young child, he was supposed to do what he was told and not question, unless asked, what the teacher say. Such commands essentially give the message of powerlessness. Most children start believing in the message that they are powerless and helpless. This is what a child most obviously learn in the first instance. It is also true that the child in question is the one coming from social margin, as the first generation of learners, besides being the first among his two brothers and a sister to have seen a school.

But despite his issues, he remained regular and never lost hope: nourishing his own motivation for education. This exemplary confidence that he showed was typical of his depressed class parentage, Mushtaq Ali and Saira Bano. He would, therefore, never miss the school and concentrate on what the teacher asked him to do. It was this attribute that solicited the attention of the then head teacher, Sufia, who was never short of showering her blessings on him.

The further added to his confidence. He was also lucky to have got the opportunity of learning under the new system of teaching and learning brought in by CARE India as part of its program: 'Start Early: Read in Time', comprising a learner-centric pedagogy, besides other interventions like print-rich environment and library for learners. As a component of the program, systemic interventions comprising an institutional mechanism for support and handholding of teachers in the form of 'cluster center' (NPRC) empowered the teachers, at least motivated among them, to realize their professional worth as an educator. The head teacher of school was one such inspired program participants.

Shamim has a good mind, possessed with good learning abilities. The exercises in oral language in the form of poetry recital, for instance, helped him in developing phonological awareness and subsequent reading comprehension. The phonological awareness also came in to facilitate the awareness of letter forms and names, which is a very complex enterprise for Hindi alphabets.



Despite intensity of cognitive substance involved in letter-learning, Shamim has always been well ahead among his peers. In the same sequel, after gaining familiarity with letters, that is, *akshara* in Hindi, he was introduced to words – particularly the rhythmic or syllabic words with one, two or three vowels in them. The *akshara* chart is also used to introduce word construction. This automatically helped him to recognize the words he was reading and to write with awareness of its sound as the guide. Gradually, he graduated to the level of sentence construction and comprehension. Besides his cognitive prowess, he

was least competitive, rather helpful in his approach. And this distinction made him the class monitor – a rare achievement for a first generation learner!

As a monitor, with ability to fluently read newspapers, he became the leader of morning assembly – the *Bal Sabha*. His ability to read the text, which generated his interest in books, in developing models, teaching aids and his leadership qualities earned him the title of ‘pride of school’ from the head teacher, Sufia. She even specially invited his parents to tell them about the achievements of their son.

5. Meaningful Engagement of a Disoriented Child

Ritesh

Student

Primary School, Sirsiya,
Balrampur



Ritesh has been a sort of problem child for his parents and peers alike. He was always interested in things other than learning, particularly those being source of formidable trouble. This was his way shaping up his childhood and giving it meaning. But he was always certain that his head was not in studies.

But Neetu, his school teacher, never gave up. She tried to decipher the sense of the boy’s enjoyment in teasing children, troubling and making fun of

them. It was the sense of desolate curiosity, wild craving and, ultimately, the fallacy of pride and fun, which he would never forget to share with.

Building on these attributes, she invoked the appealing and empowering pedagogical principles of EGR and engaged him in playful learning activities, beginning with shorter duration undertakings. This unfolded his perception of ‘self’ and the world around him. And in this stretched out process, the teacher found him attentive while listening to the story she read loudly for the class. He would then go with the teacher and get involved in drawing sketches, cartoons and posters with supportive hands. Gradually, Ritesh himself started taking the lead in such creative sessions and helping faltering peers. He had become the kind of monitor of craft sessions to the extent that Neetu became dependent on him.

Besides his artistry in crafts, he became an accomplished storyteller, always immersed in writing stories, listening and telling stories among the children in the school.

6. From a Reluctant Learner to a Learning Leader

Rinki

Student

Primary School, Bardaha Bazar,
Balrampur

Rinki, hailing from an agrarian family of Premavati and Ram Gopal, was a poor starter when admitted to the school five years ago. In fact, there was very little that the school could offer in the name of engaging a child. On top of it, her dismal achievement was consistent with her parents' outright refusal of schooling as sheer wastage. Although her initial disposition towards schooling was quite positive, which was shattered by the miserable school atmosphere.

With the introduction of 'Start Early: Read in Time' program, there were some systemic changes in overall approach to schooling, including the pedagogy. Even the ambience of classroom, the cleanliness and adequacy of infrastructure in the school, gender-just environment – all these things came to be defined as a factor in learning and cognitive development of a child. The classrooms were, therefore, made attractive – as 'print-rich' – as source of familiarization with print, besides cultivating the sense of enquiry among the children. Over and beyond, the 'cluster meetings', which equipped the teachers with learner-centric approach to teaching and relating the subject with living environment, in larger view of the process of their childhood formation.

With these changes at the helm, it was natural for her to experience a sense of joy and enthusiasm – a drive to learn and learn more. Here from she started looking forward to school, participate in *Bal Sabha*, reciting poems and telling short stories, sometimes performing on the stage.

This helped her in socializing with peers, helping and supporting them in their projects, reading stories for a select group of them during recess. Her fluency in oral language – that is, listening,



speaking and interpreting non-verbal cues for communication, knowledge of vocabulary, connecting with literature and comprehension – everything got new lease of life.

7. Learning as Self-Discovery

Nazia Khatoon

Student

**Primary School, Maharaj Ganj Tarai – I,
Balrampur**

Youngest among her siblings, Nazia Khatoon, daughter of a vegetable-seller Mohammad Junaid of Harihar Nagar, was the first one in the family to attend the Primary School, rather than the *maktab* for Islamic learning. Nevertheless, this was not the independent decision of her parents; for the parental attitudes are highly interdependent: what one thinks about secular education or schooling is likely to be influenced by the opinion maker in the family or community, sometimes neighborhood as well. In the case of Nazia, it was the insistence of one of the school teachers that prevailed against the prevalent family norms of not-sending-daughters-school, but *maktab*.

Whatever be the stimulus, she managed to reach the school in class third as the most intelligible girl among her peers. She would interact with everyone, socialize with most of them, share pleasantries in her native *Awadhi* dialect in most placid and easy-going ways. She would never mind any teasing remark on her speech, always focused on her engagement with books, attending classes without any failure, with the sense of responsibility and courage.

While progressing in her studies, one of her teacher, Monika, took up the charge of enabling her to speak the standard instructional language (i.e., Hindi), besides fluently reading and writing.

Building on her oral language, she was led to phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension etc. The process of vocabulary development was also initiated to build grounds for her potential literacy skills, leading to phonological awareness and comprehension. She was then introduced to writing and reading skills on the basis of her knowledge of key vocabulary. Further, reading aloud interesting literature by the teacher also catalyzed her interest.

Her progress brought happiness and excitement all around. The parents were happy, the teachers were happy and, on top of everything, Nazia herself was happy.

8. Cognitive Development Process in Removal of Fear Factor

Sarita Kannaujia

Student

**Primary School, Begampur, Chitaura Block,
Bahraich**

Sarita, who lost her father in a road accident while she was in class fifth at Begampur primary school, became hapless in a family with two school-going elder sisters and a younger brother, besides the ailing mother with no wherewithal and source of income. Gradually, her haplessness grew into reluctance, reinforced by loss of confidence and self-esteem. Alongside, she also turned into more supportive and helpful, but disinclination for taking up any responsibility, any initiative, whatsoever. No one had any clue to this problem.

It was first noted by the field activist in-charge of EGR (Early Grade Reading) efforts in the school and solicited the attention of the teacher on this child. The teacher, in conformity with the EGR methodology, initiated to initiate her in group tasks and activities, but failed to arouse her willingness to come out of her gloom and do what she could do well. Yet, she has never restrained herself to help fellow children in painting, preparing wall-hangings etc.

With continued teacher's support, she started opening up and slowly revealed her problem which related to father's accident and subsequent death. It turned that she was the victim of fear factor or phobia, instilled in her sensitive mind by her aunt. Following the death of her father, her aunt started blaming her for the fatal accident, as she was the one who saw her off on his last motorcycle ride.

The often repeated words of her aunt – that she is always there to distort everything she does – penetrated deep into her being. This attitude greatly played on her natural instincts, and she became fearful of the great world of uncertainty. Initially it was like the common fear of dark, that of unfamiliar object, for example, which the words of aunt brought to her, peaked her curiosity and tempted to step into the mystical realm as the defense mechanism of mind to take control of her own life.

The teacher then brought her to come face to face with the fear – the fear of spoiling or distorting the work in hand. She was given the assignment as a kind of role playing activity. She was, in fact, made to take the risk – the risk of spoiling the drawing. And she did that with best of her talent. This gave her cognitive awareness about her phobia and led her to prevail over whatever blockade she has in mind.

The process of liberating the girl from her fear through her initiation into the situation of direct confrontation through the development of cognitive consciousness has been central to the EGR interventions. Only thing is that in this case it was applied to help a child to overcome her fear of unknown.

9. Beginning of Learning Through Participatory Oral Processes

Pritam Verma

Student

Primary School, Gujrati Purwa, Shivpur Block,
Bahraich

Some of the teachers have gradually become prone to believe that oral language development in early years is the most significant factor in literacy development. It is this language that develops the ability among young learners to perceive speech or spoken words as a combination of sounds that create the foundation for phonics (that is, the relationships between the sounds of written words and spoken language) and spellings. This how the ground for alphabet learning is obtained, and which predicts subsequent reading and spelling abilities.



Therefore, the children not familiar with letters and their respective sound codes tend to feel strain in learning to read and write. Further, the skill to recognize words thus developed and rehearsed consistently through aloud reading of poem, stories, plays with theatrical gestures etc. helps the children most significantly to focus on meaning as they start reading written text. The illustrated text, moreover, is considered most preferred option for initiating the children in reading process. Therefore, existence of a good children library becomes a factor in motivating the children for reading.

These inferences emanate from the experience of exposing the children, with special reference to a lonely child, Pritam Verma of class first, who started as reluctant learner, often failing to attend his classes.

He first got the taste of schooling when got a chance to recite a poem in the morning assembly, which he did in his own characteristic theatrical style. This initiation to the process of participation and collectivism changed his personality: from and introvert to an outspoken extrovert child,

always eager to attend the school and taking part in all the activities that came to define the classroom processes.

Most important was the development of reading habit, triggered by his proactive role in morning assembly. And the hunt for doing that with all effectiveness, he was driven to consult books in the library and pick up the matter of his choice that he would memorise for reciting in the assembly. This pattern of development at the initial level now shows off in classroom performance and achievement.

10. Learning and Enabling with EGR

Rekha

Student

Primary School, Bardulia, Shivpur Block
Bahraich

Rekha, the daughter of a petty shopkeeper, Santosh, and Sita Devi, belonging to Bardulia village in Shivpur block, was brought up in sheer poverty as one among five siblings. In those inclement conditions and nearly absence of literacy in the family, Rekha always had a calling for education. Even the parents were not short of avarice to her natural impulse for education. But they also knew that the public schooling system has failed to provide the kind of education the children need. She herself was not always inclined to attend classes. At times, her motivation for learning used to be massively frustrated.

In the midst of it, CARE India's program came to her school in 2014, with explicit commitment to tackle most of systemic, pedagogical and child-centric issues, besides the institutional mechanism of providing handholding support to teachers. The program also created opportunities by energizing the children's committees with program content. On the other hand, the existing arrangement of 'cluster meetings' meant for teachers became the centre for training in the *new* pedagogy, the 'Early Grade Learning', besides providing resource material, including books, for an effective and result oriented educational process for up-keeping the morale of Rekha and many of her peers to pursue their education.

11. Cluster Meetings Result in Early Grade Learning

Primary School, Naubasta

Hariharpur Rani Block,
Shravasti

The Naubasta primary school is one of the total numbers of ten schools of Kisunpur Chorwabhari *Nyaya Panchayat* chosen for EGR ('Early Grade Reading') interventions under the 'Start Early: Read in Time' program of CARE India.

With 186 children on the roll, the teachers ensure their regular participation in monthly 'cluster meetings' going without fail. True to the mandate, the Kisunpur Chorwabhari cluster is not only particular about monthly meetings, but in delegation of key responsibility of providing academic support to teachers and schools – their managerial functions – for quality interventions keeping in mind the necessity of cognitive development of children and inculcation of reading and learning skills and comprehension.

The intervention of CARE India at this critical level has been of critical significance in terms of perspective building of teachers, their pedagogical improvement and sensitivity towards the children of socially marginalized background. Even learning kits were provided to the teachers for children as part of the intervention package.



As per an impact evaluation of cluster level interventions from the vantage point of learning improvement, the school children were rated with high level of reading abilities. They could fluently read the story and reference books, in addition to textbooks, apt to their age and grade.

12. Coping with her Alienation through Participatory Platform

Parvati

Student

Primary School, Patna-II, Jamunha Block

Shravasti

It is a commonplace experience to have a young girl from an agrarian family not finding her orientation in classroom setting and its activities. One among the three daughters and a son of Gangaram Verma, nine-year-old Parvati was essentially troubled by the burden of comprehension; particularly the tongue-twisting language, characterized by its insensitivity that violates natural form of expression and comprehension.

As the child of humble lineage, and away from her fields and home, the school atmosphere crammed with children of all ages huddled together estranged her in relation to other children and, finally, to herself, unable to see her as the subject of her own thinking, loving and feeling

individual. On the other hand, the teacher depended wholly on textbooks written in incomprehensible language, could only read the text loudly or at times asking the pupils to copy from it. That was all that going in the name of teaching. For the teacher used to be comfortable by the logic of least action in the classroom.

Parvati was one of many students identified by CARE India's field team who were absolutely alienated by the school environment, always withdrawn from school activities. And most of them were neither regular in attending school.



As the follow up to this visit and its findings, the field team, in association with the teachers, resolved to develop participatory platforms for children and make them vibrant; creating an attractive and friendly atmosphere in the school setting has also been on the agenda. It was how the existing arrangement of children committees was gives its purpose and significance.



With the promptness of teachers, the morning assembly or *Bal Sabha* not only became a permanent fixture of school-based activities but created opportunity for children to realize their worth as individuals. In the process, Parvathi was also motivated to participate in the assembly with her niche for singing songs and poems.

Subsequently, the activity-based pedagogy replaced the existing one, in which the teacher could only utter something so as to reiterate religiously what was said in the textbook. The new science of teaching rolled

out with the efforts of CARE India's initiative, created space for every child to be a master of her own learning process. The schooling thus came close to the realities of life. This realization made Parvati a prominent achiever with distinct regularity.

13. Coping with School Atmosphere through Reading Skill

Sharda

Student

Primary School, Hardwari, Jamunha Block

Shravasti

In the midst of an atmosphere of no learning whatsoever, the little girl, Sharda of class third, coming from a family of humble social lineage, was one with least motivation as a reader and a participant in schooling activities.

Sharda, daughter of an agricultural labor, was caught by the inertia of learning alien things in alien atmosphere despite couple of years in the school system. It was because of her lack of enthusiasm in reading textbooks, could not connect to classroom instructions. One explanation could be the absence of participatory mechanism in the teaching and learning system, reinforced by general pattern of teacher's apathy towards the children of excluded and marginalized communities. Still the fact remained that she could not cope with literacy development process that it was.

But the environment suddenly changed with the arrival of scores of *interesting* books and development of school library – a place where she could access a book of her choice and getting



impulse in the process to read that. Sometimes, her teacher would read aloud a good book to children so as to generate their interest and motivate them to pick up one on their own. Slowly, she became prone to believe that reading books was within her prowess.

Her drive to read books collectively soon became her key preoccupation to 'cope' with her schooling. Her teachers were also came out proactively to help and guide couple of such motivated pupils. Book reading also became a factor in her interaction and socialization with teachers and fellow students.

14. An Assay of 'Early Grade Reading'

Priya

Student

Primary School, Sirsiya, Sirsiya Block

Shravasti

Priya's story is one of those children from humble background whose engagement with print, followed by motivation to have faith in her reading ability through the mediation of comprehensive and structured reading material supported by illustrations, have led her to connect with literature and generating interest in textbooks.

Priya's stoop to early literacy achievements owes much to the efforts of her inspired teacher, Kusum Kumari Mishra. For she was the one who brought the EGR ('Early Grade Reading') pedagogy for classroom processes in order to promote learning to read and write among the children of her social background. Further, the books made available to these children through the establishment of school library under the program of CARE India: 'Start Early: Read in Time'.



The process commenced with the development of phonetic awareness to help the young learners of class third. They were led to focus on the meaning of words and their sounds, that is, to say,

the relationships between the written language and the sound of spoken words. The efforts were followed by the development of letter-knowledge or alphabets to predict reading and spelling abilities and, subsequent skill of the learner to recognize written words with focus on their meaning. The ability of reader to understand what she was reading, that is, extracting and constructing meaning, is what is known as comprehension. This is how she learnt reading and comprehending to a considerable extent quite early, in class third. Her participation in morning assembly further enabled her to achieve fluency, over and beyond developing leadership quality.

IV.

Evidences on Leadership Development

The EGR (Early Grade Reading) pedagogy has been an educational venture designed to transform the children from the social margins – the first generation learners – into young citizens in the process of teaching or empowering them to begin to speak and demand attention for their issues. It is exemplified by its in-built mechanism to foster a collective learning environment in the form of print-rich classroom walling, child-friendly library or even morning assembly sessions by focusing on the development of literacy-culture and communicative capacities of children. The EGR pedagogy insists on conducting oral exercises with children by dwelling upon the resources of childhood formation so as to enable them to have faith in their knowledge and its relevance for building future educational trajectories. Alternatively said, the pedagogy attempted to defend the dignity inherent in a child's potential and, to provide the possibility of better world. And in this sense, it was a movement towards self-determination and, more subtly, assertion of rights

By way of using the existing participatory structures like Bal Sabhas and Bal Samitis and giving them democratic norms of functioning, the EGR pedagogy has an implicit aim of producing democratic citizens and empowering the next generation of democracy.

The pedagogy essentially tries to intervene on behalf of these children with the resolution of enabling them to go through the act of knowing in learner-centric processes to transform the reality (of learners) by the creation and recreation of knowledge. In other words, the pedagogy does not require the teacher to tell her pupils what they must learn without having known the motivation. The pupils in this process, therefore, cease to be passive learners. Instead, she would engage them critically and try together to arrive at some conclusion. Alternatively, the pedagogy unfolds a long drawn process of language and literacy development among the early grade children to whom it is focused. There are several elements central to the process identified by National Reading Panel, namely, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension, which have judiciously been employed in the grain of this EGR pedagogy. Besides, the National Early Literacy Panel, recognizes letter-knowledge or alphabets, phonological awareness, naming and phonological memory as the critical steps of literacy development efforts which the pedagogy also rolls out.

The leadership development approach ingrained in the pedagogy is tangibly articulated in its goal of 'creating independent and motivated readers, who are able to participate meaningfully and in an empowered manner' in the society. The basic premise in which the pedagogy articulates is the motivation, not coercion, of children and helps them to be intrinsically motivated. And in the advanced course, it is the resource of a child's motivation that enables her to act independently to find solution of her problems beyond the domain of curriculum or the methods shown by the teacher. It has also been noted that most children, because of their inherent impulse instilled by the pedagogy and its judicious use by the inspired teacher encourages her to improve the skill by practice on the strength of her own moral principles and sensible conviction and come out with self-confidence as a trailblazer, as an autonomous individual, as a leader!

1. Preparing for Realizing the Agency

Saloni Singh

Student

Primary School, Sambharpurwa, Kaiserganj Block
Bhraich

The first impression of interaction with Saloni Singh of Sambharpurwa in Kaiserganj block was one of subjugation to patriarchal authoritarianism. Her undernourished body and pale look invokes the image of a subject surviving for cooking and serving, with no 'will' of her own – evidently subsumed in the being of the family patriarch. In many hierarchical families the girls are trained to obey boys; children must submit to elders. Sex and age – these are two determining and measuring rods of status within the family. The father – or the family patriarch – is, therefore, atrocious in his attitude towards women and children, daughters in particular. The family is supposed to put up with all the atrocities that the patriarch commits against his wife, his daughters and other female members in the family. And more they put up with these, more they are appreciated as *sanskari*! Saloni Singh is perhaps one of those *sanskari* girls facing extreme social restrictions on their freedom of movement



and activities and, by inference, that often result in suppression of their agencies in society, with extreme implication for well-being and social progress.

The CARE India's 'Early Grade Learning' (EGR) interventions, however, changed her self-image to a considerable extent. Gradually she began to realize that restrictions on her freedom of movement and activities were the constructs of a typical patriarchal mindset; that physical confinement to the domain of household has diminished her abilities to act freely, to learn freely and, to articulate her creative urge freely. Besides the CARE India activists, there were some motivated teachers like Ankita Dwivedi and Saroj Maurya by her side and in her grooming along with other incumbents.

Collectively they tried to defy the most ubiquitous standpoint that the children of poor families naturally lag behind in cognitive development. The problem of these girls was their very restricted interaction with peers in the neighborhood and, parents in the family. Therefore, with limited verbal exposure and opportunity of being engaged by parents and peers for conversations and dialogues, their responses were neither explicit nor creative. It is not to deny the fact that parents in poverty often lack the time and energy for anything more than goal oriented commands. Moreover, one commonality among these girls was their lack of capabilities to make choices and acting on them in pursuit of the prospects of well-being and progress. And it was not because they were poor, but their experience of volatile situations beyond anybody's control, except to give up meekly. The teachers found that the girl, especially Saloni, had very weak skills to control and regulate emotions in the beginning. Similarly, her working memory, attention management could draw on very limited supply of mental energy.

In fact, the readiness of school system generated by CARE India's educational interventions, coupled with the ability of some children, including Saloni and her peers, Deepa and Gayatri, to use and benefit from school, made all the difference in the lives of these girls. If not in terms of poverty alleviation of their families, the efforts ensured nurturing of interdependent skills of cognitive language and socio-emotional functioning. It took them hardly any time to develop abilities to learn about physical health, motor skills, emotional and behavioral self-regulation, social and communication skills and, above all, curiosity and motivation for participation in school and neighborhood activities. And this was preceded by early schooling failures, likelihood of truancy, drop-out and unhealthy or delinquent behavior.

The CARE India's interventions in the form of activity-based leaning system, combined with parental involvement, have shown significant effect on the language and cognitive skills which, according to the teachers, are likely sustain beyond formal schooling years. Today at class fifth, Saloni can do reading and maths with a sense of ease and confidence. Her teachers say that her attentional skills are predictive of subsequent academic success. Longitudinal follow up of identical program in Gajadharpur Upper Primary School, for instance, shows that girls from poor and depressed class background in the intervention are more likely to graduate from the present intermediate level and go for employment. They are less likely to falter and succumb to depressive symptoms.

But, after the discontinuation of the program, the school system is trying regain its characteristic features. The teachers, principally those with no kind of recourse to CARE India's 'Start Early:

Read in Time' program, fancy the idea of uttering 'facts' almost religiously reiterating what was being said in the text-books. And the pupils know it for certain that they have to recite the *mantras* 'revealed' to them in chorus. Our impression is that while doing so, none could make much sense of often cryptic statements of the teacher. Further, in traditional reverence to the divine utterance of teachers building on the sacred tenets of text-books, the children continue the incantation as if under an awesome spell of these chants. And there is nothing unusual about it. It is a commonplace experience all the school-goers: that 'a lot is taught, but little is learnt and understood', as codified by the Prof Yashpal Committee Report (*Learning Without Burden, 1993*). Indeed, teaching is a negotiation, a transaction, which cannot be accomplished unilaterally, without ensuring that what is taught and actually learnt and understood.

The tragedy is that there is no system of continuous pedagogical improvements and perspective building in the fast changing society and its values. On top of it, lack of culture specific teaching and learning resources contribute to the burden of non-comprehension and alienation in the classroom. Those who suffer most are the children drawn from production-based lingual and cultural milieu.

Saloni was able to distinguish herself because of her teachers getting handholding support from 'Early Grade Reading' (EGR) intervention of CARE India through reflective platforms for peer learning at appropriate administrative levels. Then, the teachers were given access to teaching/learning materials and tools to energize the classroom teaching, in addition to a small school library with ensured access of book to children. Ankita Dwivedi was the teacher having her way through the EGR program; she initiated Saloni and her peers into the world of books and motivated them to develop a reading culture: children attempting to read, borrowing books, and narrating the story among peers. Further, the strategy of promoting cultural expression by developing necessary skills of performing arts and drawing and painting changed the course of Saloni's life. Today, she is able to think of herself, make her own choices and looking forward to realizing her agency role in the society by becoming a district magistrate.

2. EGR: A Tool for Empowerment of Powerless Children

Roshni Begam

Student,
Primary School, Khagai Jot – I, Balrampur Block,
Balrampur

The dominant perception of teachers, anyone else for that matter, belonging to *other* socio-religious communities, about Muslim children, specially girls, that their first preference is *maktab* education because of being Muslims has been contested by surfeit of studies, the most significant being the Sacher Committee report, which found only 4% of them studying at these elementary Islamic institutions. The fact of Roshni Begam not coming to the school directly, but via *maktab*, is explainable against the backdrop of *unease* that Muslim parents increasingly find the public spaces as daunting. The aspects of this understanding relates to the double burden of being 'anti-

national' and being 'appeased'. Media tends to perpetuate this image. Sometimes identity-markers, even the food-habits, become cause of their concern. The gender issue is also given a Muslim slant on the basis of a few select cases.



The youngest daughter of a vegetable-seller, Ayyub Ali and Najma, has three sisters, two of them married, and two elder brothers, who studied in the same school, now supporting the father in his livelihood pursuits. She joined the school only after getting assured of good education by the head teacher, Suman Devi Gujjar.

In fact, most Muslim girls in her Rampur hamlet go to *maktab* to learn the basics of Islam so as to be able to read Qur'anic text, perform *namaz* and other rituals, not for education. For education means secular education, to which most parents across all the socio-religious groups are generally indifferent. It doesn't really make much difference as the daughter is going to leave them anyway. In the meantime, it is also true that even a mild impulse or assurance to the effect of safe and good education could ignite the latent desire to educate their daughter, the way it happened in Roshni's case.

At school, she had first recourse to literacy – reading and writing skills in the standardized language of instruction, that is, Hindi, through the medium of oral language. It involved some very crucial activities like developing phonemic awareness skill – entailing focus on meaning as well as sound – to predict reading achievement. It was realized by engaging the child in storytelling, poetry recital etc. in the morning assembly, exposing her to print-rich environment and allowing access to children books in the school library. The process enabled her to gather the letter knowledge, word recognition and comprehension, followed by fluency in reading and, subsequently, developing writing skills. The literacy skills nurtured her literary capabilities: Writing stories and telling them with theatrical gestures to a select group of children soon became one of her favorite activities. Now, her resounding presence at the center-stage of schooling activities has become a key factor in mobilizing parents to support daughters' education. And for herself, she is looking forward to study and pursue a career in engineering.

3. 'Start Early' Initiatives Fashions Leadership Development

Brijesh

Student, class Vth
Primary School, Bhojpur Navin



Brijesh was one amongst numerous children of poor agrarian families where unceasing livelihood struggles impinge upon their whole development prospects. But Brijesh has been forward looking boy, largely unfazed by the circumstances of his being. The only problem was that his experience of schooling was not at all encouraging. At one point, he was all set to withdraw himself from the school. In the meantime, while in class third, CARE India's intervention - 'Start Early: Read in Time' – brought a treasure of interesting books and the motivation on the part of new teacher, Daya Nand, to read them aloud for his pupils. He himself realized the experience of good initial progress among children, particularly in this boy, in learning to read. This restored his self-esteem and confidence to prevail over the trivial things coming in his way forward.

Daya Nand was essentially trained through the peer learning process at 'cluster meetings' with the resources of EGR interventions. His visit to Brijesh's family and meeting with parents changed their mindset towards the child and, reciprocally, altered the latter's vision for future prospects of life. Gradually, he was enabled to speak his mind: An outright introvert became a talkative extrovert on the platforms of *Bal Sabhas* and *Bal Samitis* as a leader, always ready to lead from the front. There is no wonder why today he is hailed as the role-model by the children as well as teachers.

4. Leadership Role through Participatory Process

Ruby Maurya

Student
Primary School, Madhpur,
Balrampur

Ruby Maurya belongs to an agrarian family of Pramod Maurya in Madhpur village in Utraula block of the district. Second among four siblings, Ruby has been a shy, introvert girl, always engaged with herself, to the extent that she became a challenge for Sarika Trivedi, the school teacher knowing her family well.

The teacher tried to catalyze her socialization among the girls of model school and oriented her in all the school activities as per the strategy articulated in CARE India's program: 'Start Early: Read in Time'. Gradually, she started participating in *Bal Sabhas* and *Bal Samiti* meetings and gradually ascended to leadership role. And in the process, she was thoroughly transformed, so much so that her weaknesses became the strengths.



5. EGR as the Language of Creativity

Sufia

Student
Primary School, Siswara, Balha block
Bahraich

Sufia and all her elder siblings – three sisters and four brothers – are the first generation to see books and pencils and jumped straight from the homestead into the school. Neither her father, Anwar, a driver and a farmworker, nor the mother, has ever been schooled.

When she was admitted to Siswara primary school, the learning conditions were not conducive. Neither the family could become a factor in her informed upbringing and providing educational support. Further, as the first generation of school-goer from a poor family, she had difficulties in



getting proper nutrition, irregular attendance and the drudgery of household work – all contributing to her lack of schooling orientation. The teacher was worried about her inability to focus on classroom instructions geared to impart information in the name of teaching. But no one could see through it simply as the lack of interest in the entire system far from the realities of her life.

It is not that she was interested in other things. Her head was in the world of books – little story books, in drawing and arts. She was keen observer always eager to find an opportunity to really learn. Making drawings on the matting with chalk, on the dusty courtyard with the use of fingers, was one of her favourite vocations of expressing herself. She was always prone to capture the tone

of, for example, poetry recital or storytelling, and try to emulate with same expressions.

All these attributes were explicit, according to her teacher, Arjuman, in her sense of confidence, her uninhibited communication even with teachers and strangers. But she would have naturally gone into oblivion had the EGR (Early Grade Learning) interventions not been there to recognize, appreciate and nurture her innate potentials. The *Bal Sabhas*, for instance, gave her the platform to cultivate leadership skills and the sense of collectivism. The requirement of print-rich environment created space for the expression of her artistic traits.

6. Schooling as Emancipatory Experience

Satyam

Student

Primary School, Khilafatpur, Kaiserganj Block
Bahraich

Son of Ranjana Devi and Ganga Ram, both labourers and farm workers, Satyam of Khilafatpur village has been a darling of all his peers in the school. As a visually impaired child, he has always been helpful and sociable, relishing poetry recital and singing songs among his friends. He was well-versed in Awadhi dialect; taking delight in its sensible use. Most distinguishing attribute was his elephantine memory. Anything coming to ears was logged as such for ever. His ability to

recognize friends by mere touch and voice was phenomenal. He has no dependence on anyone: always prone to do his work by himself, find his own way in the classroom.

Be it the morning assembly or oral classroom activities, he would remain eager to participate and learn all the times. It was this propensity that helped him to develop enormous treasure of poems, stories, plays etc. in his memory. Satyam was fond of sharing his learning in the school with his friends who used to assemble in his homestead in the evening. All of them were always willing to hear his recital and narration in fluent Awadhi.



Way back to his childhood days when his impairment was the cause serious concern of labouring parents with no wherewithal, the head teacher of village primary school encouraged the parents to enrol their child in the school. Thus, he was admitted to grade one while at six.

Meanwhile, the head teacher was led to the necessity of strengthening the *Bal Sabha* – the participatory platform of students. He did that by bringing in lot of oral activities in this domain involving children. This created opportunity for Satyam to come on the centre-stage with his personal theatrical and poetic resources. Slowly, he started mastering the art of learning by hearing, by doing, with implication for his cognitive development and early grade literacy accomplishments that began to show off in meaningful and communicative activities.

7. Group Process in Leadership Development

Jagat Ram

Student
Primary School, Purushotampur, Gainsari Block
Shravasti

One amongst the five children – one daughter and four sons – of Rupa Devi and Laxman Prasad, both laborers, this little boy of Purushotampur school in Gainsari block was the image of an absolutely alienated child burdened, with lack of placement in the schooling system, not to mention about the burden of non-comprehension.

As the first generation learner of a poor depressed class family, he was trained as a child in a flexible caste language, designed for production-based communication without the help of writing. In fact, entry of written words was always prohibited in these households for generations and generations. It was, therefore, natural for the child to find everything *against* him, beyond his comprehension and childhood socialization. The school was a different culture. It was not reflective of lives he found in the narratives of *Dalitbahujan* culture in which he was brought up. He could not locate his family setting in the narratives of the school and the books. There was virtually nothing familiar to him, and his upbringing.

There was no one in the school to diagnose his problem, his lack of interest in anything coming his way. Sometimes he would even bunk the classes.

But the process of continuous support and handholding at the *Nyaya Panchayat* level empowered his teacher to make out the source of problem and its resolution in the pedagogical principles enshrined in the EGR (Early Grade Reading) initiative of CARE India.

The ice-breaking began with his involvement in *Bal Sabha*. It proved to be an opportunity for this young fellow to join the mainstream and speak to all the students. Gradually, the initiative worked and he started finding orientation in school activities. He learnt the language of communication in the process of regular interaction with teachers and the children of even senior grades. From this platform of *Bal Sabha*, he also moved out to other children committees with a sense of belongingness. Thus, slowly but surely, he emerged as leader, with ability to take initiative, organize and carryout the task in hand by soliciting support of his peers and seniors.

V.

Institutional Mechanism for Participatory Learning and Capacity Building of Teachers: NPRC

Pursuing the goal of developing improved reading skills among the children – the first generation learners from the social margins, the ‘Start Early: Read in Time’ program of CARE India places onus on teachers and, accordingly, developed an institutional system of support and handholding by strengthening the existing systemic mechanism in the form of resource center at the cluster or nyaya panchayat level, known as NPRC. The structure of Nyaya Panchayat Resource Center or NPRC came into existence as a part of societal mission for bringing about fundamental changes in the basic education system within the National Education Policy Framework of 1986 (modified in 1992) and its program of action articulated in the form of Basic Education Project (1993) with the support of World Bank. But the idea of such an outfit forming the lowest rung of institutions in the vertical hierarchy, named as ‘Cluster Resource Center’, was mooted by Kothari Commission (1966) with the aim of providing academic support and guidance to teachers and schools, besides managing and overseeing wide variety of interventions.

In the light of such an elaborate institutional arrangement, but running defunct for want of resources, CARE India stepped-in with its EGR interventions and occupied the space of ‘cluster centers’, with monthly ‘cluster meetings’ for the network of teacher to meet.

These meetings, at the outset, have been of crucial avail in terms instilling the taste of collectivism and participation in the learning process engaging the teachers. And gradually, the ‘cluster centers’ were developed as the hubs for diverse academic and co-curricular activities such as teachers’ trainings, demonstrations (of ‘model lessons’) and design development & fabrication of low-cost ‘teaching-learning material’ (TLM) for the teachers to facilitate their classroom processes. Above and beyond, the cluster level support for teachers comprised the perspective building or enabling to critically know for whom they are learning to know about.

In other words, given the focus of EGR, the methodology of knowing assumes special significance, because it has also to do with cultural and historical elements. And what they learn in collective peer-learning practices under the guidance of a technical expert is not a package, but a product of continuous processes in which the learners – the teachers act on the reality of social marginalization and exclusion and, that of ban on the entry of written words in domains of depressed class background of children. It implies saying that cluster centers are the platforms where reflective actions of learners create and recreates knowledge, which in non-transferable. Neither it is in the intension of EGR to gather knowledge and expand it to the children in the classroom.

What the cluster centers essentially do to develop their capabilities in perspective and in skills is to know and know again with them – the participating learners. With this orientation in the process of knowing, they go back to classroom to work with their pupil so as to guide them collectively, and individually as well, in the quest for the development of literacy – reading and writing skills.

1. Celebration of Awareness

Zulkarnain

Coordinator, Kapoor Pur Cluster, Jarwal Block
Bahraich

The coordinator of Kapoor Pur cluster in Jarwal block, Zulkarnain, was part of the government teachers' fraternity with plum jobs, good salaries, secure employment and plenty of time for other activities. On the other hand, the trauma of unwanted rural posting, the poor image of a teacher and sometimes detestable work environment, difficult pupils, excessive paperwork – these together work against the genuine commitment of some of the newly appointed teachers with understanding of the secular and democratic values enshrined in the Constitution as essential guiding principles.

Worse happens to be most teachers' attitude towards the children from socially excluded and poor communities – no less than a hate story! Zulkarnain was no different in taking pride in asserting and sharing his casteist outlook on one pretext or the other. It was essentially his casteist outlook that he was finding lot many things related to the upbringing and socialization of his children with no awareness of values and etiquettes. But he could not see beyond his



unfounded standpoint and appreciate their cultural milieu as least hierarchical, but secular and democratic, with roots in production, rather than scriptures.

With the onset of CARE India's educational program and its interventions in respect of early grade readers (EGR), sustained process of dialogue and concomitant changes was set in. Ultimately, the compulsion of compliance with the EGR approach, changed his line. What really worked was the four-day-long training program on EGR (Early Grade Reading), which unfolded the theoretical and practical aspects of activity-based teaching for early grade learners by making prudent use of teaching-learning material (TLM).

He brought this learning and made efforts to institutionalize it at the resource centre (NPRC), popularly known as 'cluster centre', to inform the classroom processes through the network of teachers meeting on monthly basis. Thus, as a 'cluster' coordinator, with the experience/learning of EGR training, it was natural for him to emerge as a key resource person for monthly cluster-level training of teachers on child-centric pedagogy, calling for sensitivity to children of non-literate background. The air of change in the atmosphere of 'cluster meetings' thus started blowing for the enthusiasm and motivation of participants.

2. Treads of a Motivated Teacher

Poonam Gupta

Coordinator, NPRC, Kundaser, Kaiserganj Block
Bhraich

With motivation for a teaching job, perhaps not so much the vocation with a sense of commitment to the promotion of education in local community, Poonam Gupta finally succeeded in persuading her in-laws and husband to obtain BTC training certificate to pursue a professional career that began with her appointment as an assistant teacher at Kundaser primary school, in 2006. Subsequently, she was promoted to the level of head teacher at the Primary School, Kundaser-I, besides assuming the additional responsibility of cluster coordinator, NPRC, Kundaser.

Her positive attitude to work and readiness to support anyone, which principally related to the pattern of personal connect with her colleagues and pupils, has not only made her popular among the people she works with directly or indirectly, but won for her twice the coveted award of 'Ideal Teacher'. Not really content with this, she is looking forward to making her *Nyaya Panchayat* as 'Ideal Cluster'.

As a regular participant in the annual EGR workshops, she has brought many learnings and institutionalized them at the cluster level so as to ensure their dissemination to all the primary and upper primary schools in her *Nyaya Panchayat* network. And that became a factor in changing the school environment and the teaching-learning culture. Everything - right from print-rich classrooms and display of models, artefacts, drawing etc. to development of school library and promotion of reading culture, in addition to enhancement of infrastructure facilities - has worked

as morale booster and created grounds for language learning among early grade children. Their fluency in reading interesting texts, increased vocabulary and connect with the world of letters are there to reckon with.



She makes full use of her experience and position as cluster-head to effectively carry out periodic supportive supervision activities, including the review of progress, in order to identify the persisting issues and resolving them collectively. Her insistence on lesson-planning and subsequent academic assessment of children by the teachers themselves has proved quite meaningful.

3. Better Late than Never to Arrive

Mithilesh

**In-charge/Co-coordinator,
Gopiya Cluster, Mihipurwa Block,
Babraich**

The centrality of 'cluster approach' in CARE India's 'Start Early: Read in Time' program as an institutional mechanism and reflective platform of teachers' network at *nyaya panchayat* level brought the focus on Mithilesh, in-charge and co-coordinator of Gopiya cluster in Mihipurwa block of Babraich district to initiate the process. Initially, his non-availability because of preoccupation at the block level (BRC) was the basic laxity in developing the institutional setup of 'cluster centre', besides its strengthening and functionality. And when the BEO (Block Education Officer) was approached to facilitate the matter, he took it as the negation of his authority. He became more adamant.

But the CARE India people never gave up. And ensured that monthly 'cluster meetings' are held through an intensive process of persuasion and pressure-building. Also, the in-charge was engaged for a joint visit to 'cluster meetings' in other *nyaya panchayats* of the block. The follow-up visit of schools that followed highlighted the mandatory requirements of organizing *Bal Sabhas* and activity-based classroom processes, over and above, the conducive (that is 'print-rich') environment encompassing the library system.



Then, he was taken to a district level meeting of cluster in-charges to have proper orientation on the purpose and functioning of NPRC (*Nyaya Panchayat Resource Centre*) known as cluster platform. Still he was not willing to maintain the NPRC room on one pretext or the other, but finally agreed to make it functional by soliciting support from all quarters. This was his turning point. And since then, he never looked out for any excuse of not holding monthly 'cluster meetings'. He held the *mantra* of 'continuity' so strongly, that in the event of a natural disaster (2014) he ensured that these meetings are organized at a different venue.

Gradually, the process of perspective building and understanding of the Early Grade Learning (EGR) initiative, Mithilesh turned out to be an activist in his own right: In addition to organizing meetings, he became regular in school visits. And while visiting a school in the cluster, he would interact with children, review the quality and diversity of teaching-learning material (TLM) and their use in the classroom. His feedbacks are often very exclusive. The ensuing state-level training program on EGR at Lucknow finally made him a trainer and resource person. Today, despite his posting at the block level (BRC), his commitment to Gopiya cluster and its network of schools withstands.

4. Consistency and Dependability on the Show

Ahmadullah
In-charge, Chogodwa Cluster, Nawabganj Block
Bahraich

Ahmadullah, the in-charge of Chogodwa cluster in Nawabganj block of the district, has been a duty-bound school teacher, but with no manifest sense of commitment to the cause of education of poor children. He accepted the present position of cluster in-charge as the will of his superiors and their concerns, hardly ever exceeding the compliance of bureaucratic procedures. From his vantage point, one cannot really think of commitment and motivation from these teachers working in most disempowering environment in the midst of resentful parents, irregular pupils and pompous inspectors, in addition to running down school infrastructure.

He was a kind of man oriented to take pride in putting up with things. The picture of disrepair and decay which the cluster room obtained with no wherewithal – not even a floor matting for the meeting - was none of his concern. He was focussed on his job: Holding timely monthly meetings with regularity. He was equally particular about joint school-visit and its protocol encompassing issues like planned teaching, seating arrangement in classrooms, print-rich environment, library use, clean campus etc. to dwell upon. He would always sit with children at their level to discuss crucial issues of their holistic participation in school activities and upkeep of school ambience with the sense of ownership. His feedback was always valued by teachers.

Reflecting on his newly-acquired approach to work, he begins with the sense gratitude for the 'Early Grade Reading' interventions which graduated him from the position of an information carrier to that of an academic professional.



Ahmadullah had a set pattern of deliberations in ‘cluster meetings’ that insisted on morning assembly – *Bal Sabha* – as a participative platform of children, besides other children committees of girls and boys in appropriate proportions. The issues of adequate use of library and its child-friendly atmosphere, vibrant classroom setting with walling duly decorated with posters and hangings made by students and made available under the EGR program also figured promptly in his scheme of things as the head of NPRC. Teaching with elaborate lesson planning remained yet another point of his concern.

Over the period of time he has been at the helm of affairs, the set-up of NPRC (popularly known as cluster centre) has gone through the different phases of development. His visits to Begampur-based TRL laboratory and the Language Resource Centre at Gajadharpur has been very effective in mobilising efforts and resources.

5. EGR Interventions Activates the Defunct Cluster Centre

Tez Narain Singh

Cluster In-Charge
Ali Nagar Nyaya Panchayat Cluster, Shivpur Block,
Bahraich

As in-charge of Ali Nagar cluster in Shivpur block, Tez Narain Singh was yet another sceptic in the ranks of teachers finding any arrangement for educational improvement in the schooling system as a different fad. The case NPRC – the *nyaya panchayat* level resource centre meant to provide academic support and hold demonstration of ‘model lessons’ for participating teachers – was no different in the eyes of people like the in-charge of Ali Nagar cluster centre. In fact, the cluster centres were hardly existent. And if existent, there was no infrastructure - no chair, no matting, and if present, it was in the state of dilapidation.

The condition of this cluster was slightly better, as it was equipped with an old, torn floor matting. Beyond the academic responsibilities mentioned above, the NPRC was made to deliver in terms of developing low-cost TLM. It was also made incumbent for these resource centres to take CARE of creating pleasant atmosphere in the school essential for effective teaching learning process.

But things started changing once the CARE India stepped in with its ‘Early Grade Reading’ (EGR) interventions; beginning with organizing resources to develop bare-minimum infrastructure facilities. CARE India also provided other resources like books and teaching-learning material, over and above, the technical and academic means.

That changed the motivation levels of not only the in-charge, but teachers in the school network of *nyaya panchayat’s* jurisdiction. Resultantly, monthly ‘cluster meetings’ became a permanent institutional arrangement particularly for those inspired by the prospects of cracking new

possibilities brought forth by the EGR pedagogy with special reference to language teaching among the beginners. For the first time the EGR interventions highlighted what so far has been considered as trivia, and these include an amiable school atmosphere with surfeit of learning windows, print-rich environment and centrality of library in the learning system, use of teaching-learning material and transformation of inert teaching practices to one of more lively, participative and joyful activity.

As a cluster in-charge, Tez Narain Singh duly uses his position to visit the network schools in the *nyay panchayat* to ensure the compliance of EGR's agenda in letter and spirit.

6. EGR Makes Duty Calls

Sanjay Chaudhry

Cluster In-Charge,
Resource Centre, Gajadharpur,
Bahraich

The Gajadharpur resource centre owes its existence to CARE India's interventions that commenced way back in 2013. There was no building, no infrastructure, no activity. The 'cluster meetings' hasn't held ever.

While the question of the necessity of support for academic and co-curricular activities, also a forum for participation, reflection and peer-learning and reviews as true substance of teaching abilities of a teacher working in rural context with children drawn from absolutely literacy-free background, has always been there. But rather than facing it squarely, those concerned opted to live with it. And to keep things pending has probably been facilitated by vested interests. Indeed, it was a matter of ambiguity compounded.

CARE India intervened with its persuasive power to mobilise the designated in-charge, Sanjay Choudhry, the head teacher at Gajadharpur school. Extended discussions carried out with him by the CARE India field activists and resource persons reinforced the significance of an institutional mechanism in the form of 'cluster centre' or NPRC (*Nyaya Panchayat* Resource Centre) for continuous support and handholding in respect of specific requirements of child-centric pedagogy for the first generation of learners.

These deliberations also brought him to the understanding of his crucial role in building the capacity of teachers in the network of primary schools under the *nyay panchayat*. This was also to ensure the development of friendly environment in the school. Sanjay, on his part, stood to find answer to his failings as cluster in-charge. The better answer was the prompt action to develop the cluster centre as a vibrant reflective and peer learning platform of teachers. And then there was no looking backward.

Shedding all his concerns like parental apathy, difficult pupils, excessive paperwork etc., he took on the task of creating the infrastructure in the first instance. An abandoned room in the school premises was taken over for the purpose, repaired and made tidy. Subsequently, the process of makeover of interior and exterior walling with posters, paintings, drawings, pictures in addition to teaching-learning material provided by CARE India, some developed by teachers and children, was accomplished.

One implication of Sanjay's strides was the development to an empowering environment, especially among his school teachers. And with it on the anvil, the sleepy atmosphere of school suddenly transformed into a hub of educational activities.



VI.

Engagement with Print

The centrality of engagement with print in the EGR (Early Grade Reading) pedagogy, based on certain well-defined conventions in respect of learning language and employment of elaborate strategies of providing one of the convenient environments for the promotion of language development skills, besides the love for books and support for children's library, together contribute to what is known as print-rich environment. Then, there is the need to motivate and encourage reading, in addition to teaching reading skill, which acquired new accent particularly after the publication of 'Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading' in 1985. The EGR pedagogy shows commonality with the findings of this report that highlights personal reading habits as best predictor of reading comprehension and achievement.

The print-rich environment – in which children interact with diverse forms of print, including wall-stories, word displays, labeled murals, bulletin boards, charts, drawing etc. - which the EGR pedagogy brings with it, finds its critical significance from the vantage point of school children, particularly those drawn depressed class background. With most of them being the first generation learner, implying sheer lack of foundation in literacy – language and listening skills, familiarity with books and recourse to scribbling and drawing practices, the print-rich environment provides windows to see reading and writing serve real, everyday purpose. The pedagogy motivates them to explore the print and try to read and write themselves. And to ensure this, there are precise spaces in the classrooms, in the school premises for them to discover the world of printed material – children magazines, story and poetry books, booklets and posters. This space, with some sort of arrangement for sitting in groups, in isolation, and shelves to stock books, an issue-register, and all important things duly labeled, happens to be the library, as the extension or institutionalization of print-rich.

Everything in this print-rich space has a distinct purpose. Even labeling is meant to give children the message that things could be identified by a set of familiar symbols that are written down. Then, there could be a rebus chart, say on handwashing, illustrating the entire procedure, explaining in words as well, step-by-step, posted by the wash-basin. Charting and graphing, moreover, used in addition to open-ended questions, tend to establish correlation between language and its representation in symbols. More to it could be the method of interactive alphabet, which allows children to learn the letters by interacting with objects. Beyond it, the activity of reading aloud good, culturally relevant, literature that connects with children's imagination motivates them to pick up a book with the confidence that they could be readers as well.

The significance of print-rich environment endorsed by EGR pedagogy may, therefore, be seen in the light of the need of developing language skills particularly among first generation learners born and brought up in a culture of silence. The awareness this environment generates that there

is an alternative way to communicate – that is through the print, helps to foster reading skills as demonstrated by diverse range of success stories hereunder.

1. Bearing Out Education as Synonymous with Freedom

Sudha

Student

Primary School, Kundaser, Kaiserganj Block,
Bhraich

Sudha's success story primarily highlights one point that in rural milieu sending a child to school on regular basis requires a great deal of efforts on the part of child and her parents. And secondarily, Dalit children often find the overall schooling experience as disgusting. On the other hand, the parental motivation seems to be quite high at least in theory. And it is more so among Dalit parents. For the educated Dalit parents, like Sudha's father – a *Shiksha Mitra* in village primary school, know the value of education more than anyone else.



Education to many of them - with exposure to Ambedkarism - is synonymous with freedom, despite the fact of discouraging experiences of schooling: It is the schooling that gives them the first-hand experience of segregation and untouchability in most structured form. It comes through the incriminatory attitudes of teachers endowed with casteist wisdom. More than often the Dalit children are scolded and punished for their caste lineage, for their field hands – the working skills. They are hated because of poverty, because their hair is not oiled and combed, because of dirt on their clothes. There is, therefore, nothing captivating in the school premises. In many cases, the childhoods of these children are mutilated by constant abuse. The situation has hardly changed in Sudha's village of Kudasar in Bhraich district with the domination of 'upper caste' *Rajputs*.

Then there are text-books with all unfamiliar contents. Not even a single book is written in production-based, communicative language to create resonance in their ears. They are virtually against them. Their homes, their culture - everything is different from what they find in the school. And the gap between the two is enormous. There is no way one resembled the other. Their alienation from the text-books and their contents, therefore, seems to be one of the crucial factors making them slow-learners and low-achievers.

The CARE India team in-charge of educational efforts took note of Sudha's reluctance to attend classes. An opinion was, therefore, developed in association with the school teacher that her failure to attend classes was because of 'poverty' and the 'drudgery' that she was made to perform on the fields. It was a misplaced understanding of her situation marked by withdrawing attitude from the schooling. According to her father, she was always interested in learning – reading books. But the text-books, to her misfortune, proved to be disappointing and failed to match with her childhood imagination. She would, therefore, retire back to the comfort and security of home, away from tedious books and learning environment. The more we looked into her life, the more we tried to reach the attitude of children in the community, the more surely did it appear that the core remained the sense of personal, embodied in the idea of the family and the neighborhood.

Still the family was interested in her schooling. Even the illiterate mother was categorical about the upbringing of her children – two sons and three daughters, including Sudha. She knows it for certain that Sudha was not being brought up and educated from the point of her marriage. The thought that she carries is that a married daughter should be able to get in touch with her parents in times of crisis, or to maintain some kind of contact even otherwise. And that this would not be possible without education or schooling. Further, in her understanding, schooling improves the prospects of a good match, helps a daughter to raise her own children, and makes it easier to cope with widowhood or divorce. Still she does not want to meddle into her daughter's resolve to attend or not to attend the school.

Public visibility of CARE India's program, 'Start Early: Read in Time', and its 'Early Grade Learning' (EGR) interventions in government schools in the area, also the work carried out by its field team, has developed a penchant among the local people to expect a great deal from them. Even the educational bureaucracy, including some motivated teachers, considers the organization as crucial institutional resource for supporting class-room learning. The EGR initiatives have indeed drawn attention to the new models of class-room pedagogy, teachers' training, school management and so on. Further, the organization has played a crucial advocacy role, and in helping to foster public participation in schooling system.

The CARE India initiative involved the initiation of children – particularly the children like Sudha not finding their orientation in the prescribed text-books as elucidated above. The basic understanding was that stories are most fundamental ways of communicating with children with the idea of developing in them a taste for written words. It is generally believed by education-activist of CARE that stories help children develop empathy and cultivate imaginative and divergent thinking – that is, the thinking that generates diverse ideas and solutions around story events, rather than looking for literal responses.

When Sudha was given a story-book in class fifth for the first time, she could very well recognize the pattern and, building on that, play out or draw narratives in which she herself would become part of the story. Gradually, she learnt to distinguish between gender roles of male and female characters and discussed them among peers and classmates drawn from her neighborhood. With her prowess in recreating the textual stories by coining characters on the basis of her own socialization as a girl child in poverty-ridden Dalit family, she solicited the attention of her teacher as well as the CARE India activists. Story-reading progressively changed her perspective and influenced her behavior quite significantly.

The import of this transformation in the case Sudha was that the school library was a bit organized. Groups of boys and girls would interact around the texts and enjoy the world of books. And mainly for Sudha, being in the library meant to be surrounded by books along, leafing through their pages, seeing the world of imagination in print, dribbling over what was there to know and to explore. Presently, as a student of upper primary school in Kundaser, she has not only found her orientation in the school system but excelling in sports. Recently she won the regional *kho-kho* championship for her district.

2. 'Print-Rich' Facilitates Learning

Renu Nigam

Assistant Teacher

Primary School, Phulwaria Shah, Gauspur Block

Shravasti

Renu Nigam, with a graduation degree, began her *vocation* as a teacher (*Shiksha Mitra*) in 2004 at Gauspur primary school. The perception of her role as teacher and the attitude she brought to work (as vocation, not job), enabled her to connect with children in first instance, before leading them to pathways of learning.

She has been an artist at her core: art is her medium of communication. Reading exciting stories for children aloud, reciting poems & rhymes, narrating riddles, play finger games etc. come naturally to her. In the pursuit of her interest, she manages to negotiate between her compliance with her duty and engagement with upper primary children for drawing and painting instructions. In the meantime, she got her promotion to the cadre of 'Assistant Teacher' and placed in a Primary School at Phulwaria Shah.



Moving beyond her natural flair for drawing and painting, the participation in the ‘cluster meetings’ made her aware about the idea of ‘print-rich’ environment. She fancied the idea which motivates the children to interact with the enormous world of print. With the permission and support of head teacher, the classroom walls were painted with pictures of national leaders, poems, alphabets, numbers/tables by the Renu Nigam herself.



Her own experiments with ‘print-rich’ environment opened up new vistas for children to gain literacy skills. She found the environment allowing children to see that reading and writing serve real, everyday purpose. Seeing the print, children realized that print carries meaning. They, therefore, explore print and get the right impulse to read and write with the sense of purpose. The *discovery* changed her entire approach to teaching, and generated interest among children – making the learning joyful by way of engagement.

3. Connecting with the Teacher and the Books

Sonu

Student

Primary School, Hardwari, Gauspur Block
Shravasti

Sonu’s story dates back to the time when he was at class third and, struggling to find his place and legitimacy in the schooling system.

By the fact of his birth, he was the youngest among seven children of Lilavati and Tanki, both farm workers of *Dalitbahujan* lineage. Despite crippling poverty, the illiterate parents were particular about the education: All the seven children – three girls and four boys – had completed schooling up to eighth grade. But Sonu was only one among his siblings who could read and write right since class third. Yet he was not alone in his accomplishment. There was his teacher, Shweta, by his side and, over and above, the ‘Early Grade Reading’ (EGR) initiative of CARE India.



As the first generation of school-goers with dirty and unaesthetic field-hands, Sonu was not amongst the 'good' children of high moral conduct and upbringing. He would never come school with washed face, clean clothes, oiled and combed hair and wearing *chappal*. No wonder why children of his background are ignorant, ugly, unclean and ill-mannered in the eyes of most of the teachers, sometimes even fellow students of socially advanced background as well. Again, it was his family circumstances which, according to the informed opinions of wise people in the schooling system, was repeatedly failing him in achieving learning-progress.

The turning point of his career came when he solicited the attention of an inspired lady teacher, Shweta. She brought him from the margin to the

center-stage, engaged in listening stories she would read aloud, and recite poems, play and dance with him, give lessons on cleanliness and hygiene, herself washing his face. By then Sonu had developed a connect with her.

She helped Sonu in the development of oral language, along with key vocabularies, as the foundation for literacy development. This was made possible by his orientation and participation in specially designed literacy development package of CARE India's EGR initiative. Moreover, he was motivated to believe that he could be a good reader. Books with appealing illustration began capturing his attention. He would pick one from the library and try to read and to understand by questioning as his new-found tool of learning and comprehension.

VII.

SMC: Parental Participation and Empowerment

It would be politically naïve to begin with the understanding, as it emanates from Section 21 (1) of 'The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 in respect of 'School Management Committee' (SMC), that parental participation is the panacea for the problem of school achievement of 'at risk' students. Some critical literature on the issue tend to see it as the abdication of state from its responsibility guided by the principle of equity. The idea of parental or community involvement in schooling within the frame of reference of 'active democratic citizenship' under the neo-liberal climate, among other things, runs the risk of reflecting the market ideology with the implication for turning the parents and the community as the consumer or beneficiary of schooling project of the state.

Further, in the context of increasingly subjugated and marginalized reality of the children incumbent to the schooling system, parental involvement is seen in relation to their success or failure. But parents with lack of requisite qualification in the form of cultural capital are always apprehensive of their effectiveness in the process of educational participation and sometimes delegate the responsibility to a certain teacher. Their refrainment remains most favorite option to avoid the situation. And thus, the issue concerning the absence of parental voice largely remain unaddressed.

Now, with a legislation trying to address the problem of parental participation with certain systemic arrangement, it would have been more befitting to see the formation of SMC in the light of grassroots participatory democracy calling for reform in the organizational structures and leadership of the school. An empowerment program for parents could perhaps be a stimulus to bring out the desired change. But that is still a far-fetched dream.

The SMC, with 75% of its members being from amongst the parents, only ensures the representation. That does not mean that parents and teachers necessarily work together and equally share decision making. For the parents, if at all, tend to adopt the role of supporters or representatives, rather than equal partners. However, there has been much activity around the issue: The parent-teacher association (PTA) has also been there for a long time. But most persistent parental apathy towards the education of children which has led to a situation of collective inertia, in addition to the oppressive conditions of their lives, on the one hand and, the dominant position of power and social status of teachers, on the other hand, hardly obtains any room for their coordination to the effect of consolidating grassroots democracy.

There are also instances of the frustration of well-meaning teachers because of parental attitude which, sometimes take the extreme form of irresponsible behavior from the both sides. But it varies a great deal. In Gajadharpur village of Bahraich, there was once very active cooperation of parents with teachers, the then head teacher, in particular, who won appreciation of village

community for his reliability and sense of duty. He was able to set in motion a virtuous circle of goodwill: Better the school, equally better the parent-teacher relations.

Thus, by improving on schooling, the EGR interventions, by implication, have gone a long way in bringing about mutual sense of trust and confidence between them, as exemplified by scores of success stories.

1. Solitary Campaigner of Girls' Education

Sanwara Begam

Ex-Member,

SMC, Upper Primary School, Gajadharpur, Gajadharpur Block,

Bahraich

It is almost empirically testified that parental involvement in children education directly relates with their learning outcomes, as much as it does with advancement of school system. One indication of the rising tide of educational aspirations of parents is that the proportion of children who have never been enrolled is declining quite rapidly. Many other signs of high and rapidly growing interest in education noted in the village include parental support for compulsory education for all children, mushrooming of private schools in the area, preference of private schools by poor parents with no wherewithal. But in the midst of growing educational aspirations of parents across all social groups, there is an unequal attention given between boys and girls, with some significant exceptions.

In larger view of the prevailing situation owing to parental attitude and their interest in school system and schooling outcomes, the RTE Act (Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009) created a democratic platform to facilitate the participation of parents, particularly mothers, in the school management system, the School Management Committee (SMC). Constituted with 75% parents as members, the RTE Act envisions parents to get involved as decision-makers with an objective to make teachers accountable to learning outcomes of children.

Way back in 2015, an assertive and articulate mother – Sanwara Begam of Gajadharpur (45) - was chosen for the membership of the committee with popular community support. With primary level of schooling and working-caste (*Pasmanda*) background, the mother of four sons and a daughter, Sanwara was a victim of persistent unequal gender relations in her parental family. The most crucial aspect of her positioning in the family as a girl child was her inability to act independently and to make her free choices. Yet she has the tendency of what is termed in social psychology as 'illusion of control' – that is, acclaiming the credit or recognition for something without having any inkling – right since the days of her childhood formation. This illusion or false judgment of her agency was because of the stress borne out of failure in realizing her worth as an individual.



Her induction in the Committee (SMC) brought certain structural changes in her thought process and belief system. Her illusion of agency transformed into real individual agency. Even as individual acts were oriented towards the needs and requirements of other parents; by implication, therefore, her individual acts were essentially social actions. And gradually, she learnt to act not only on her behalf, but on behalf of the school collective of parents. Most surprisingly, her driving force was not so much the sense of importance or power in her wild perception, but rationality. She had all the clarity of her acts as the member of the Committee and oriented towards well defined goal. In fact, she was duly groomed by the then head teacher, Sanjay Chauhan, to use her wisdom or common sense to guide her activism.

One of the most significant aspects of her activism was its elasticity. She had the ability of reading the situation – the context of her action, the social action, as elaborated above, and customizing the action accordingly so as to be effective and goal oriented. But she would often go beyond to assert her position to take advanced social action essentially directed at other actors in the school system. It also explains why she made more foes than friends in the Committee as well as in the school system. She was, therefore, shown the way by the new dispensation after the exit of her mentor, Sanjay Chauhan, from the school.

She has been out of the Committee for more than a year, but still recalls her incumbency with a sense multiple loss: How Chauhan and the CARE team led her to the understanding of rights of children to education and the purpose of the Committee and, above all, the meaning and significance of her incumbency as the member. She learnt to communicate in simple and ingenious ways to the people – women and mothers, even young children, particularly those in the vicinity of the school. Slowly she developed a narrative of her own on the basis of the salient features of the RTE Act perceived and understood by her. She would never forget to bring in reckoning the most ubiquitous question of gender bias in the motivation of parents. What worried her most why mothers no less than fathers express much stronger interest in their son's education

than daughters? Then she would herself answer that parents have much higher expectations for their sons than the daughters. The gender bias is so strong that, she adds, it makes little sense to lump boys and girls together when discussing the motivation of parents for education.

Still she holds that education may give a girl better prospects of finding a good spouse. But, at the same time, education will raise the cost of her marriage for obvious reasons of marrying a better-educated boy. In such a situation, she as a mother is all set to handle this dilemma by compromising between financial means and concerns for her *only* daughter's future well-being.

Who are those not much inclined to send the daughters for schooling? They are, as per her own experience, those expecting the marriage cost to rise with the education of daughter. But in this respect, the general level of education in the caste-community becomes very significant. And that is very lowly-rated in her *Pasmanda* or depressed caste community living in Gajadharpur village. We also found that among the *few* better-educated castes a daughter's education made her marriage easier. In this realm the saying goes that finding a match for educated girl is much easier and that the educated brides are better equipped to run their household well. But in the Muslim community of Gajadharpur, it is generally believed that finding a suitable match for an educated daughter remains a difficult proposition. And the educated families have higher expectations and demands. This is the view held even by the parents whose daughters are studying at high school or intermediate level. These parents, nevertheless, sincerely trust that the bridegrooms' families are hardly interested in educated brides.

In the midst of these complexities, Sanwara continued her campaign for schooling daughters with complete regularity. Besides this campaign, she as a Committee member took direct action to remove the public toilet from the school gate after the village *pradhan*, BSA, BEO – all of them showed their lackadaisical attitude towards the problem. She even solicited the support of some other Committee members to remove the meat shop from the vicinity of school.

2. SMC Platform for Ensuring Safe and Secure School Environment

Noor Alam

SMC member

Primary School, Bhairampur

Balrampur

The crisis of rural schooling is one of the many facets of the miserable functioning of public services in the region. Nevertheless, the local government bodies (*Panchayati Raj* Institutions) have indeed brought the opportunity for the people to exercise some control on the quality of local public services and allied matters. There are well documented examples of improved practices of local democracy have led to some progress in development programs. In Uttar Pradesh, however, the *panchayats* are formed electorally, but on the basis of factional mobilization without a reference to policy agenda or the issues of human deprivation and social inequality.

The 'School Management Committees' (SMC) constituted under the RTE Act, 2009 at the school level in the village with the membership of parents/guardian (75%), elected representatives, teachers and community members, suffered from the vested interests of *panchayat* head. He forged the formation with the connivance of teachers by undermining the elaborate legal protocol.



The CARE India's 'Start Early: Read in Time' program commenced the intervention by highlighting the need of regularizing SMC meetings and used the opportunity to educate the members in respect of its purpose, constitution and roles and responsibilities of members from the vantage point of the functioning and improvement of school system. Accordingly, consensus was developed among the members on the issue of reorganizing the body. Ultimately, with the support of BEO, CARE India promoted local leadership and, that ensured the restructuring of the committee, with Noor Alam as its vice-president. In that capacity, he made it certain that monthly meetings are organized as per schedule with an elaborate agenda, which he would develop with the support of teachers and use that to mobilize the members to attend the meeting.

He was particularly concerned about assuring the parents that the school is no less safe a place than home for girls. The initiative worked to develop safe and secure environment in the school with the support of teachers. The collectives of adolescent girls were also mobilized for the purpose. In the process, irregular students with major share of girls were identified; and home visits were found useful in developing the propensity of parents in the light of the provisions of RTE Act, 2009 in respect of the right of children to education and the duties of parents and guardians towards the schooling of their wards. Consequently, six out of eleven out of school girls were enrolled immediately after.

Presently, Alam is working on a project in coordination with CARE India team and the elected representative to pressurize the BDO to place the necessity of enrolment of all the children of school-going age group as one of the basic criteria of eligibility for accessing the benefits of official welfare schemes/programs.

3. Champa Devi: Who Energized the Committee

Champa Devi

**Ex-Chairperson, School Management Committee,
Primary School, Begampur, Chitaura Block,
Bahraich**

Champa Devi, in early fifties, of Begampur village, continues to be recognized by the community as the head of School Management Committee (SMC) despite her withdrawal to household chores. But she carries on asserting her claim to the position of influence that ventures to support multi-pronged commercial activities of her husband, Jagdish Lal, a prominent and persuasive *kotedar* from the powerful faction of the village, with significant amount of holding and means – a tractor, for instance - of agricultural production.

Jagdish is the patriarch of this landed caste family of four daughters and four sons, in addition to parents. And as a patriarch, he speaks on behalf of Champa Devi with sheer mindlessness of classroom realities, unresponsiveness to the needs of children and teachers etc. He is always preoccupied with official directives.

During the days of her association with SMC, she was particular about the meeting and mobilized others to be present and show their sense of accountability to the parents and children, besides putting in concerted efforts for the improvement of school system in their capacity as members. And in a month's time, there was dramatic change in the situation: Members stopped coming for meeting just to register their signatures. More than 80% duly attended the full meeting and raised their issues of concern. But nothing could really be translated into practice.

But she remained one throughout the period of her tenure to never forget visiting school and meeting with children and teachers. But owing to her background - her dominating husband, all her activism was restrained to just making visits.

4. 'Our School, Our Children and Our Responsibility...'

Shivram Mishra

SMC Member

Primary School, Auraiya Nidhan, Gilaula Block,
Shravasti



The idea of engaging the village community, with obvious focus on parents, in schooling affairs enshrined in RTE Act, 2009 by creating the platform of SMC (School Management Committee), with 75% parents as members, is seemingly informed by some myths, with some grain of truth, particularly in respect of the lack of parental motivation and accountability on the one hand and, the patterns of parent-teacher relations marked by palpable tension and mutual antagonism. The SMCs were

indeed formed as a matter of legal compliance; they largely remained as the reflection of the proverbial concern of the state with fads and foibles.

The SMC of Auraiya Nidhan primary school, headed by Shivram Mishra, was yet another official formation, with no manifest sense of purpose and meaning, until the mediation of CARE India, with an elaborate understanding of the role of parents and community in influencing the larger system and key stakeholders, as articulated in its 'Start Early: Read in Time' program of school education.

Taking cognizance of factional strife as feature of rural society in Uttar Pradesh, the CARE India team began its campaign with utmost CARE in developing a personal chord with Mishra, invoked in him the sense of power, and made him aware about his slated roles and responsibilities as the head of the committee. And that worked in most significant way.

In a very short span of time, Shivram Mishra, duly energized by his newly acquired sense of power, was in the midst of system, meeting teachers and parents, mediating between them, resolving issues and giving them motivational tips to the effect of improving the learning atmosphere and its outcomes in the form of children's achievements. Over a period of time, his school visits became a feature of daily-routine. At times he would involve children, exchanging pleasantries, telling stories and asking them to recite inspirational poetry etc. Moreover, he was

also seen performing supervision of MDM processes and the quality of food, modalities of its distribution – almost everything became his concern.

In addition, regular home visits showed off in regularization of attendance; he was also instrumental in facilitating the enrolment of twenty-seven children. 'After all, in the words of Shivram Mishra, 'this is our school, our children and our responsibility to bring the best out of it'.

VIII.

Gender Perspective in EGR System

Our concern in this section relates to the needs of girls and boys, their experiences, the hopes and discernments in relation to schooling. The gender perspective entails a principle of equality to ensure that the system of schooling and its structures are gender-equitable: that girls and boys in the school are able to benefit equally from education and other opportunities; that they should be able to realize their full human rights and agency. Akin to this notion, there are interrelated concepts like gender-parity and gender-equity, which are broadly seen as building blocks of equality in schooling system. For instance, parity – like achieving equality in girls' enrollment - is the first stage in the long-drawn process of gender equality, while the basic principle of equity refers to the equality of opportunities among children, that is, to say, one's achievements can only be determined by one's capacity, hard work and fortitude, rather than the social and economic circumstances.

But this can only be made possible by employing measures, scholarships for instance, sometimes defined as affirmative actions, to recompense for historical and social detriments restricting both girls and boys to stand on equal footing. But, above all, what we need is not only gender-sensitive schooling environment, but curriculum and teachers' training. Further, more than written words, teachers' attitude, sensitivity and competencies are more important for a girl child from an illiterate household.

This is because she is more dependent on teachers for her learning needs which, if not satiated, may lead to termination of schooling per se. Yet there are other factors intrinsic to the upbringing of these children in a system of democratic and equitable values and ambience which pose formidable obstacle to the process of adjustment and orientation in a different setting of school system where links between caste, class and gender relations have not only been a factor of extreme gender inequality but also of great resilience in these unequal patterns.

A related issue of some importance is that of lack of encouragement, or restrictions on girls' freedom of action and participation in classroom activities, which have been an important factor of inertia in gender relations. Encounters and experiences of our fieldwork confirm the influence of gender stereotypes, including a docile view of the abilities and potential of female children. The

sexist content of curriculum, on the other hand, continues to be the source of gender bias in the classroom.

Against this backdrop, the advent of EGR (Early Grade Reading) interventions of CARE India in the primary school system, articulated through the mediation of children's books – even a school library, activity-based teaching, accent on participation and, above all, oral language as the stepping stone, essentially empower the pupils, both girls and boys, to see each other as valuable in themselves. The role of girls specially becomes significant in this regard, since they have tended to be a marginalized group in the society. The interventions take them, the girls, as well as boys, along to a point of development where an individual is valued for who they are, rather than any abstract category of girls and boys. The following success stories demonstrate how the interventions have worked by providing spaces to children irrespective of their gender identities.

1. Parental Motivation and Teachers' Support as Factors in Inspiring a Girl Child to Find her Schooling Space

Hasrat Jehan

Student

Primary School – I, Matera, Risia Block,
Bahraich



Evidently, today the disadvantaged sections encompassing the depressed class (*pasmanda*) Muslim community are awakening and organizing movements for equality and social justice. Parallel to it is the changing pattern of the phenomena of marginalization among these Muslims, which relates to their socio-economic conditions. The marginalization in education is increasingly being seen in relation to various forms of persistent disadvantages rooted in underlying social inequalities. But, this does not hold good among Muslims; for their historical educational backwardness is seldom a cause and consequence of their marginalization and discrimination. The point is being substantiated by persistent disparity between the educational status of Muslims and other socio-religious categories. According to Sacher Committee (2006) report, 'Muslims are at double disadvantage with low level of education combined with low-quality education; in some instances, the relative share of Muslims is lower

than even the SCs who are victims of long-standing caste system.’ The Committee, therefore, retort to recommend ‘a significant policy shift, in the recognition of problem and in devising corrective measures, as well as in the allocation of resources’.

Further, owing to the structural constraints of patriarchal *pasmanda* Muslim families and concomitant gender relations of power under the garb of the so called growing Islamic predicaments, suppression of a girl’s agency has largely become a social norm in most families rising to secure Islamic consciousness.

Hasrat Jehan of Matera village, presently at class fourth in the village Primary School, was one such girl whose suppression of agency by way of restriction of movement activities by physically confining her to the household chores not only diminished her ability to socialize among the peers but failed her to initially find orientation in the schooling system on getting enrolled in class one.

There are other factors basic to schooling which tend to fail the children socialized in working class culture. These include the language of instruction - radically different from what they learn in the family and the homestead, and the content of textbooks which are absolutely divorced from the culture of their upbringing. The sense of fear for the unknown has also become a fixture of early socialization of *pasmanda* Muslim girl as the consequence of certain radical changes in syncretic composite culture even in the countryside. The prevailing socio-political environment, accompanied by the feelings of distress that it generates among the ranks of disadvantaged people, places emphasis on the strength of home and neighborhood. Nobody, particularly young girls, therefore, want to face the ‘strange’ world of ‘them’, in opposition to ‘us’, outside the safety of home and the neighborhood.

It took her an annual academic session to accept the schooling system as a place she could identify with. She was readmitted to class one the next year. Her parental motivation for their daughter’s (numbering five) schooling was phenomenal: the elder daughter also graduated from the same Matera Primary School-I. Despite abject poverty and gradually inflating monetary requirements of the family, the father was straight in his opinion that girls’ education is indispensable. But it was not founded on anything, say, marital or employment prospects. The employment motive is generally absent among the *pasmanda* people with exposure to feudalistic interpretation of *Quranic* injunctions in respect of girls’ education.

It was, in the ultimate course, the tenacity of school teacher, Aijaz Fatma, to empower the young girl, Hasrat Jehan and her peers Shazia & Gulafshan, to come up and face the challenges of schooling by shedding her inhibitions and fears, while continuing her Quranic education at neighborhood primary seminary (the *maktab*). In fact, her primary attitude was not so much of fear, but mistrust, accompanied by a lack of illusion about what ‘they’ (the school people – teachers) will do. But for these children of Hasrat Jehan’s age-group, the atmosphere always had a different emotional temperature. Their fear was based on adversaries in air, with no corporal shape to inspire awe.

Besides Aijaz Fatma, the other teacher in the school, Yogita Mishra, was the first one in the school to have recourse to the CARE India’s program of early language and literacy development among beginners at cluster meeting. The informal deliberations among the peers empowered the teacher to appreciate the stock of knowledge and experience these *pasmanda* children bring to school.

Articulating the experience of teachers' development program, she developed a school library and prompted the children to interact with books in the first instance. The children participating in morning assembly were gifted with language learning activities for sheer enjoyment – with learning being essential outcome. Then, there were short stories, poems, charts and paintings collected/developed with the idea of taking the children to the realm of their family and community life through the medium of written language and other forms of cultural expressions. Hasrat Jehan, among others, got an opportunity to participate in language learning activities, beginning with spoken language/dialect, its enrichment and expansion to newer domains beyond the experiences of their socialization. As a young child, Hasrat Jehan - with certain amount of *maktab* education behind her – could find free spaces for her participation and realization of her own worth.

Despite her regularity in attendance and engagement with the school activities, she largely remained a lonely child, always withdrawn to her own self, but expressing it in creative and artistic language. She is pretty good and able to speak her young mind through drawings and paintings. And, as an artist at core, she is always hungry for recognition.

2. Participatory Institutions as a Prop to Nurturing Inner Strength of a Girl Child

Kajal Verma

Student

Primary School, Rehra Bazar



Kajal Verma of class eighth has been an exemplary student among the 291 children enrolled in the school. She was the one who could refuse to accept any false platitude about her life doled out as 'truth'. Her proactive participation in school activities - *Bal Sabha Samiti*, *Swakshta* and *Khel Samitis* – has been a factor, besides the concerted efforts of head teacher, Preeti Singh, in the process of their activation as the part of 'Start Early: Read in Time' initiative of CARE India.

One implication of her engagement with students' platforms has been in the form of the sense of collectivism and support. For instance, she would never forget to take her faltering friend, Puja, along while coming to school. And secondly, according to her own testimony, *Bal*

Sabhas helped her in shedding inhibitions and enabling to articulate her mind, even if amounting to criticism.

Daughter of Sharda Devi and Sheshram, she has been a late beginner, yet managed to cope with very early, largely on her innate strength of reading habits that she picked up from her classroom instructions as part of the pedagogical package of the CARE India with emphasis on 'Early Grade Reading' (EGR).

The interplay of TLM (Teaching-Learning Material) helped her in learning clay-modelling as a hobby, in addition to reading, brought to her by access to interesting books. Also, Maths became her favorite subject because of its problem-solving approach. And with these attributes, she is looking forward to be a teacher, a social worker, with an explicit agenda of addressing the social evils like smoking, drinking, idling etc., based on her own experience of having a drunkard father and an elder sibling.

3. Reading Aloud Breaks the Silence

Om Gupta

Student,
Mirzapur Village, Chitaura Block
Bahraich

This stunted boy, Om Gupta, belongs to the Mirzapur village in Chitaura block of the district where a community library was established by CARE India as a component of 'Star Early: Read in Time'



program to promote reading culture, especially among the first generation learners of early grade. The library allows for issuing books to members so as to give them freedom to read aloud, if they wish so, or any other way they like reading themselves, or even listening to elders reading for them.

The library was a kind of read aloud club. Some children read books there to tell a good story; a couple of them having inherited much from the tradition of storytelling and singing. The library was just building on it and enriching the tradition by providing space to young readers to access more stories and ideas. The library in-charge, Shivani, the elder sister of Om, was just focussed on one thing – promote reading to culture a reading culture, no matter the way it goes.

Om was the only child coming to library with his sister, but never got motivated to pick up a book, only watching others reading and indulging in diverse conversations. Then, by way of chance, Shivani gave him a book with illustrations on a certain day and read the text aloud for him. And that worked. He was motivated, but without losing his cornered position in the library room. His motivation was evidenced by the fact of his inquisitiveness to know about certain words in the story he was familiar with. The maiden experience of turning the pages of the illustrated book for the first time in that neighbourhood setting led him to the understanding of the link between the picture and the text which he shared with his sister. Shivani still recalls his expression of good feeling while getting back home with her after going through the book. That made her happy because of his discovery of a good companion.

The next day, he himself asked her to read another story for him. And that continued over an extended period of time. Most important result of her reading aloud was increasingly growing connect of his spoken dialect with the language of literature. It also immensely contributed to his most limited stock of words.

The most amazing thing happened on the eve of a workshop on early grade learning (EGR) organized in the village by CARE India. As an integral part of the efforts because of his sister, he raised his own name to be included in the list of storytellers. No one could believe that a child who hardly speaks would tell a story. In fact, he was mocked by all those present there. Then Shivani asked him to tell that story he was preparing to tell in the workshop. Without losing any time, he told the story of '*pakaudi* and *phulauri*' for the sheer surprize of everyone. Again, he told the same story from the dais in the workshop with sense of confidence and command over the narrative.

.....