

Trying to close a widening gap!

It has been a tough two years for so many children during this pandemic period. In the nearby Government primary schools children are beginning to go back to school after 82 weeks of very little contact with teachers or their classmates and minimal access to books or stationery materials. Some were kept inside while their parents went to work and not allowed to meet their friends and most have had little encouragement to keep up with their studies. Now after two years they are back to school and trying to 'catch up' with what they have missed. They may well have learnt other things about being responsible and independent or how to manage in difficult times but opportunities to develop their reading and writing skills have been severely limited. The gap has drastically widened between the children who have had the support of online classes and the attention of their 'schooled' parents and those who were already on the margins.

Difficulties that teachers already faced have been compounded by the pandemic. Imagine being a teacher cum headmistress in a school where third, fourth and fifth standards are clubbed together. This class includes children who know very little Kannada either because they are from migrant families whose home language is Hindi, Telugu or Tamil or others who have dropped out of English medium schools with the parents' drop in income and who are suddenly faced with studying in a language that they can't read or write in. There are also pupils who drop in and out of school as their parents struggle to search for jobs in different places or cope with sickness in the family. In any class there will be a range of abilities but in this class there is a child who cannot talk and another who is so distracted that he finds it difficult to sit still. There are also newcomers who have had almost no schooling even at the age of nine or ten years. On top of all this there is a stream of demands on the teacher's head to complete all kinds of administrative tasks, attend meetings (on average one day a week) and ensure that children complete worksheets and memorize answers for upcoming tests.

It is in just this situation that Sarojini and Gousia have been trying to support the teacher and the children in a variety of ways. They work in two nearby government primary schools; in one school they spend three days a week doing classes in Kannada and environmental studies. They also run a classroom library and encourage children to share what they have read or looked at. In addition they teach one day a week in another school and are in the process of building up a small library there. In that school the buildings urgently need repair and the children mostly sit outside because the roof has been declared dangerous and storage of any materials has been a problem.

.From last July when we began to take open air classes for children attending the nearby Government primary school we were happily surprised how eager and hungry children were to learn. We had been in contact with most of the children giving book bags, ideas and materials for craft activities over the two years of the schools' closure but to have in person classes has been a joy!

In a class of 20 there were some children belonging to migrant families who didn't know Kannada, others who had forgotten nearly everything about reading and couldn't recognize or write the letters of their own name. Some remembered a few letters and vowel combinations and just two or three children who could read with some confidence. Sarojini and Gousia worked with the children in three groups using the new Kannada primer which we had developed over the last year and other resources that are designed to support children not just to decode but make meaning and connect with the written word. Children also need to develop their oral skills if they are to be empowered by literacy. The children have made small books about themselves, enjoyed reciting rhymes, learnt through playing word games and have listened and told stories to each other.

The children needed to 'catch up' with basic skills in reading and writing but they were also eager to do things with their hands, ask questions, share their stories and explore the world around them. In the last few months among other things the children have made a book together about the seasons, worked collaboratively on a scroll on the changing stages of a pumpkin plant, presented the life cycle of a butterfly through a mobile, drawn symmetrical patterns and

made a display of seedpods. The children have also been happy to choose books to take home and to share with each other through book talks and discussions what they have gleaned from the stories they have read and the information they have learnt.

Sarojini and Gousia have both had years of experience working with children and we urgently need support for them to continue the work that they have been passionately doing over many years and which feels all the more urgent as children and teachers meet the challenge of the long term effects of Covid on children's learning.

March 17th 2022

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