

This policy brief is the outcome of recommendations made during the **First National Conference on Factors of Poor Learning: Challenges, Opportunities and Practices for Learning Improvement in Socially Diverse Elementary Schools of India**, organised in New Delhi on September 2-4, 2016, by **Deshkal Society in collaboration with the Language and Learning Foundation, Indian Institute of Corporate Affairs, PACS, Save the Children, India and Sulabh International Social Service Organisation.**

Submitted
To
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Background

India's classrooms increasingly reflect the socially diverse demographic reality of today. More and more children from socially marginalised communities are now attending elementary schools. According to the DISE report of 2013-14, SC and ST children constitute 19.7% and 10.6% of the total enrolment respectively. Likewise, the respective percentage share of OBC and Muslims children is 44.2 and 13.7.¹ These figures indicate that the enrolment of children from various marginalised communities in schools has increased significantly and, at present, reflects their demographic share. In other words, the enrolment exclusion is just about behind us, and the focus has moved on to sustaining retention in schools and ensuring that students achieve satisfactory learning results. The country should be well aware that any future of India depends on educating children from marginalized communities meticulously and here as a nation we are clearly falling short.

The annual ASER report indicates significantly lower achievement on basic literacy parameters by students from SC and ST communities. Another study² by the Deshkal Society in Bihar disaggregated the composite data on learning attainment which was found to be much lower than grade level across all categories. The study shows that 46.02 and 47.12% of Scheduled Caste children in Std. II can read nothing in, respectively, the districts of Gaya and Katihar. Their levels of literacy trail far behind the literacy levels of their upper caste classmates in Std. II, of which only 22.37 and 23.64 per cent failed to read anything. Teachers as well as civil society organisations across the country report similar learning deficits in SC, ST and Muslim children

¹NUEPA. 2015. *Elementary Education in India: Trends 2005-06 to 2013-14*. New Delhi: NUEPA.

²Deshkal Society. 2014. *Report on Social Diversity and Learning Achievement: The Status of Primary Education in Rural Bihar*. Delhi: Deshkal Society.

compared to the general population of children in the same schools. (For details please visit at http://deshkalindia.com/pdf/Reports/Final%20Report_22-10-14.pdf)

Many factors, economic, societal and familial, can be said to be responsible for this situation. However, experiments in relevant teaching of children from marginalised communities, though few and far between, clearly show that what happens within the school matters greatly to children's learning. The conference deliberated on these issues and looked at some successful interventions. Some critically significant issues and recommendations for concrete action emerged from the deliberations and are briefly stated below.

1. **Deficit versus Difference:** Children from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are not less intelligent or less capable. They may have different experiences and knowledge. Other languages and cultures are not inferior to the dominant one, just different. Teachers and education administrators are found to be often ignorant of these apparently self-evident truths. A belief in and commitment to these basic tenets will need to be built into the whole system of education.
2. **Context Matters:** Poor learning is the result of the wide difference between sociocultural contexts and early learning expectations. The 'knowledge' contained in textbooks and taught in class is devoid of practical learning and often represents the knowledge of the dominant section of the society to which curriculum and textbook designers and teachers usually belong. The 'tyranny of the textbook' can be broken by using graded children's literature and reading cards created for local contexts, and the knowledge of the marginalized communities needs to be brought centre stage if first generation school-goers are not to feel alienated and uninterested. Teachers, education administrators, curriculum and syllabus designers need to appreciate that

children have different social and cultural identities in order to understand the diverse backgrounds of children and to include children's knowledge and experience.

3. **Language Matters:** Language acquisition happens early and global evidence shows that children learn best in their mother tongue or the language they are most familiar with, when they join primary school. Government policy must support use of children's first languages in the classroom especially in the early primary years. This should include the need for teachers to map and understand language and cultural diversity in each classroom, using children's familiar home language to develop strong competence in the school medium of instruction and English over time. It is important to use children's first languages in the classroom in the early years to ensure comprehension, better cognitive capability and improved self-esteem of children, and to provide children with a solid basis for further academic success. For this to happen, a flexible language policy needs to be adopted, and the present subtractive approach of stigmatizing and eradicating children's home language must be discouraged. Involving community members in children's learning experiences, through storytelling, local games, local history etc, and providing a rich resource of reading material in both home and school language and English, are other critical interventions.
4. **Children in Special Circumstances:** Children who are subject to seasonal migration with families, children belonging to nomadic communities, and children in conflict zones form another category of the marginalized, and need special provisions and policies to ensure their right to quality elementary education. Seasonal hostels and residential schools, child tracking systems, coordination between departments and districts, and flexible policies for specific cases, are all necessary to support children in these situations over which they or their families have little control.
5. **Teachers and Teacher Education:** If we are to create classrooms where every child learns, we need to re-think the role of the teacher, and consequently the kind of preparation and capacity building he or she receives, both before and during service. This includes:
 - Strong belief in social justice, the ability and right of every child to learn
 - Strong agency for the teacher as a co-creator of the curriculum rather than the current role of a technician implementing centralized programmes
 - Ability and interest in creating dialogue with students, parents and the larger community to ensure contextualized learning rather than completion of syllabus
 - Ability to use a range of teaching materials and methods, as required for each child and context instead of only the prescribed ones
 - Continuous professional development through diversified strategies: pre-service, in-service, networks, resources, courses etc.
 - Preparation of many more teachers who come from marginalized communities themselves.
6. **Assessment of Learning:** Nationally the focus has been on reporting centralized aggregated figures. The expectation that all children in the same grade will master the same work at the same level and same pace is unreasonable and inappropriate. Assessment should focus on what the child knows and can do rather than on what she or he must have learnt by then. Its mechanism should be local and contextual to the child, teacher, school and parents. More work is needed on

looking at learning outcomes at local level, at school and cluster level, to understand factors and reasons, and to present teachers with specific indications for action. This would also add to accountability of the system at a local level. Secondly, the focus on narrow learning objectives tends to cause neglect of larger humanitarian goals as well as of the broader aims of education. Assessments need to look at these as well to provide feedback to teachers.

7. **No Detention Policy:** The 'no detention policy' is being cited as the reason for poor learning levels, without any evidence to show that failing children makes them learn better. Children from marginalized communities, who perform badly in assessments as seen above, are the main victims of the policy of failing students, a case of 'blame the victim'. Children from the poorest and weakest sections of society, already poorly served by our school system, are likely to drop out if labeled 'failed'. Continuous and comprehensive assessment of children, without stress and labeling, is part of good and enabling pedagogy and needs to be continued.
8. **Education versus Skill Development Programmes:** We would be doing a grave injustice to children from marginalised communities if policy was to focus on 'skilling', for instance, instead of a more holistic view of education that includes academic, social, emotional and vocational learning. Only the latter will give children the opportunity to pursue higher education and larger social and academic ambitions if they are so inclined.

9. **Early Childhood Education:** In the period between 3-6 years, when rapid brain development is taking place, it is important for all children to have a stimulating environment that helps them to develop language and cognitive abilities that will form the base of future academic achievement. Therefore, ECCE approaches need to be reinforced and continued within the early school grades, i.e. to cover the 6-8 year age group as well so as to ensure that strong foundations are built for lifelong learning. This is even more so for children from marginalized communities who enter school with multiple disadvantages. Each child should have a right to being ensured of a rich and welcoming learning environment in the pre-school years, and more crucially so in tribal hamlets and other habitations where such communities live.

The conference reiterated the belief that change is possible, and indeed there is no alternative to change if we are to achieve the national goal of having a well-educated population across all social categories and classes. Change will have to be holistic and systemic. This will have to include curriculum, textbooks, pedagogy and assessment, teacher education and academic support, language policies, and school-community linkages. Our discussion pointed towards an aspirational vision of change with commitment for social justice and equity in education. Many practical examples of how this is being achieved at small and even large scale were presented at the conference and need to be applied in different contexts to effect this change. Government needs to take this on as a major priority in the framing of the New Education Policy.