DISRUPTIVE
LITERACY

A ROADMAP FOR URGENT GLOBAL ACTION

DR SUNITA GANDHI

TOM DELANEY, JONATHAN HAKIM AND MASHHOOD BHAT

BLOOMSBURY

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URGENT GLOBAL ACTION

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Tom Delaney
Jonathan Hakim
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*This book is dedicated to everyone who has taught
using the Global Dream Literacy Program.
Your service and dedication are incredible!
We also dedicate this to all of the learners who have
walked with us on the path of literacy.*

It is better to light a candle than
to curse the darkness.

Praise for Disruptive Literacy

'It is a matter of great satisfaction that an initiative has been taken for the literacy and enrichment of education of children and adults in India. *Disruptive Literacy* is not only a collection of ideas, but presents research-based practical solutions. I hope that the book will be a reminder to put literacy on the top agenda. I extend my best wishes for expanding literacy and numeracy of children and adults here in Uttar Pradesh, and across India.'

– Anandiben Patel
Honourable Governor, Uttar Pradesh, India

'I am delighted that DEVI Sansthan is publishing a new book on the goal of increasing literacy in India. Literacy is a key that opens the gate to prosperity and progress. That's why universal literacy is so crucial throughout the nation. I hope that this book will be a great aid in the efforts to build literacy.' (Translated from Hindi original)

– Yogi Adityanath
Honourable Chief Minister, Uttar Pradesh, India

'Conventional school education and adult literacy programs in many Low and Middle Income Countries are quite ineffective in teaching literacy, and the literacy crisis has been exacerbated by COVID, causing millions to drop out of education. Drawing on examples of the literacy movements from around the world, Dr Sunita Gandhi outlines a broad roadmap for a literacy movement that combines mission mindedness (government leadership), mobilization (of all sectors of society) and methods (better pedagogy). I firmly believe that Disruptive Literacy is a must read for all who desire a world in which everyone is empowered with the key skills of literacy.'

– Vicky Colbert
Former Vice-Minister of Education, Colombia
Executive Director of Escuela Nueva (The New School)
Awardee Yidan Prize and others

'Sustainable Development Goal 4 is to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". For this goal to be reached, literacy should be at the centre, starting at an early

age. Literacy promotes the foundation of lifelong learning, equipping children and young people with fundamental skills for the future such as reading, writing, counting, the knowledge of their rights... That's why I have decided to join the movement for universal literacy and numeracy founded by Dr Sunita Gandhi: Global Dream.'

– Aïcha Bah Diallo
Former Minister of Education, Guinea
Founding Member, Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE)

'Sunita Gandhi has been incubating an approach to learning that can revolutionize education for everyone and become the new modus operandi. Her methods for literacy and education are truly pathbreaking.'

– Alok Ranjan
Ex-Chief Secretary, Uttar Pradesh

'The very name of the book provokes us to rethink the role of literacy in our contemporary world. It helps us understand the challenges we are encountering worldwide, and describes concrete steps forward. I'm especially fascinated with the systemic approach of the book. It reminds me of my own experience as the Head of National Curriculum Development in Finland and the lessons we learned during our extensive curriculum reform, e.g. in involving the entire population in coming up with their inputs for change. This book examines the creation of a new educational ecosystem and covers all facets of education, starting from student agency and the work of every teacher up to assessment and governance systems as well as global literacy movement. Disruptive Literacy equips us with determination and hope.'

– Irmeli Halinen
Pedagogy and Curriculum Design Expert, Finland

'The most remarkable feature of this book is that it provides a clear roadmap for policymakers on how to tackle the scourge of illiteracy that still besets a large segment of population all around the world. It is a must read for policymakers and all those associated with the campaign against illiteracy.'

– Anil Swarup
Former Secretary of Education, India

'The ability to read is a fundamental right. Literacy is the rock upon which all of democratic society rests—and yet it is a freedom denied to hundreds

of millions of people worldwide. The tragedy starts with the individual then ripples out to their family, their community and their country—but it does not stop there. It is a global crisis requiring a global response. This book presents a powerful call to action worldwide.'

– Kyle Zimmer
Founder and CEO, FirstBook

'Anyone interested in scalable, sustainable change in education and development must take this book seriously. Policymakers, government leaders and corporations can see strategic designs for maximum impact. School directors can benefit from systematic planning grounded in thorough research. Teachers in the formal and non-formal sectors can be assured of what works. Disruptive Literacy is provocative, inclusive, compelling, and accessible reading. I am filled with hope. Let's get started!'

– Fred Mednick
Founder, Teachers Without Borders,
Professor of Education Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

'The book outlines in great simplicity and yet with great sophistication, the basic fundamental issues we need to solve. Policymakers would be highly negligent not to strongly consider putting this proposal into action as soon as possible. Not only would they do the community, their nation and humanity a service, but their actions would also surely be vote-winners!'

– Robert Thorn
Founder, Developing Real Learners NPO,
Director of Academy of Learner Development

'Disruptive Literacy is a crucial piece... I truly believe this text offers guidance to student unions to serve as rallying points to bring about educational justice. I deeply appreciate the personalization of the statistics… putting a human face to numbers is a truly compassionate paradigm shift. Throughout history, students have always been the epicentre of social change—the COVID era has once again proven this to be true... Dr Sunita Gandhi reinforces the crucial roles students can play to support literacy programs to save us from losing a generation to COVID. It's urgent! It's a call to action!'

– Peter Kwasi Kodjie
Secretary-General, All-Africa Students Union

'Enabling children and adults to read is the first essential step in the journey of education. Underlining the urgency of the problem around the world, this new book makes the case that this challenge must be tackled in a mission and movement mode. It is a forceful call to action for all.'

– Rukmini Banerji
CEO, Pratham Education Foundation Awardee, Yidan Prize and others

'This book is an important voice in the education ecosystem to provide a roadmap to help reduce illiteracy globally. The concept of engaging all members of the community to promote literacy is novel and ancient at the same time.'

– Rana Dajani
Founder, We Love Reading, Jordan
Winner of 2017 UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize

'Our goal is that every child should get an education. The Global Dream toolkit is a novel method for learning and teaching, which is highly commendable. I congratulate Dr Sunita Gandhi and the team at DEVI Sansthan for their work.' (Translated from Hindi original)

– G.B. Pattanaik
Former Chair, India Literacy Board

'The ability to read is not just the foundational skill for all future learning, but a critical life skill. Empirical and anecdotal narrative, including perspective on timeline of education reform in India, and across all stakeholders, makes this book a very engaging read. At a time when we are reeling under the COVID learning loss, this book is most timely & compelling read!'

– Ashish Dhawan & Shaveta Sharma-Kukreja
Founder & Managing Director, Central Square Foundation

'*Disruptive Literacy* provides a thoughtful exposition on the global literacy crisis. Dr Sunita Gandhi and her co-authors outline a straightforward yet compelling roadmap for the world to achieve universal literacy, underscoring many of the common issues which require our immediate attention. Consideration of the ideas and proposals put forward in this book by policymakers at any level would greatly benefit our communities.

– Dame Janice M. Pereira
Chief Justice, Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court

'I'm delighted to see Disruptive Literacy disclosing a roadmap for global action. Dr. Sunita Gandhi is always contributing to achieving Global Literacy. I have seen her hard work and dedication from the initial days of Global Dream Project for Adult Literacy. I place my heartfelt appreciation for her zeal and extraordinary efforts.'

– Lalita Pradeep
Director, Literacy and Alternative Education,
Government of Uttar Pradesh

'Foundational literacy and numeracy matters as it is the first essential step for children to explore their full potential. Yet, we are facing a huge learning crisis, aggravated by the pandemic. Business as usual will not deliver the outcomes. This book is therefore an essential read for policy makers and practitioners alike seeking disruptive solutions involving all stakeholders within the education ecosystem that can be scaled up, replicated and sustained. Drawing from national and international experiences and juxtaposing these with individual testimonies makes this a compelling read!'

– Girish Menon
CEO, STiR Education

'Disruptive Literacy is action-provoking in its clarion call against literacy poverty. In simple language and drawing on landmark campaigns, it provides a 10-step roadmap for a mass people's movement underpinned by government mission, societal mobilisation and disruptive teaching methods. Whether policymaker, school leader, corporation, community organisation or individual—there's something in it for everyone!'

– Shankar Maruwada
CEO and Co-founder of Ek Step Foundation
Member, National Curriculum Framework Committee, India

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Foreword

I was introduced to Dr. Sunita Gandhi by my friend Dr. Vicky Colbert. I learnt about her initiative called Disruptive Literacy Movement that is a global coalition that aims to help achieve Universal Foundational Literacy and Numeracy by 2030, as envisioned by SDG 4. In our first online meeting she explained her upside-down Accelerating Learning for All methodology of teaching the alphabet and helping children decode words completely on their own. I thoroughly enjoyed using her Global Dream toolkit that introduces three-letter words to help five-year-olds to start reading simple sentences within weeks. I found this idea of 'disruptive literacy' powerful and agreed to associate with it as an advisor to collaborate in the reduction of the enduring differentials in abilities between children of advantaged families and children of disadvantaged families.

Disruptive Literacy: A Roadmap for Urgent Global Action is a much-needed manifesto for achieving large-scale transformation. Many low and middle income countries have been facing a learning crisis where a large proportion of children are still not able to achieve basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills even after spending years in school. In Latin America, half of the children aged 8 years and above cannot read. After the COVID-19 Pandemic, millions of children have lost two critical years of learning and now face an uncertain future. The book concludes that this crisis cannot be solved by school teachers alone, all sections of society will need to participate in a people's movement with government leadership at the top. Sunita offers concrete evidence-based solutions for reform in government policy, as well as a powerful call for action and roadmap for every stakeholder of society including NGOs, corporations, schools, universities and individuals, for a people's movement for mass literacy.

The book should be read for three main reasons. First, to understand the problem of why so many children and adults are not literate. Sunita brings her extensive policy background from her World Bank experience and her work in 50 countries to offer sharp perspectives and offer concrete reforms in policy, curriculum and pedagogy. Second, the book introduces a flipped class pedagogy and toolkit that accelerates literacy and numeracy

skills in record time, and can be delivered by anyone, anytime, anywhere. The authors draw from their experimental research and grassroots work in the schools, slums and villages of India. And third, the book makes a strong case for the revival of mass literacy campaigns to address the literacy crisis. Through detailed case studies of similar successful literacy movements in Latin America, Africa and Asia, the authors provide a policy framework for replicating these campaigns across the world. I believe this is a must read for every minister, policymaker and bureaucrat working in education.

I support Sunita's Disruptive Literacy movement and the demand to treat the literacy crisis as a global emergency. Governments must make this top priority and implement a time-bound mission to ensure no child or adult is left behind. All non-governmental stakeholders need to be mobilized for this mission. This book provides an excellent blueprint that can trigger a movement for literacy around the world. We have a historic chance to eradicate a huge social inequality and I invite all of you to join the movement.

Dr. Ernesto Schiefelbein
Chilean pedagogue, economist and educator
Former Minister of Education, Chile

Introduction

Fighting the Illiteracy Pandemic

'Can I learn to read at this age?'

Sufia, aged about 40, asked a simple yet deep question as we stood next to her bamboo-and-plastic shack by the side of a railway track.

She didn't have the opportunity to go to school as a child. She had never attended an adult literacy program. But now, encouraged by her children's progress in our literacy classes, she plucked up the courage to express her interest in learning to read.

As Sufia knew, literacy is a crucial skill. Recognising this, Sustainable Development Goal 4 sets out a target for all children (4.1) and a 'substantial proportion' of adults (4.6) to reach universal literacy by 2030. But are we on track? Let's take stock.

The Big Picture: An Illiteracy Pandemic

The gradual gains in literacy that had been made over the past decades have been neutralised in just two years due to the COVID-19 crisis. The disruption to education has been bad enough worldwide but it has been worst in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), including India, where tens of millions of children already lacked foundational literacy and numeracy skills before the pandemic.[1]

Internationally, the progress made in reducing child labour and underage marriages over the last two decades has been undone.[2] A large number of children have dropped out of school; some may never return to education. The future of an entire generation is at risk.

Why Disruptive Literacy?

Amidst the havoc wreaked by the COVID-19 pandemic, many wish for a return to 'normalcy'. But the sad reality is that the status quo before COVID-19—marginal increases in literacy rates, education systems that left millions behind—was never good enough. The pandemic, then,

serves as a jolt to starkly reveal inequalities that have long festered under the surface. Let us not return to the status quo, but rather build back a better education system. It's time for a disruptive approach, one which demands literacy and education for all. It's time for a rapid response—treating this as the crisis it is, acting swiftly to reach universal literacy. It's time for a form of teaching that accelerates learning, rather than using the same old paradigms which result in children sitting in schools for years without learning the basics. This need not be the case—our transformative methods, based on research and evidence, show that rapid gains in learning are possible.

This manifesto calls for everyone—from governments and top leaders to each and every citizen—to commit to universal literacy. If we start together today, it is possible to make the whole world literate: in two years, not 20 or 40! We are calling for a literacy movement that:

- Commits to the urgent *mission* of universal literacy, giving it a top priority
- *Mobilises* all segments of society, from schools and colleges to NGOs to corporations to ordinary individuals
- Uses groundbreaking *methods* of teaching literacy that are swift and effective

It might seem impossible to bring about a transformation of this magnitude, but the COVID-19 crisis has shown that remarkable change can happen rapidly. When faced with a public health emergency, huge funds have been rapidly mobilised in response. Several COVID-19 vaccines have been developed, tested and rolled out at an unprecedented pace and scale. When stakeholders worked together in a mission mode, the seemingly impossible has been achieved.

We need 'the reading bug' to transmit even more infectiously than a virus in this mass movement! Every illiterate person should be empowered with the key skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. If every literate person contributes to this noble mission, then very soon we will have a fully literate world.

From Macro to Micro and Back Again

When governments at all levels, NGOs, corporates, schools, colleges and individuals act together, tremendous change is possible in a short period. India eliminated polio because the Pulse Polio mission was carried out with great enthusiasm and commitment from top to bottom. From Cuba to South Korea, several countries have achieved universal

literacy in record time through people's movements spearheaded by governments. If it has worked for them, why can't we do the same for the whole world?

Doctors and nurses have done a magnificent job fighting COVID-19. Ultimately, however, the war against the virus cannot be left to our healthcare heroes alone. The collective actions of individuals like you and me—wearing masks, socially distancing, sanitising our hands—are critical. In much the same way, while teachers are heroically working for literacy, we cannot leave this massive responsibility to them alone. As enabled through a people's movement, participation of the community is invaluable for school education and adult literacy. Both the macro-level (government policy, political will, adequate funding) and the micro-level (actions of schools and colleges, community groups, and ordinary individuals like you and me) are crucial.

The Gift of a Lifetime

Many of us give to charity, but this often has only a short-term impact. In contrast, literacy is a lifelong gift: once someone learns to read and write, they will have those skills forever. Literacy can even be a longer-than-life gift due to the inter-generational impact it has, through parents passing on the gift of literacy to their children.

And what of Sufia? She conquered her self-doubts, learning to read swiftly using the Global Dream Accelerating Literacy for All (ALfA) program. The next time she went to a parent-teacher meeting at her child's school, the teacher, knowing Sufia was illiterate, invited her to make a thumb impression in the register. Imagine her surprise and delight when Sufia reached for a pen instead to sign in the register for the first time.

There are 770 million illiterate adults in the world. 50 per cent of 10-year-olds in LMICs can't read. These are not just data: behind each statistic, there is a story of a real person like Sufia. A person waiting for their lives to be changed with the gift of literacy.

This book is being launched as part of the Global Disruptive Literacy Movement.[3] We hope you will take part and join the campaign!

Decisive action is needed. If not now, then when? If not you, then who?

Let's seize the moment and make history.

A Mass Movement for Literacy: Three Key Ingredients

1. **Mission:** Government gives literacy foremost importance in a time-bound mission, for example, for two years. Tremendous motivation and momentum can be generated and channelled in a short period of time. Government mission-mindedness needs to extend to structural changes in education systems. We need long-term thinking and short-term action.

2. **Mobilisation:** The involvement of all segments of society is vital. Schools and colleges, corporates, NGOs, individuals and the government at all levels—everyone has an important role to play. Coordination of all stakeholders is crucial, for instance, through a national level app, in which each illiterate individual is identified and paired up with someone responsible for teaching them.

3. **Methods:** The old ways of teaching literacy are time-consuming and based on rote learning. We need new techniques that are research-based, swift and effective. For instance, Global Dream Accelerating Learning for All (ALfA) enables foundational literacy and numeracy to be taught in just 30–50 hours over 3–5 months, instead of 3–5 years.

Part A

A New Mandate:
Literacy is the Need of the Age

*Literacy is the road to human progress and
the means through which every man, woman and child
can realise his or her full potential.*
– Kofi Annan

POINTS TO PONDER

**Why does literacy matter in the lives of people and
the life of a nation?**

**Why are so many adults and children unable
to read and write?**

**Why have existing policies and institutions not been
able to solve this problem?**

How can we shift the paradigm?

The Literacy Octopus
One Measure, Multiple Benefits

Being a non-literate member of a community has innumerable disadvantages, including the inability to:

- *Carry out basic financial transactions such as compare the quality and quantity of goods purchased against the price charged*
- *Fill out forms to apply for jobs, loans, services, etc.*
- *Comprehend public circulars and articles in the news media*
- *Use conventional and electronic mail to communicate and conduct business*
- *Make use of the internet and other technology to improve one's life and professions*
- *Comprehend directions and safety directives on the street, on medicines, etc.*
- *Help children with their education; be aware of one's basic rights and responsibilities as a citizen of India*
- *Appreciate works of literature*
- *Pursue employment in medium- or high-productivity sectors that require literacy*

     – **National Education Policy (India)**, 2020, Chapter 21.2

In my view the imposing tower of misery which today rests on the heart of India has its sole foundation in the absence of education.

– Rabindranath Tagore
Indian leader, poet and Nobel laureate

If you are reading this line, you are, by definition, literate. In all probability, your entire circle of friends and family is literate.

You, like us, live in the Literate World.

We in the Literate World use our ability to read and write and manipulate numbers all the time, often taking it for granted. From the

market to the meeting room, from hospitals to home, our use of the written word and numeral is as ubiquitous, essential and unnoticed as the air we breathe.

Yet have you ever imagined what it is like to be illiterate? To not be able to fill in a form without asking for help? To not be able to help your child with their homework? To not be able to understand your doctor's prescription? To fear that you might be cheated, just because of your inability to read a form and sign your own name?

There's another world out there: the Illiterate World. Its citizens walk the same streets that we do. They are working in low-paid jobs, minding our children, cleaning our buildings and driving our vehicles. But have we ever taken the time to realise that their lives are very different to ours; and that much of this difference has its root in the (in)ability to read and write?

This book is all about how we can rapidly achieve universal literacy. The current chapter asks why literacy matters in the first place, examining how it shapes our lives. The next two chapters examine why so many children and adults are unable to read and write.

"Literacy is the bridge from misery to hope."
Kofi Annan

"Literacy is the vaccine for poverty."
Dr Stephen Peters

"Literacy is the foundation of all learning"
National Education Policy, India
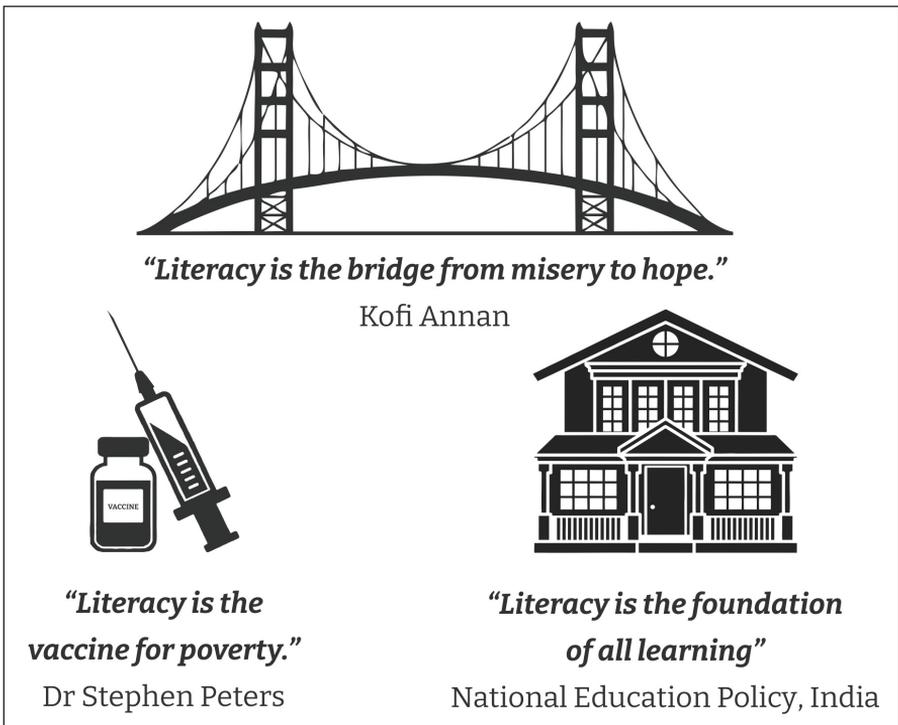
Figure 1.1: Literacy is Central to Human Wellbeing and Development

A child cannot reach her full potential without the foundation of literacy. In the same way, without the foundation of universal literacy, a nation cannot reach its social and economic potential.

Literacy is important in and of itself: reading and writing are enjoyable and enlightening. But literacy also affects a host of critical life issues. The ability to read and write has a significant impact on our self-confidence, health outcomes, income and civic participation.

Literacy is like a key that opens not one but many doors of opportunity. Literacy is like an octopus, whose tentacles reach every corner of our social, civic, familial and economic lives. Here, we look into the significant impact of literacy on eight crucial areas of life.

Income

'100 minus 35 leaves 65, not 75, auntie,' we explain, handing back the extra 10-rupee note. The shopkeeper grins sheepishly, embarrassed by her error in giving back too much change.

There is a strong positive correlation between literacy and income level.[4] This is true both at the individual level (literate people earn more) and the national level (countries with higher literacy rates tend to have higher per capita Gross Domestic Product [GDP]).[5]

Literate people tend to be more confident, and literacy opens opportunities for them to work in the formal economy, and thus have greater job security. For people who remain in the informal sector, like the shopkeeper above, basic literacy and numeracy skills are crucial to succeed in their daily business.

Health

'Hamara form bhar do, please, bhaiya.' (Please can you fill this form for me, brother.)

We are standing in the bustling ground floor of a government hospital in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh (India's most populous state). As we fill out one registration form, several other patients come to ask us if we can help them complete their forms as well.

In another instance, I (Tom) was admitted in a COVID-19 ward along with some 40 other patients. The doctors asked patients to regularly check their pulse, blood pressure and oxygen saturation levels, and report via WhatsApp. It quickly became apparent that many of my fellow ward-mates couldn't read and understand numbers on the thermometer, forget about being digitally literate!

> *Diving Deeper: What is Literacy?*
>
> Literacy is sometimes regarded as just being able to sign a name. However, it involves much more than that. 'Literacy' is a term that is often used to connote foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN), which means the ability to read and write with comprehension in at least one language, and count and perform simple mathematical operations. Literacy further involves the confidence to use these skills in everyday life. Literacy is not binary but rather a continuum. Some people are more literate than others, that is, better able to use reading, writing and arithmetic in their everyday lives.[6] Sadly, many people who are counted as 'literate' in government surveys can neither read with comprehension nor write confidently. Hence, they are not functionally literate.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that literacy has a positive impact on public health. This is because reading increases the ability of people to engage well with the healthcare system, from the very basics—being able to read a medicine label—to life-and-death decisions, like going to a proper hospital before it is too late. Literacy has a particularly powerful effect on lowering infant mortality. A Cambridge University study of Indian districts found that an increase of just 4 percentage points in literacy had the same effect size in lowering infant mortality as a 25 per cent reduction in the poverty rate.[7]

In recent months, the COVID-19 crisis has once again highlighted the role of literacy in public health. How are people who are illiterate supposed to use Arogya Setu (India's contact tracing app) or book themselves a vaccination slot?

Population Growth Rate

'Hum do, hamaare do!' (Two of us, two of ours!)

The slogan is memorable from family planning campaigns over the years in India. While access to family planning services is key, arguably the best contraceptive has nothing to do with pills.

There is a strong body of evidence showing that growth in literacy rates leads to a decline in fertility rates, thereby curtailing the population growth rate.[8] This is primarily through young women becoming more empowered within the family to decide when to have children and how many children to have. Literacy also enables couples to better understand the different contraceptive options available and choose what suits them best.

Diving Deeper: Literacy Inequalities Around the World

Low levels of literacy are a problem in many low-and-middle-income countries (LMICs) worldwide. Much of Africa and South Asia are illiteracy hotspots. Further, even some high-income countries struggle with low literacy skills.

While steady progress has been made, the world still has some 770 million illiterate adults.[9] Another 617 million children and adolescents (aged 6–14) lack basic reading and maths proficiency.[10] Globally, 260 million children are out of school, and 53 per cent of 10-year-olds in LMICs still lack basic reading skills.[11] According to UNICEF, since the COVID pandemic this figure has worsened drastically—now some 70% of children lack basic literacy![12]

This book has global scope, relevant for many countries worldwide. While we use many international examples, our focus is naturally on India where it is more deeply informed by our experiences. India has by far the largest population of illiterate adults globally and a huge learning crisis in its schools. Some of India's districts have as low literacy rates as almost anywhere on earth: for instance, Alirajpur (Madhya Pradesh) has an adult literacy rate of just 36 per cent. In India, half of Grade 5 students can't read a Grade 2 text in their mother-tongue.

Table 1.1: Comparison of India and the World on Literacy Metrics

Demographic	*Metric*	*India*	*World*
Adults	Literacy (%)	74%[13]	86%[14]
Adults	Number of Illiterates (millions)	252[15]	773[16]
Primary School age (6–11 y.o)	Number of Illiterates (millions)	50+[17]	387[18]
School age (6–17 y.o)	Out-of-School Children (millions)	32[19]	260[20]

Civic Participation

People who are illiterate struggle to engage meaningfully as citizens in the civic process. It is hard to make informed choices if you cannot read newspapers and access written information. When large swathes of the population are illiterate, democracy suffers. In contrast, literate people are generally more able to have informed engagement in civic and public life.[21]

Democracy is much more robust when people can read and analyse information for themselves. Recent research has shown that literacy rate is strongly correlated with the desire to be governed democratically.[22]

Throughout history, democracy has advanced when the common people are empowered to scrutinise the government's decisions. Many democracies have, at least on paper, strong systems to ensure transparency and hold the government accountable. For instance, India's Right to Information Act enables citizens to ask pertinent questions of any government official and mandates a response within a month. Literate citizens are much more able to use such mechanisms to ensure their rights are upheld.

Access to Government Services

Literate people are generally more aware of their rights and more capable of accessing them. Many countries have numerous schemes to help the poor. In India, this ranges from ration cards (subsidised food grains) to *Aayushman Bharat* (health insurance) to *Awas Yojna* (public housing). Often, the poor cannot access these schemes directly and instead are dependent on middlemen, who charge substantial fees. Low literacy skills and lack of awareness are the main culprits.[23]

In some of the slums where we teach, we have been asked by many families to assist them in accessing government schemes. Some of the people get in a real tangle with faults in their paperwork, for instance, due to their name being spelt differently on their various documents. Those who can read are generally better able to manage their documentation.

Social Equality

'My husband was so amazed when I signed my name rather than using a thumb impression,' Mona excitedly told her friends. She had recently learned to read and write in our Global Dream ALfA Program (for details on Global Dream, see Part D).

Equalising access to information is a great force for social equality. Historically, there have been enormous gender, geographical and caste differentials in literacy rates. This entrenches social inequality. Learning to read can be an important step on a disadvantaged person's journey of empowerment, both by having more voice within the family and by being more able to engage with broader society. The struggle for universal literacy goes hand-in-hand with the struggle for gender and racial equality.

Self-confidence in Social Interactions

We once sat in the home of a young woman who had expressed a desire to learn to read. Before beginning, she poured out her heart. 'I'm afraid even

to leave the slum. What if I want to come home, but I don't know which bus to get on? I cannot even read where the buses are going; I will just be lost in the city! I have never gone anywhere.'

This woman was 22 years old, yet was terrified of taking public transportation. Lack of literacy often leads to lack of confidence. Added up over millions of individuals, a literate nation is a confident nation.

There is a sense of shame in using a thumb impression. People who are illiterate often have to depend on strangers to read and fill forms. They live in fear of being cheated. In contrast, literate people are generally more able to interact with the world confidently and are less fearful of others cheating them.[24] And that confidence in daily interactions impacts their aspirations. It shapes what they can achieve for themselves and their families.

Children's Future

In 2015, our NGO conducted a large-scale literacy survey of Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh.[25] The survey directly tested the literacy of some 1.5 million people, finding a strong correlation between adult and child literacy rates at the local level. Literate parents are more likely to ensure their children learn how to read, and these literate children, in turn, grow to become literate parents who value education.

Indeed, it is our conviction that literacy holds immense benefits for adults and children alike which led us to write this book. Often adult literacy is considered an entirely separate topic to children's education, but we believe that these are as closely linked as two sides of the same coin.

We cannot solve the problem of illiteracy for adults without addressing the same for children. With the COVID-19 pandemic forcing millions of children to drop out of school, the pool of illiterate adults will swell unless immediate action is taken to bring the children back into the educational fold.

Conversely, it is difficult to resolve the crisis of child illiteracy without addressing adults' literacy. Community and parental involvement are crucial to ensuring children are enrolled and attending school.[26]

Taking these eight factors together (Figure 1.2, overleaf), you can see how increasing literacy rates is one of the key drivers helping populations become healthier, wealthier and more socially and civically engaged. To bring it back to a personal level, consider the stories of three people at different stages of life and see what practical differences literacy is making for them.
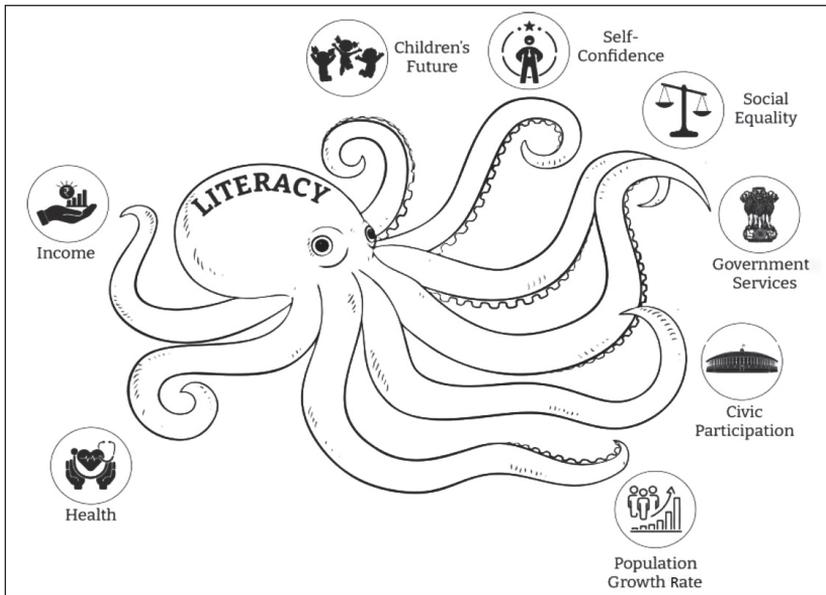
Figure 1.2: Literacy as an Octopus: How Reading and Writing Affects Many Spheres of Life

Stories Behind the Statistics: A Tale of Three Literacy Learners

Believing in a Child's Potential

With a father who drank and a mother with various health issues, education was not prioritised for Shaniya or her siblings. At nine years of age, she had never been to school, but had a passion for learning and was keen to join our literacy classes. After just 11 hours of instructional time (44 sessions of approximately 15 minutes each), spread over three months, she went from total illiteracy to being able to read simple stories. Impressed with her rapid progress, Shaniya's mum managed to enrol her in school. Three years on, Shaniya is a confident young woman in Grade 6.

The Boy Who Liked Maths

Humaid was a 14-year-old when we first met him. He was already semi-literate, having studied for a few years in a madrassa (Islamic education centre). However, he struggled with several *matras*[1] and was a very slow reader. He had recently moved to the city with his older brother

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[1] In Hindi and many Indian languages, a *matra* is the symbol for a vowel when it is preceded by a consonant.

and was keen to resume his education. After brushing up his matra skills for several weeks, we began reading newspapers together. We quickly discovered that his real passion was maths. Together, we swept through basic operations before moving on to topics like geometry and algebra. Eventually, we were able to help Humaid enrol in Grade 10 National Institute of Open Schooling. Greater literacy and numeracy skills have also opened up employment opportunities, and he has since worked as a bus conductor and accounts assistant—jobs he wouldn't otherwise have accessed.

The Shopkeeper Who Learned to Read

Reshma, 35, helped her husband run a shop by the side of the road in one of the slums where we teach. Reshma heard about our class, and kept sending us messages via her nephew. Eventually, we visited her shop and ran a first lesson in the cramped space. From her warm smile and insistence on getting down to work, it was apparent how determined Reshma was to learn how to read. Reshma and her husband would often order chai for us, and we would all drink tea together as she worked through the Global Dream ALfA Program. In time, we progressed to numeracy, which was highly relevant for her job. The self-confidence Reshma has gained, and her practical skills, are of great benefit to her and her family. It was a joy for us, too: we felt a helper's high to see her smile!

Those are the stories of just three people who learned to read and write through the Global Dream Program. What about the hundreds of millions who still cannot? The next two chapters consider the sobering question: given how beneficial literacy is, why are so many children and adults still unable to read and write?

Reflection Questions

1. This chapter lists eight crucial areas linked to literacy: income, health, population growth rates, civic participation, access to government services, social equality, self-confidence, and impact on children. Which of these areas are most important to you as an individual? Are any of these factors surprising to you?
2. Think through a typical day in your life, from your preparation in the morning to your work to your leisure time. How often do you find reading, writing or arithmetic essential in your everyday life?

The Illiteracy Time Bomb

Why can't the Children Read?

There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way it treats its children.

– Nelson Mandela

The global disruption to education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic constitutes the worst education crisis on record.
– UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank combined report
'The State of Global Education Crisis'

The ability to read and write, and perform basic operations with numbers, is a necessary foundation and an indispensable prerequisite for all future schooling and lifelong learning. However, various governmental as well as non-governmental surveys indicate that we are in a learning crisis: a large proportion of students currently in elementary school—estimated to be over five crores (50 million) in number—have not attained foundational literacy and numeracy.

– National Education Policy (India), 2020, Chapter 2.1

'*A, la, ga … ala-ga … alag*'

After a little struggle, the young teenager was excited to read a three-letter word in his very first session with us. We were conducting a diagnostic test to determine his reading level before starting the lessons. He knew most of his letters but struggled to join them into words.

'Did you go to school at all when you were younger?', we inquire.

Shadab is taken aback. 'I am in school now,' he responds. 'Grade 6. I got back from school an hour ago.'

Now it's our turn to be surprised! How could he not have acquired the simple skill of reading in school? As he continued to study with us, we were pleased to see him learn to read in just 46 sessions of about 15

minutes each over two months (12 hours)—a feat he hadn't accomplished in six years of school.

Shadab is not alone. An estimated 50 million primary school students (Grade 1–8) in India cannot read, write or do basic arithmetic: the very foundations of learning![27] If a few children do poorly in classes, we say they are failing at school. But if a considerable proportion of children are not learning the basics at school, then we must reverse the phrase: it is the schools which are failing our children! Research shows that, taught the right way, almost all children can learn to read.[28] So how is it that so many are not learning this key skill?

Our survey of Lucknow was conducted in 2015, in conjunction with the government of Uttar Pradesh, with 3,957 primary and pre-primary teachers as enumerators. We found that, on average, just 22 per cent of illiterate students learn to read with each additional year of schooling.[29] Take a moment to let this figure sink in. Suppose we have a class of 30 students in Grade 5, of whom 15 are unable to read. Just three of these children will likely become literate over the next year; the Grade 6 class will still have 12 students who can't read.

'Surely half the students will not be unable to read in Grade 5', you may be thinking. Unfortunately, that is the exact situation many of our schools find themselves in, as has been shown by numerous studies.[30] The Annual Status of Education Report, Rural (ASER, 2018) showed that just 15 per cent of Grade 2 students could read a Grade 2 text. By the end of primary school, only 50 per cent of Grade 5 students could read a Grade 2 level story. Even by Grade 8, 27 per cent of students were still unable to master the simple text. There is an identical story with low numeracy levels. By Grade 8, one-third of students were still unable to solve a two-digit subtraction problem. And this is before the COVID-19 crisis—which
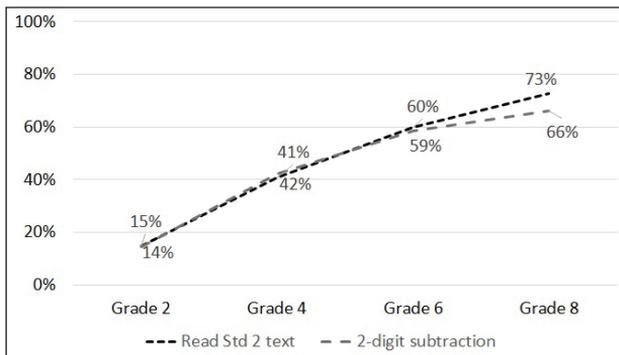
Figure 2.1: Reading and Arithmetic Levels of Indian Rural Primary and Upper Primary Students (ASER, 2018)

has meant two years of educational disruption, and for many, a regression as they have forgotten earlier learnings.[31]

And it's not just India. According to a World Bank report (2019), 53 per cent of children in LMICs are in Learning Poverty, defined as not being able to read a simple text by age 10. The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated this, with the rate of Learning Poverty now estimated to have risen to 70 per cent.[32]

Without dramatic and timely intervention we will lose much of this generation to illiteracy. If we cannot reach these children, many will miss out on literacy for their whole lives, swelling the number of adults who do not have such foundational skills.

The literacy crisis facing children in India and many LMICs can be understood using a simple framework, which we call The Leaky Bucket (Figure 2.2). To understand why the literacy outcomes are so poor, we need to realise that there are huge inefficiencies and losses in the education system. In order to turn around the destiny of tens of millions of children like Shadab, we need to address five key issues holding back our education system.

Input: millions of teachers, tens of millions of children

Output: Approx 2 out of 3 school hours wasted

3% Not Enrolled

28% Students Absent

15% Teachers Absent

Outcome: by Grade 5, only half of students can solve a 2-digit subtraction and read a 2nd Grade text

55% Teacher's non-Teaching Time
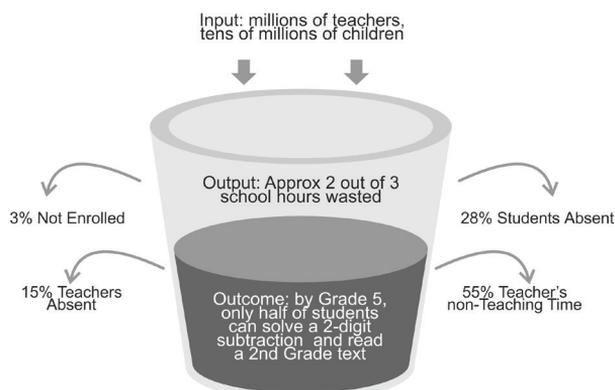
Figure 2.2: The Leaky Bucket of Indian Public Primary Schools[33]

Student Enrolment

The first factor of learning potential loss is that some children are not enrolled in school to start with. India has made great strides in student enrolment, having now reached a figure of 97 per cent enrolment for primary schools.[34] The government at all levels is to be commended in its efforts to roll out education throughout the nation, from the densest slums to the remotest villages. However, in some LMICs, low student enrolment remains a huge problem. In Sub-Saharan Africa, some 20 per cent of primary-school-age children are out of school.[35]

In India, too, there are still millions of children who have never been to school, and tens of millions more who drop out prematurely. It is quite common, in particular, for children to drop out after completing Grade 5 or Grade 8. At the national level, 28 per cent of 14–15-year-olds are out of school; in Uttar Pradesh, the figure is a whopping 38 per cent.[36] According to the National Sample Survey Organisation, some 32 million children (aged 6–17) were out-of-school in 2017–18: and this is likely to have at least doubled due to COVID-19.[37] Two of the primary reasons young people drop out of school are child labour and underage marriages.

Stories Behind the Statistics

Danish: A Day in the Life of a Child Labourer

Danish's father died of lung cancer when he was 10. From this tender age, he was thrust into a work schedule that would break most adults:

- 7 am to 1 pm: School. Even after his father's death, Danish continued school until finishing Grade 8 at the age of 13.
- 1:30 pm to 5 pm: Arabic and Urdu lessons and religious education at the madrassa.
- 5 pm to 7 pm: Manual labour at the screen-printing shop, an illegal child labour mill in his slum. He started at age 10, soon after his father's death. Some of the children working there are as young as five or six.
- 7 pm to 11 pm: Pharmacist's assistant, pulling medications off the shelves at the local slum medical dispensary. Danish started that work before his father died, and did it for the first two years unpaid, then began earning ₹60 ($0.80) per week.
- 11 pm to 3 am: Back to the screen-printing shop. For the first three years, he only made ₹50 ($0.70) per week for those six hours a day.
- 3 am to 7 am: Sleep. Though, understandably, he often slept at his desk at school as well!

At age 13, Danish dropped out and started screen-printing for 13 hours each day, getting a raise to ₹80 ($1.10) per day. Since turning 16, he's moved on to work as a salesman and a driver, but without 10th pass or 12th pass credentials, Danish will likely remain stuck in the cycle of poverty.

That's the life of just one child labourer. There are millions of children across India and around the world working similar back-breaking schedules, with their daily survival hanging by a thread.

COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on girls, with an estimated 10 million more children likely to be married in the next five years, globally, due to the pandemic.[38] We have experienced this ourselves in slums where we work, with girls as young as 16 being married off illegally, the COVID-19 restrictions being a convenient excuse to push through a low-cost wedding. As well as putting girls at risk of early pregnancy and domestic violence, underage marriages also terminate many young women's dreams of further study. The spike in poverty caused by COVID-19 has put numerous out-of-school children at greater risk of trafficking, as reported by several NGOs working on these issues.[39] Millions more children also risk being pushed into child labour due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as many parents have lost jobs and fallen further into poverty. Globally, this could lead to the first rise in child labour after 20 years of progress, according to the International Labour Organisation and UNICEF.[40]

Student Attendance

Along with non-enrolment and dropping out, the second factor impeding learning is that many children enrolled on paper have extremely inconsistent attendance. In India, ASER (2018) found that just 72 per cent of primary and upper primary students attend school on any given day![41] Why do many children attend school so intermittently? Some students fall ill frequently due to unsafe water, poor nutrition, or an unsanitary environment. Others have parents who are migrant workers, often going back and forth between village and city depending on work availability, seasonal agriculture, festivals and family events.

There is a vicious cycle between lack of attendance and lack of literacy. Our experience working in many slums attests to the fact that students who don't attend school regularly often struggle to learn how to read, making them more vulnerable to taunts from other students and punishments from the teacher, thereby further reducing their motivation to attend. Breaking this cycle—especially for children who suffer from attention or behavioural issues—can require great patience and perseverance.

The COVID-19 pandemic has derailed education for tens of millions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, in part due to being on the wrong side of the digital divide. ASER (2020) found that only one-third of students had received any learning materials or activities in a reference week during the pandemic, and one-third of students had not been in contact with their teachers at all for six months, from March to September

2020.[42] Many of these students have had extremely sporadic attendance from then until the present, too.

Internationally, the quantity of learning loss due to the pandemic is mind-boggling. At its peak, over one billion children in low- and middle-income countries were affected by school closures. Simulations suggest that the current generation of school-children will lose around $17 trillion of lifetime earning due to this educational crisis.[43]

Stories Behind the Statistics

Bolu: Getting Literate Five Minutes at a Time

Bolu was an eight-year-old boy who came from a family with many struggles. He roamed the alleyways with his friends rather than attending school. When we invited him to our class, several neighbours mocked him, saying he was too stupid a child and would never learn anything.

After the first few sessions, it became clear that Bolu had some attention issues and had no idea how to focus on or comprehend letters. We had to keep his lessons very short (at most five to six minutes). Still, he could be a troublemaker, often running away before he had finished the session. Over time, we saw him improve gradually, more able to focus, more willing to listen to instructions, more in control of his actions and emotions.

Even as Bolu progressed in the program, he continued to have attention and behavioural difficulties. But no matter how many times he ran away, we encouraged him to come back and read the next day. Finally, after one year and 115 extra-short lessons, Bolu could read storybooks competently and pass the literacy post-test (Grade 3 level).

We were especially encouraged when Bolu's father began taking him and his brothers to the government school every morning—the first time anyone in their family had attended school! We are certain that Bolu's progress in the Global Dream Program and the demonstration that he could learn was an important part of him being mainstreamed into the classroom. But while we were able to show patience with Bolu, schools are often not so flexible for children with attention and behavioural issues. Sadly, several years after entering, Bolu still has only intermittent school attendance.

While students from middle-class families typically have access to smartphones and internet connectivity, those who are socio-economically

disadvantaged often lack it. As ASER (2020) found, some 62 per cent of families have at least one smartphone, but many of them may have only one phone which is used by older members, and some don't have data on their phone. A study by Azim Premji University found that a shocking 92 per cent of Indian children have lost at least one literacy skill, and 82 per cent have lost a numeracy skill.[44] The pandemic is thus further widening existing educational disparities and severely reducing student attendance, not just in India but in LMICs around the world.[45]

Teacher Attendance

Even if a child is enrolled in school and attending regularly, it is still no guarantee that they are learning. The third factor leading to learning loss is low teacher attendance. How will the children learn when no one shows up to teach? Lack of regular teacher attendance is a huge issue in many classrooms. According to a 2005 World Bank study, 25 per cent of government teachers in India were absent on any given day.[46] More recent studies show that the average government school teacher has an absenteeism rate of 15 to 20 per cent.[47] These missing work days cost the taxpayer a staggering ₹100 billion ($1.4 billion) annually.[48]

Teacher absenteeism is not a problem unique to India but rather is prevalent in many LMICs. A recent UNESCO study of Sub-Saharan and Eastern African countries found absenteeism rates ranging from 15 to 45 per cent.[49] Even if the teachers are marked as present, late arrival and early departure are common issues. The atmosphere of impunity has grown to such an extent that some teachers hire substitutes to sit in class for them at a fraction of their own salary.[50]

What can be done to improve teacher attendance? The UNESCO report identifies factors such as greater monitoring and accountability by school heads and boosting parental and community involvement. This can be a challenge, particularly in rural areas of India where the majority of children studying in government schools come from low-caste, disadvantaged backgrounds, whereas teachers often come from better-off communities and may live some distance from the neighbourhood of the school.[51] This dynamic often impedes social cohesion between teachers and the community. Part B of this book discusses some of the structural changes needed to ensure that all teachers are attending school.

Teachers' Non-teaching Time

Compounding the problem of teacher absenteeism, many teachers who are physically present in the classroom are not actively teaching. Many

diligent teachers want to do their jobs well, but much of a teacher's time is taken up by non-teaching activities: taking the roll, marking student work, filing documentation.[52] Add to this the extra roles often given to teachers: from administrative tasks to disaster relief work, from encouraging the uptake of family planning to running elections.[53] The National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, India, recently found that, during an election period, just 19 per cent of teachers' time was spent teaching![54] Further afield, a UNESCO report found that between 4 and 27 per cent of teachers' classroom time was lost to non-teaching activities in various Sub-Saharan African countries.[55]

Poor Pedagogy

All the four factors discussed above—student enrolment, student attendance, teacher attendance and teacher time spent on task—are relatively easy to quantify. Multiplying together these numbers for Indian government primary schools yields a very disturbing figure: at any given moment of a school day, less than one-third of 10-year-olds are attending school with the teacher present and teaching in the classroom!

> 97 per cent student enrolment × 72 per cent student attendance × 85 per cent teacher attendance × 45 per cent teacher time spent teaching = 27 per cent of time used constructively.

Yet the rates of learning are so low that even these four quantifiable factors do not explain why such a large proportion of children attend school for years without learning the basics of literacy and numeracy. For a child like Shadab, even considering that two-third of school hours may have been wasted, five years' enrolment in school still corresponds to over 1,300 instructional hours![56] Surely, this should have been enough for him to learn the simple skill of reading?

Poor pedagogy is the missing factor that prevented Shadab, and millions of his peers, from learning these basic skills at school. Even when students and teachers are present, and lessons are being held, the way those lessons are conducted is often highly problematic.[57]

School teachers in India and many LMICs rely predominantly on rote learning, which research shows is an ineffective technique. It is understandable. They themselves were taught this way in their own schooling experiences. Teacher trainings seem to often not have a substantial impact on teaching practice.

Please be assured that we are not blaming teachers as individuals. Rather, it is the education ecosystem as a whole that needs to be

transformed. The same teacher moving into a different environment may do a much better job.

Curriculum and Teaching-Learning Materials (TLMs) are also crucial to a child's learning. Unfortunately, much of our current curriculum is teacher-centric and difficult for children to follow on their own. There is a disconnect between most children's learning levels, and what is expected of them in the curriculum. For instance, the curriculum keeps marching ahead at pace with each grade, even while millions of children like Shadab remain stuck, unable to comprehend their textbooks simply because they can't read. Part D offers a deep dive into the science of how literacy and numeracy can be taught more effectively. For now, suffice it to say that the style of teaching common in many of our schools is not helping our children realise their full potential.

What about Recent Initiatives?

While we've painted a depressing picture of the state of children's literacy, surely there are some positive signs of improvement in the education system? This section discusses some of the legal and policy mechanisms in place to reform the education system and work towards universal child literacy. Great legislation and policy has been enacted over the past few years, but this needs to be complemented by urgent action at the ground level.

In India, the Right to Education Act (RTE, 2009) establishes the right to a compulsory, free and quality education for all children aged 6–14 and charges governments and parents with the duty to ensure this right is realised.

The RTE, combined with the mid-day meal scheme (a free feeding program for all government primary students), has succeeded in lifting enrolment rates to the point that the vast majority of children now go to school at least some of the time. However, the RTE's intentions to improve the quality of education have proven much tougher to implement.

The RTE has an inputs-based approach; it assumes that learning will occur if certain quantifiable, tangible inputs are in place. Hence, it stipulates pupil-teacher ratios (30:1 in primary and 35:1 in upper primary), distance requirements (must have a primary school within 1 km) and minimum infrastructure (all schools must have a dedicated play area, etc.).

These are all good and necessary improvements. However, the focus on inputs in no way guarantees learning outcomes. As we've seen, there are other crucial, less tangible factors that have a greater impact on the quality

of education. While having a library is important, even more crucial are teacher motivation and pedagogy—without which the students may not be able to learn to read and thus can't take advantage of the library! Though essential, the *physical environment*—the presence of desks and chairs and blackboards—does not ensure that learning will take place if the teacher doesn't know how to create a *social environment* conducive to learning.

What of India's recently launched policy, the National Initiative for Proficiency in reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN)? NIPUN is like a breath of fresh air in clearly acknowledging the scale and depth of the child literacy crisis and in setting clear and ambitious goals. It is fantastic to see government commitment to ensuring all children attain foundational literacy and numeracy by Grade 3, within five years. It invites the state governments to work out the details and ensure its implementation.

In order for NIPUN to be successful, it requires changes to the whole educational ecosystem: not just the teacher, but also policies, curriculum, assessments, monitoring structures, training and more. To quote the World Bank: 'Classroom-focused interventions need systems-level support.'[58] A teacher who could not meet the foundational literacy goals for their students before the COVID-19 crisis will remain unable to do so without a transformation of the whole educational ecosystem. Part B discusses some of these crucial system-level changes needed to ensure all children are learning well in school.

What about other low-and-middle-income countries around the world? There are many encouraging examples of governments enacting serious policy reforms and striving to ensure quality and equality in education. On the whole, though, we reach the same conclusion: existing institutions will not bring the scale or pace of change required. Urgent actions are required to change what we teach, at what stage, and the way we teach it—without which, we will repeat the same mistakes of the past. We need disruptive learning solutions—not more of the same old methods, or those that only marginally improve the status quo. Incremental change is insufficient. We need transformative, low-cost, replicable, scalable, sustainable, evidence-based approaches, such as Global Dream Accelerating Learning for All.

We've seen numerous factors preventing children from learning even the basics of foundational literacy and numeracy. Moreover, children are not the only group suffering from low literacy levels. The next chapter asks the tough question of why so many adults around the world, particularly in India, are still unable to read.

Reflection Questions

1. What are the five factors that hold back children's literacy? Visit a local school and observe. Are these factors present?
2. Talk to a child who attends school intermittently or not at all. Ask them or their parents for the reasons.
3. What was the most shocking statistic for you in this chapter?

Consider Your Context

This chapter primarily analyses the problems of India's education system, including non-enrolment and dropping out, low student attendance, teacher absenteeism and time being spent on non-teacher activities. Research your country's situation, and compare its figures to India's, to create a 'Leaky Bucket' diagram (2.1) for your own country. What are the recent legislative and policy initiatives to try to improve the education system in your country? How effective have they been? How can they be more effective?

The Forgotten Millions

Why can't the Adults Read?

Reading is not walking on the words; it's grasping the soul of them.
> **– Paulo Freire,** the great Brazilian educator

Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

> **– Albert Einstein**

It has been three millennia since Sanskrit was developed as a written text. Six centuries have passed under the dominance of the printing press and a new intellectual age of public readership. We celebrate the eighth decade of India's independence from British colonialism and dedication to a vision that every Indian participate in the nation's progress. Fifty-six years have gone by since the Kothari Commission called for a mass movement to eradicate illiteracy in our country.

Yet, India still has 252 million adults who are illiterate.[59] This is by far the largest share of the world's illiterate population and several times more than second-placed Pakistan (59 million). In fact, India has more illiterate adults than the combined total of the next nine nations added together (Figure 3.1).

'Perhaps that is accurate,' sceptics will say, 'but our literacy rate is higher than many other countries.' It's true. India is doing far better than South Sudan (literacy rate: 35 per cent) and Afghanistan (43 per cent), and numerous other war-torn, crisis-ridden nations.[60] But how can it be that a country like ours—peaceful, democratic, sovereign, stable—still has around a quarter of its citizens unable to read and write?

'We've made some progress,' optimists argue. Indeed, India's literacy rate has risen steadily from 18 per cent in 1951, the first Census after Independence, to 74 per cent in 2011. But this rate of progress is too slow for the hundreds of millions still waiting to learn how to read and write, in a world increasingly dependent on text and technology. In 1950, India's

Disruptive Literacy
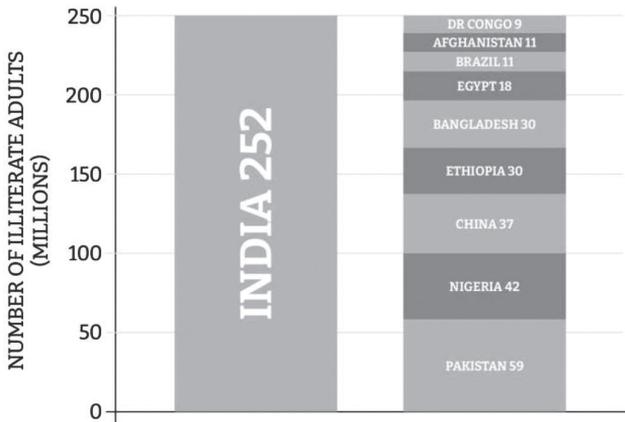
Figure 3.1: India vs Other Top 10 Countries for Number of
Adults Who are Illiterate[61]

literacy rate was similar to China's (20 per cent).[62] Since then, China
has reaped the rewards of a heavy investment in school education and
adult literacy, and now has near-universal literacy. India, meanwhile,
languishes behind. Bangladesh's 1981 Census found a literacy rate of 29
per cent—yet, today, Bangladesh's literacy rate is almost the same as India
(Figure 3.2).
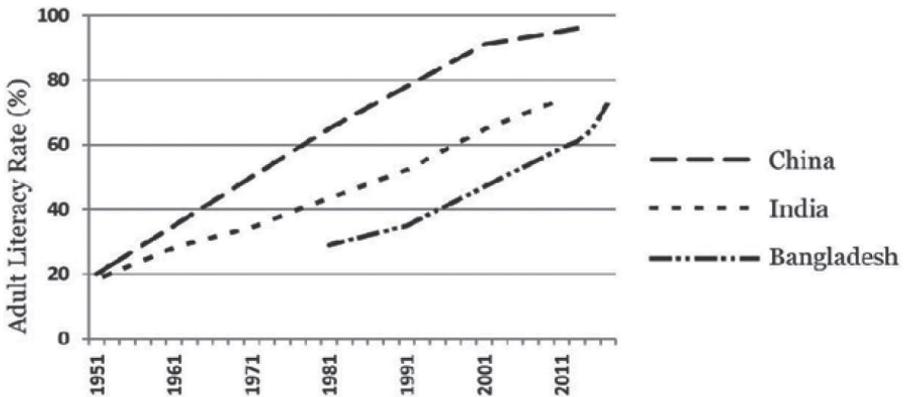
Figure 3.2: China, India and Bangladesh Adult Literacy Rates Over Time[63]

The number of illiterate adults in India is about as large today as it was
at Independence (Figure 3.3)! While the literacy rate has increased, it has
barely been adequate to offset population growth, meaning that there are
still over 250 million adults who are illiterate—similar to 1951. The same
trend is seen in many LMICs. Globally, there are still some 770 million
adults who are illiterate—marginally more than the 700 million there
were in 1950![64]
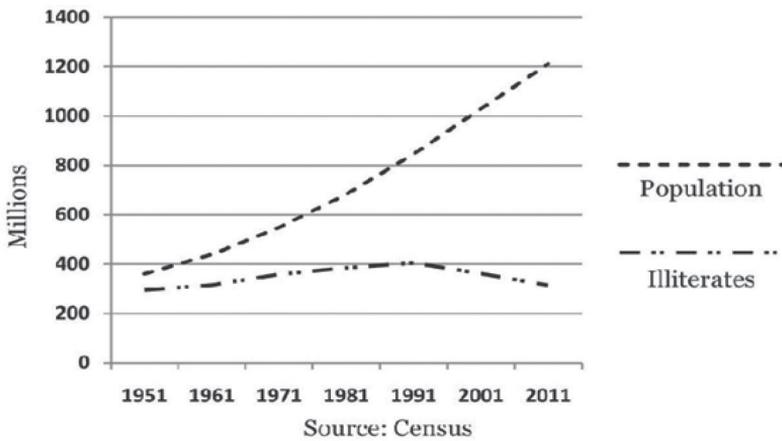
Figure 3.3: India's Population of Illiterate Adults Over Time

The actual state of illiteracy in India may be worse than the official figures suggest. Our survey of Lucknow found a rural literacy rate of 63 per cent, around 5 percentage points lower than what the 2011 Census reported.[65] An even larger gap was present in urban areas. This could be because the Census relies on people self-reporting whether they are literate. This is a well-known and widely observed phenomenon around the world: self-reporting inflates literacy rates.[66] An earlier National Sample Survey study found that an astonishing 34 per cent of those who claim to be literate failed a literacy test.[67] The Census' reliance on self-reporting underestimates the true extent of the illiteracy crisis.

We need to ask ourselves the hard question: why are so many adults still unable to read and write? In our experience, it comes down to two factors: limited schooling opportunities in the past, especially for women and disadvantaged castes living in rural areas, and an ongoing lack of effective adult literacy programs.

Historic Socio-demographic Disadvantage

Many adults who are illiterate today had limited schooling opportunities in their childhood. This is particularly the case for women, people from disadvantaged castes, and those who grew up in rural areas. Our survey of Lucknow district showed the ongoing disparity in literacy rates by caste, geography and gender. Shockingly, we found that only one in 10 rural Scheduled Caste/Tribe (SC/ST)[68] women in the age range of 51–60 were able to read! These socio-demographic factors of disadvantage across geography (rural vs urban), caste (SC/ST vs General), gender (female vs male), and age (older vs younger) all compounded each other.[69]

The compounding influence of socio-demographic factors is portrayed powerfully in Figure 3.4. The population sector with the fewest factors of disadvantage—urban, General caste, men in the 15–35 age range—had a relatively healthy literacy rate. Add one or two factors of disadvantage, and the literacy rate drops a little. But adding a third and particularly the fourth factor of disadvantage sees the literacy rate plummet.
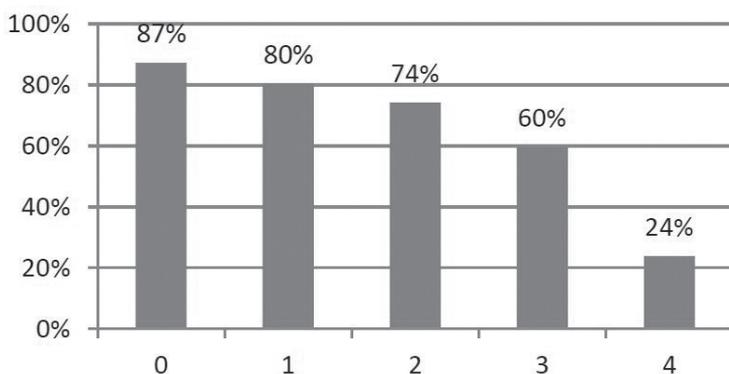
Figure 3.4: Adult Literacy Rate as a Function of Number of Sociodemographic Disadvantage Factors[70]

A Short History of Adult (Il)literacy in India

For those unable to learn to read during childhood, access to adult literacy programs is often scant.

As far back as 1966, the Kothari Commission report reflected critically on two decades of efforts to improve literacy rates: '*Many literacy drives have been organised on a state or local basis, which were launched with considerable drive and enthusiasm but which petered out in apathy and dissipated efforts a few years later. There are several reasons for this. The campaigns were too limited in scale to achieve a significant advance and generate enthusiasm for further effort. They also tended to be sporadic and uncoordinated—government departments, voluntary agencies, educational institutions and individuals working more in isolation than in active collaboration with other agencies. They were often launched hastily, without a careful assessment of the needs and interests of the adults, without awakening public interest or stimulating the desire to learn, and without adequate provision for the follow-up work, in the absence of which no lasting results could be obtained. It is therefore not surprising that they failed.*'

While India's literacy has continued to rise gradually in the intervening decades, many of the insightful remarks of the Kothari Commission's report still ring true today.

India's National Literacy Mission (NLM) was established in 1988 as the overarching government body coordinating adult literacy efforts. However, the NLM lacked ambition in its goals and timeframes: its initial aim was to make 80 million people literate, but over 80 years![71] And as with many institutions, the NLM was constrained year-to-year by its budget. Rather than setting an ambitious goal and allocating the requisite funds, goals were based on budgetary constraints.

In the past decade, the National Literacy Mission was reincarnated as the Saakshar Bharat Abhiyan. The primary focus of Saakshar Bharat was female literacy; therefore, it ran only in districts that had a female literacy rate of less than 50 per cent in the 2001 Census. While narrowing the geographical focus, it broadened the age range to all adults (15+), in contrast with the NLM's original mandate, which only targeted 15–35-year-olds.[72]

Saakshar Bharat aimed to 'create a sustainable demand for literacy' through motivation and mobilisation campaigns. The goal was to have one Adult Education Centre per 5,000 population. Each centre would be staffed by two volunteers (at least one of whom was a woman).[73]

The program aimed to make learners literate over the course of 300 instructional hours. Yet the time limitations of many adults made this a challenge. In rural areas, literacy programs struggle during seasons of peak agricultural labour. Often urban adults do not have much time during the day, as they may be daily wage earners. Our survey of Lucknow found that many people who are illiterate preferred studying in the early morning or evening, but many adult literacy programs do not cater to these time constraints.

On paper, the Saakshar Bharat Abhiyan has been a roaring success. However, conversations with learners and volunteers at the ground level indicate that many people who 'passed' the exam have since 'forgotten' how to read: indicative of rote memorisation rather than genuine learning. International experience also testifies to the fragility of some neo-literates' reading skills.[74]

Two and a half years after the conclusion of Saakshar Bharat, in September 2020, the government launched Padhna Likhna Abhiyan (PLA), with the goal of making 5.7 million adult learners literate in the first year of operation.[75] At this rate of progress, it would still take 45 years to reach universal literacy!

Further, the primers used in such programs are often extremely bulky, some several hundred pages long. Complex, teacher-centred materials such as these narrow the pool of those who can be an instructor, and

means that extensive training is required. For instance, 25 per cent of PLA's already limited budget is allocated just for the training of volunteers![76]

Adding to the organisational difficulties of some adult literacy programs, many adults may have initial hesitations around attending literacy classes:

- They are often busy with responsibilities at work and home.
- In some cultures, adults feel shy or embarrassed to attend classes, which they may perceive as being for children only.
- Some adults are more interested in learning skills that can directly help them in their livelihood.
- Some adults feel that they are too old to learn or that literacy is too difficult.

Addressing these attitudes during the community mobilisation process is critical for an adult literacy program to succeed.

Just as this book was going to press, we were pleased to see the government announcement of the 'New India Literacy Program', with the target of making 50 million people literate over the period 2022–27. Encouragingly, the plan is for the program to be run primarily by volunteers, using an online teaching-learning system. The use of modern technology is helpful, but improving the pedagogy and the content is at least as important as changing the way it is delivered. Nevertheless, we are excited and hopeful.

The Need for Active Approaches to Adult Literacy

If adult literacy programs have lacked much success, how is it that adult literacy rates are still gradually improving? As Bilal Barakat notes in his cheekily titled paper, 'Improving Adult Literacy without Improving the Literacy of Adults', much of the gain in adult literacy rate is due to older cohorts (who tend to be less literate) passing away and literate teenagers becoming adults.[77] This is true not just in India but in many LMICs.

Some believe that this passive approach is sufficient to gradually improve adult literacy rates. However, this attritional approach to adult literacy is both extremely slow and also unjust from a human rights perspective.

Moreover, even this passive mechanism for improving adult literacy is now under threat. The COVID-19 situation has disrupted both children's and adults' education programs. Many teenagers who were illiterate two years ago still have not learned to read, and will now join the huge pool of illiterate adults.

It is a calamity that hundreds of millions of people around the world are unable to read and write. But this is no natural disaster, like an earthquake or tsunami. It is a manmade problem; and like all manmade problems, it has a manmade solution. It is to this we turn in the next chapter as we explore a new paradigm for literacy.

Reflection Questions

1. Why do you think gender, geographical and caste inequalities compound each other to lower the literacy rates of some disadvantaged groups?
2. What do you think of this critique that many adult literacy programs are slow, ineffective and unambitious in scale?
3. Many people believe that we should focus exclusively on school education, and that adult literacy can be solved through attrition. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Consider Your Context

In India, adult literacy rates vary substantially by gender, geography, age and caste. What are some of the factors explaining literacy inequality in your country?

Photo 3.5: 3,957 Government School and Anganwadi Teachers Receive Training Prior to Conducting the Global Dream Literacy Survey of Lucknow (2015)

The Paradigm Shift

A Mass Movement for Literacy

The new data show that 53% of all children in low- and middle-income countries suffer from learning poverty. Progress in reducing learning poverty is far too slow to meet the SDG aspirations: at the current rate of improvement, in 2030 about 43% of children will still be learning-poor.

– Ending Learning Poverty, World Bank (2019)

So far in this book, we've delved into literacy's unparalleled importance. We've come to understand some of the reasons that so many children and adults remain illiterate. We've seen that the existing education system for children, and literacy programs for adults, are insufficient to solve the literacy crisis in a timely fashion.

Isolated efforts, giving literacy low priority, and using ineffective teaching-learning methods are simply not enough. Business as usual is unacceptable. We need disruption. We need a paradigm shift.

What is required is a mass movement driven by a government fully committed to universal literacy. As history has shown us—from Cuba to Nicaragua, from Vietnam to South Korea—mass movements have been very effective in drastically raising literacy rates in short periods of time. Such a mass movement needs to mobilise all segments of society and harness the energy of millions as literacy volunteers in a time-bound mission.

For such a movement to succeed, three key ingredients are necessary: government mission-mindedness, mobilisation of the whole society and groundbreaking methods. As depicted in Figure 4.1 (overleaf), these ingredients are strongly interlinked. The next three parts of this book examine these elements in greater depth.

Part B discusses the first key ingredient of a successful movement: strong political will and government leadership viewing literacy as a top priority. This involves setting ambitious goals and acting decisively
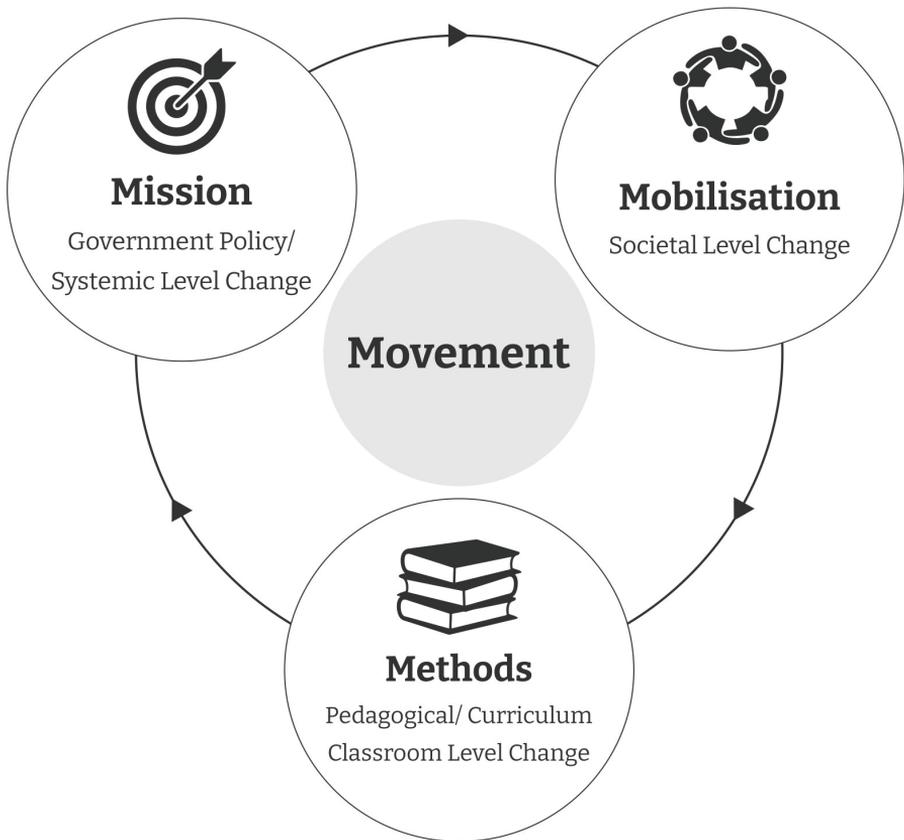
Figure 4.1: The Interconnections between Three Key Elements of a Mass Movement

towards them. To push for full literacy in a nation is not just another program; it has to be a revolution. This will require all government officials to adopt the achievement of universal literacy as an urgent cause. It also requires reworking the entire educational ecosystem—assessments, curriculum, monitoring and accountability structures, teacher training—to build high-quality, transparent public schools that will ensure every child is learning.

The second element of this paradigm shift is discussed in Part C: the need to mobilise all segments of society towards this common goal of literacy for all. Everyone has a role to play: community groups, schools and colleges, ordinary individuals, religious organisations, corporations and foundations. When these diverse parties act together, the seemingly impossible can be achieved.
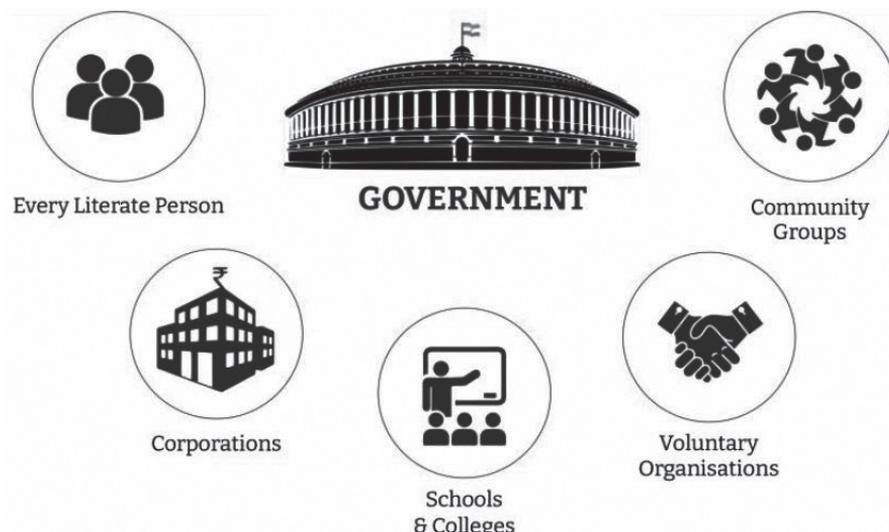
Figure 4.2: All Segments of Society Need to be Involved in a
Mass Movement for Literacy

The third and final element of a successful literacy movement is effective and engaging materials and methods. The Global Dream Program enables literacy and numeracy to be taught rapidly: 30–50 hours of instructional time spread out efficiently over 3–5 months are sufficient to make most learners literate and numerate. This accelerated rate of learning saves a lot of time and money. Crucially, any volunteer who is already literate can use these materials; one doesn't have to be a qualified teacher. Part D examines the science behind teaching literacy and numeracy, explaining how the process can be accelerated dramatically.

Traditional institutions and processes are not enough to make the world literate within a reasonable timeframe—they need to be disrupted. We need a paradigm shift: sincere mission-mindedness, mobilising all segments of society, and better teaching-learning materials and methods. If we can do that, literacy for all is in sight.

Reflection Questions

1. What do you think of the framework of 'mission, mobilisation and methods' as key elements of a paradigm shift in how the literacy crisis is tackled?
2. What other elements may also be important?
3. In your country/context, who are the most important stakeholders who could help implement and drive a mass literacy movement?

Part B

A New Mission:
Transforming Education Policy

Public education is an investment in our future.
– Matt Blunt, former governor of Missouri, USA

Strong political will and dedicated governance structures
give the campaign approach the best chance of success.
UNESCO: Reading the Past, Writing the Future

POINTS TO PONDER

Should governments give literacy top priority?

How can political will be generated?

**What changes does the education system need to
ensure literacy for all?**

Literacy as Top Priority

Creating a New Educational Ecosystem

Attaining foundational literacy and numeracy for all children will thus become an urgent national mission, with immediate measures to be taken on many fronts and with clear goals that will be attained in the short term (including that every student will attain foundational literacy and numeracy by Grade 3).
   – **National Education Policy (India)**, 2020, Chapter 2.2

Don't let the urgent get in the way of the important.
   – **Dwight Eisenhower**

'Get out!', a voice shouted. 'The house is burning down!'

Amidst scenes of commotion, we rushed out. 'What's happening?', was the cry on everyone's lips. Once we had evacuated, people looked at the house and couldn't see any evidence of a fire.

Then the man stepped forward, a solemn look on his face.

'You rushed out because I said your house is burning down. But we barely spare a thought for the fact that our planet is burning as climate change accelerates fires, heatwaves and all kinds of disasters. Surely the planet burning is like your house burning down; it just happens to be less visible and occurring on a longer timescale. So why are we ignoring it?'

What the environmentalist said of climate change is equally true of the illiteracy crisis. Existing governance structures are typically short-term, leading to the neglect of issues like literacy, while 'urgent' issues and short-termism dominate the news and election cycles.

Instead, the government at all levels needs to make literacy a top priority and tackle it in a mission mode. Literacy is the key to socio-economic development. We need a clear long-term vision followed by rapid action to reform the education system and ensure foundational literacy and numeracy for all.

When we consider education reform, the first thing we think of is teachers, who are, indeed, the backbone of the education system. However,

teachers don't act in isolation but are part of a much broader ecosystem, as shown in Figure 5.1. This ecosystem consists of the educational policies and budgeting, curriculum, assessments, monitoring mechanisms, training and support. For teachers to excel and help their learners achieve foundational literacy and numeracy, we need to transform the whole ecosystem surrounding them.
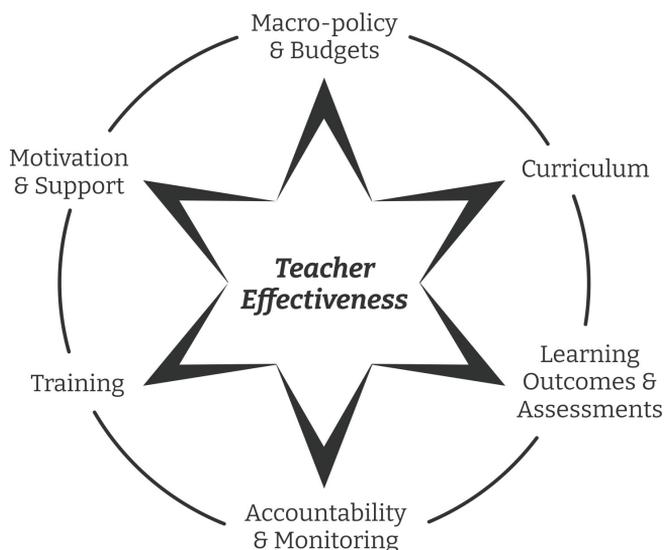
Figure 5.1: Ecosystem for Teacher Effectiveness

Table 5.1: Structural Reforms in the Education Ecosystem

	Traditional Approach	*A New Ecosystem*
Macro-policy and Budgets	Education claimed to be a high priority, but not reflected in actions. Limited budget, allocated ineffectively.	Education genuinely a top priority, reflected in a large and well-allocated education budget.
Curriculum	Completion of syllabus required, whether or not everyone has learned.	Child-centric, focused more on understanding than memorisation of facts.
Outcomes and Assessments	Outcome is seen narrowly— merely as marks. High-stakes assessments for the purpose of sorting and labelling students. Tests primarily involve factual recall.	Outcome is the holistic development of students. Formative assessments that focus on progress, giving immediate feedback to inform the learning process and make early intervention to fill gaps.

	Traditional Approach	*A New Ecosystem*
Accountability and Monitoring	Limited accountability, mainly rule-based and hierarchical (towards superiors).	Robust and holistic accountability, including in the sideways (towards peers) and downwards direction (towards students/parents)
Training	Limited, mainly theoretical and delivered in lecture mode, with minimal or no ongoing support.	Addressing worldviews, new pedagogy, and linked with in-classroom ongoing support.
Motivation and support	Extrinsic motivation: by pay check.	Intrinsic motivation: peer communities of support, professionalism and teaching as a higher calling.

This part explores the structural reforms required to revitalise the education system and deliver the critical foundational skills of literacy and numeracy for all. This process of re-imagining and re-working the education system should be driven by evidence.[78] The current chapter tackles macro-level educational policies, including goal-setting, budget and curriculum. Chapter 6 examines the need for a revolution in the way assessment is done in order to provide timely feedback to all stakeholders, from the child to the policymaker. Chapter 7 explains the need for holistic accountability structures, especially teachers' accountability towards parents and students, and also their own peers. Chapter 8 explores the changes needed to help motivate our teachers and give them the training that will empower them to excel in the classroom.

Education Policy: Making Action-oriented Goals

It is remarkable what countries can achieve when working on a war footing. The COVID-19 pandemic offers a reminder that huge resources can be mobilised if a problem is treated as an emergency. Experiences of numerous nations, from Cuba to South Korea, show that governments that go to war on illiteracy can win swiftly—and in doing so, unlock tremendous social and economic progress.

A first step to prioritising literacy is to set clear and ambitious targets. Sustainable Development Goal 4 aims to ensure that all children and a 'substantial proportion' of adults around the world achieve literacy and numeracy by 2030.[79] Similarly, in India, there are bold goals regarding child literacy: NIPUN Bharat (India) strives to ensure that, within five years, all children attain foundational literacy and numeracy by Grade 3.

It is excellent to have such a clear, specific and ambitious goal for child literacy. However, the wording on adult literacy in the National Education Policy is quite broad, mirroring the SDGs: to achieve 100 per cent literacy as soon as possible.

Moreover, goals alone are not enough; we need to have the political will to achieve them. Given that over half of the children in LMICs are unable to read and considering that COVID-19 has wiped out 20 years of gains made in education worldwide,[80] we need to be clear-headed in the actions necessary to achieve these targets. Even if countries reduce their learning poverty at the fastest rates we have seen so far in this century, the goal of ending it will not be attained by 2030.[81] Government leadership from the front is essential—for instance, in India's highly successful Pulse Polio Mission, government officials at all levels were given targets and held personally responsible for meeting them. We can apply the same lessons now to carry out a full-blown people's movement for literacy.

Setting ambitious goals is a crucial first step, but specifying who will do what, by when, to achieve these goals is critical. Often the goals are laudable, but the exact roadmap is missing—and in addition, the financial outlays required to reach these goals are sometimes insufficient.

Revitalising Education Spending

Low-Income Countries (LICs) spend only $28 on education per child per year—compared to over $3,200 per child per year in High-Income Countries (HICs).[82] Disturbingly, some two-third of LICs have cut their education budgets during the COVID-19 period.

In India, total public spending (states and central government) amounts to 3.2 per cent of GDP—lower than the global average of 5 per cent, and lower even than the average of LICs (3.5 per cent).[83] Expenditure on education in India has never come close to its own recommended level of 6 per cent of GDP, as envisaged by the 1968 Education Policy, reiterated in the Policy of '86 and '92, and restated yet again in 2020.[84] India and many LMICs can show their commitment to literacy by boosting the education budget.

It's not just national governments that are spending too little on literacy. International donor agencies have seen pledges fall short of what is required, particularly given the severe blow that COVID-19 has dealt the education systems of many LMICs.[85]

Of course, critics will rightly ask why we are achieving so little value for money within the current education system.[86] Not only do we need more money allocated for literacy and education but we also need to spend it much more effectively. With some 70–80 per cent of India's education budget being spent on teachers' salaries, we need to invest more in areas currently being neglected, such as effective and innovative 'catch-up' literacy and numeracy programs, conditional cash transfers to ensure high student attendance and prevent drop-outs (especially for adolescent girls), and public-private partnerships.[87]
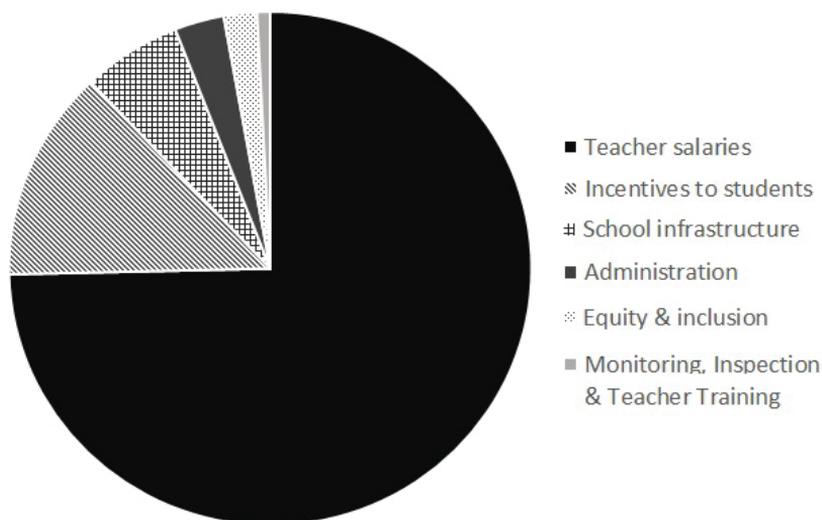
Figure 5.2: Educational Spending in Bihar, India (2017–18)

An impressive example of budgetary reform is the transformation of Delhi's education system. The government has begun spending 23 per cent of the state budget on education in recent years. The additional money has been used to modernise school infrastructure, increase the capacity of school leaders and teachers, and build robust and transparent accountability systems.[88] The consequent improvement in the quality of public education has led many students to leave the private sector and enrol in government schools.[89] It has also facilitated hundreds of thousands of children learning to read.

Nationally and internationally, more money could be spent on incentivising students' enrolment and attendance, for example, through a conditional cash transfer. As discussed in the box below, such schemes are a powerful way to boost school enrolment and attendance, which is all the more important, given the blow COVID-19 has dealt.

Policy Pro: Conditional Cash Transfers

- **What is it:** Cash transfers to parents, ideally conditional on their children's school attendance.[90]
- **Evidence:** Programs such as Brazil's Bolsa Familia, in which families are given a transfer, conditional on their children's vaccination and school attendance, have assisted in curbing child labour and boosting school attendance.[91] Similar programs have also been tried successfully in Bangladesh and Pakistan, in each case, lifting enrolment rates by over 10 percentage points.[92] Delhi government's Ladli Scheme sets aside money in girls' bank accounts at various educational milestones, from enrolment in primary school to completing their education, for them to redeem once they turn 21.[93] As these examples have shown, conditional cash transfers motivate parents to enrol their children in school and ensure their ongoing attendance—particularly important since COVID-19 has led many children to drop out.
- **Pilot suggestion:** Trial for girls in Grade 7–12 in areas with high drop-out rates. Set a minimum attendance bar of, say, 80 per cent, to receive a quarterly transfer.

Curricular Reform: Getting the Books Right

Along with goal-setting and budgets, the curriculum is a key component of the educational ecosystem. Research around the world has shown that curriculum is a variable that has a substantial influence on students' learning outcomes.[94] This topic is too complex to engage with in detail here,[95] but there are a few broad points to be made about the contentious but crucial task of curricular reform:

- Teachers shouldn't feel pressurised to 'complete the syllabus' within a prescribed time period regardless of their students' learning levels. Currently, the period is non-negotiable, and students' understanding is negotiable—it should be vice-versa.
- We need a rigorous and evidence-based approach to choosing and refining the curriculum. Ideally, we should use control trials in which teachers are randomly allocated different textbooks and the results measured. In some countries, this is a requirement: new textbooks can only be introduced after their efficacy has been measured.
- Textbooks are usually made for the teacher. Instead, they should be made for the students so that they can learn largely by themselves,

or working with their peers. Materials are better laid out in learner-friendly modules that progress from simple to complex, with plenty of worked examples and illustrations.

- Teachers and students should be encouraged to make their own learning materials and design their own activities. Teachers can go above and beyond what the curriculum stipulates and work to the guiding principles of a good education. We need to ensure that learning outcomes are achieved for all and that children learn values and life skills, not just being made ready for exams.

In light of the vital importance of curricular reform, we have been encouraged by the recent initiatives of the governments of the Maldives and Mizoram (a state in North-East India). The education departments in these jurisdictions have invited Global Dream ALfA to work with them in redesigning the curriculum to be more learner-centred, using pictures and concrete objects to accelerate learning. Results of schools using the new materials is being compared with those using the traditional curriculum, generating rigorous evidence on the efficacy of the intervention. The evidence suggests that children can learn much more rapidly when using learner-centred curriculum—so much so that now even some five-year-olds are able to read a newspaper!

Conclusion

Governments at all levels around the world need to make attaining universal literacy a top priority and set clear, time-bound goals towards this end. Governments should spend more on education and literacy, especially in crucial areas such as conditional cash transfers to students, teacher training and accountability/monitoring structures. Reforming the curriculum to make it learner-centred is another key change required for the educational ecosystem.

Policy Recommendations

- Set clear, time-bound goals and targets for stakeholders at all levels in the education system.
- Increase education spending to 6 per cent of GDP, as recommended by worldwide best practice.
- Introduce a conditional cash transfer (CCT) to help school attendance bounce back after COVID.
- Create/select a research-based, learner-centred curriculum that facilitates independent and peer learning. Emphasise progressing

only once children have understood, rather than sticking to rigid timeframes that don't ensure genuine learning.

Consider your Context

- What does your country spend on education as a proportion of GDP?
- Does your country use conditional cash transfers or any other form of incentive to ensure school attendance?

Re-examining Exams

Structural Changes to the Assessment System

> *Sometimes, the most brilliant and intelligent people do not shine in standardised tests because they do not have standardised minds.*
> — **Diane Ravitch**, American historian of education

Albert Einstein. Thomas Edison. Pablo Picasso. Leonardo Da Vinci.

What do all these people have in common? That they were pioneers in their respective fields? Powerful thought leaders and trendsetters? Yes, all of the above... and one more. They all struggled at school or college, including failing in exams! Several were rejected from the school system, lambasted as fools.[96] The fact that they went on to change the world shows how narrow-minded the traditional education system is, particularly when it comes to assessing children.

As we saw in the previous chapter, teaching and learning occur in a classroom but are shaped by a much larger educational ecosystem. One crucial component of this system is assessments. Assessments set the tone of education because they crystallise its goals. The structure, frequency, and style of assessments have wide-reaching impacts on the teaching-learning process.

When we think of assessments, we may think of board exams for Grades 10 and 12. But assessment should be a continuous process of feedback that starts from a young age, and informs both the teacher and the learners of the next steps to be taken. In the context of literacy, getting assessment right is all the more crucial. Done well, assessments as feedback identify learning gaps and allow immediate action to be taken to quickly bridge them, which is crucial for future learning. Done poorly, assessments as summative exams make low-literacy students feel incapable of learning, increasing the likelihood of them dropping out of school.

Assessments should be all about collecting data to inform and drive the learning process. Unfortunately, these data are often being collected for the wrong purposes, in problematic ways, and are conveyed unhelpfully.

These key areas requiring reform are shown in Table 6.1 and discussed in greater depth below.

Table 6.1: Reforms Needed for the Assessment System

	Traditional	*Paradigm Shift*
Why? **Purpose**	**Summative:** Sorting and ranking students.	**Formative:** Informing the teaching-learning process. Students compete with themselves, not each other.
What/ **When?** **Methods**	**High-stakes exams:** Lots of memorisation required, fixed timings.	**Low-stakes repertoire:** Mix of assignments and portfolios too. Frequent, unannounced tests, problem-solving and unseen passages.
How? **Reporting**	**Focus on marks:** Lots of teacher marking required, delayed results, takes away time from learning.	**Focus on progress:** Use TargetPlus or similar app to provide specific, easy-to-understand feedback for learners, teachers and policymakers.

Why? The Purpose of Assessment

Exams have traditionally been summative in nature. Such exams generate lists of 'high performers' and, maybe unintentionally, designate others as 'not good enough'.

For those scoring well on tests, this can lead to complacency. For those who do poorly, it can lead to a feeling of hopelessness and low self-esteem. A lot of children are lost early on in their schooling because they are made to feel that they are not good enough. A young man in one of the slums where we teach recounted that he left school because a teacher beat him for being unable to read. Students are often fearful of exams because they are high stakes, used to judge capabilities, compare and classify. The excessive emphasis on test results leads to comparison of students, and has a negative impact on student well-being.

The purpose of assessment should be to help all children understand their areas of improvement and to better guide their efforts to develop these skills. Assessment data should not be used to classify children but instead to 'identify areas of learning and development where children may need support or extension', as NIPUN Bharat (India) reminds us.[97]

This may sound like a good idea, but how can we get there? One crucial element is for us as teachers and parents to change the language we use around assessments. We should encourage everyone on their strengths and also motivate learners to work on their areas for improvement. We need to stop talking about assessments as things to be afraid of, but rather as ways to check learning.

Research has shown that children do better when competing with themselves, that is, focusing on their personal growth rather than competing with others.[98] We need to celebrate progress against students' own previous performance, not in comparison to others. Not only is this beneficial for students' well-being and mental health, ironically, it can also improve their marks, as narrated below.

Stories Behind the Statistics: The Power of Progress

Once, during a school assembly, a boy in Grade 5 was called up on stage to be commended for the progress he had made. He had scored 70 per cent, which didn't make him a class-topper but was a drastic improvement from his earlier results.

We saw his mother watching in tears and asked her why she was crying. She responded simply: 'My son has never been called on stage before.' A later follow-up revealed that the experience had not only tremendously boosted his self-esteem, but his academic performance also continued to improve, thanks to the focus on his progress rather than his marks.

What/When: The Methods and Frequency of Assessment

The traditional conception of assessment involves high stakes exams conducted infrequently (for example, once or twice a year) and on fixed dates. This provides students with the opportunity to 'cram' before the exam. They promptly forget what they have 'learned' afterwards. It also gives teachers the motivation to 'teach to the test', that is, specifically cover content they think or know will be on the exam. These exams are usually fact-heavy, requiring students to memorise sections of their textbook.

Instead of 3-hour exams, which many learners dread, it would be constructive to have more formative tests. Frequent assessment-as-learning enables immediate feedback—rather than waiting till the end of the semester, students and the teacher should know immediately how well a topic was understood. Many of these tests should be unannounced, surprise tests, which will offer a better picture of students' actual skills and reduce the possibility of last-minute cramming.[99]

Further, in a world where we have instant access to huge amounts of information, memory is not as important a skill as the ability to understand and apply our knowledge to novel and complex problems. Many countries with progressive education systems are making increasing use of 'open-book' exams, in which students may consult their textbooks and notes

during the test. This may sound like a strange concept, but in real life, it is not so much the ability to memorise large amounts of data that is crucial, but rather the ability to organise information well and refer back to it.[100]

Beyond exams, we need much more holistic assessments. The very format of a written exam is restrictive. We need many more varieties of assessments: students creating charts, doing puzzles, activities, giving oral presentations, show-and-tell assignments. We want assessments that give all students the chance to showcase their learning in a variety of formats.

How: The Representation of Assessment Data

Traditional exams take a long time for teachers to mark. Not only does this waste teachers' valuable time, it means that there is usually a substantial lag between the student sitting the exam and receiving feedback.

When the students do receive feedback, all they typically get is a percentage or grade, which doesn't help them understand the specific areas they need to work on. Imagine if you did a blood test and simply received a grade of 'C-' without being told whether you are lacking haemoglobin or have high blood sugar. Such a report will be useless as it doesn't inform you what treatment you need. In much the same way, the traditional exam system is not designed to help students learn but rather to judge performance. The unspecific feedback it provides is near useless—even harmful if it leads to underestimating a child's true potential.

Instead, research shows that when both students and teachers receive prompt feedback, this enables and motivates them to work immediately on any aspects they are struggling with, and leads to better learning outcomes.[101] Feedback needs to be much more specific: giving students data on how well they did on each sub-topic so they know what their strong points and areas of improvement are. Similarly, teachers need detailed feedback on which areas the whole class requires revision on.

Report cards could also be much more holistic: a child is more than just their academics. If we want to develop human potential holistically—academically, emotionally, socially, and physically—then we should represent all these areas on the report card.

Disruptive Assessments

We have developed TargetPlus, an app that helps transform the way assessments are done and the type of feedback they can offer. It unlocks the power of instant, automated marking and analysis in an accessible format, just requiring the teacher to have a basic smartphone, which most already do.

How does it work? The students are given an assessment, which may be a standardised exam or a test the teacher has created themselves. The marks are entered on the equivalent of an OMR sheet, either by the teacher or by the students themselves. The teacher scans these sheets with their smartphone and, within a few minutes, receives a detailed report card for each student and for the class overall. Crucially, rather than showing the average marks scored, it gives a detailed, topic-wise analysis, as shown in Figure 6.1. This enables the student to immediately and easily understand which areas they did well in and which areas they need to work on further.

This is represented using colours, to be attractive and easily interpretable: green indicates the areas in which a student excels, blue the topics they have largely understood, and orange the topics they need to go over again.
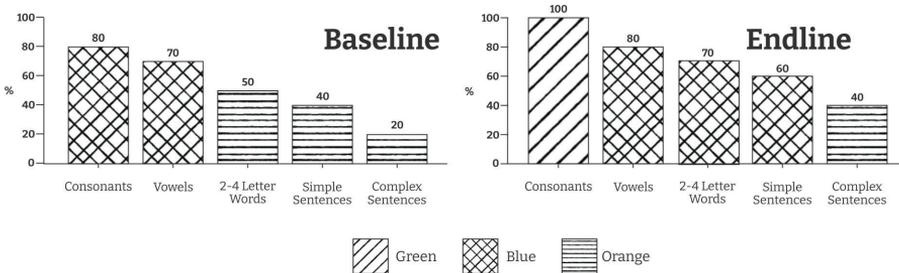
Figure 6.1: Sample Report of TargetPlus App, As Seen by the Learner, Showing Their Progress Between the Baseline and Endline

The TargetPlus App is also useful for analysing data collected through one-on-one assessment methods. Teacher observations on student reading capabilities can be entered directly on the TargetPlus App or captured on a scanning sheet, generating real-time classroom reports.

Rather than the old system of checking by hand or scanning calibrated OMR sheets, this system saves both time and money by eliminating the data entry and analysis process that is generally carried out manually. It doesn't require individual devices for all learners, just a single smartphone for the teacher is enough. The instant feedback the child, the teacher, the school head, and the policymaker receive, enable them to take immediate action, which is much more powerful than delayed action.[102]

If learning is measured easily, assessments can be carried out more frequently. Early intervention can then be taken by all concerned, rather than waiting till the term-end exam. Early intervention is especially vital for foundational skills: if we don't intervene early, the lack of literacy and numeracy will continue to plague students throughout their education.

India's NIPUN Bharat is extremely helpful in providing clear and detailed learning goals expected at different grade levels. Table 6.2 shows the literacy and numeracy skills expected of students from pre-primary to Grade 3 level.

Table 6.2: Child Learning Goals Under NIPUN Bharat

	Literacy	*Numeracy*
Pre-school	Recognises letters and corresponding sounds. Reads simple words comprising of at least 2 to 3 letters.	Recognises and reads numerals up to 10. Arranges numbers/objects/shapes/occurrence of events in a sequence.
Grade 1	Reads small sentences consisting of at least 4-5 simple words in an age appropriate unknown text.	Read and write numbers up to 99. Perform simple addition and subtraction.
Grade 2	Read with meaning 45-60 words per minute.	Read and write numbers up to 999. Subtract numbers up to 99.
Grade 3	Read with meaning at least 60 words per minute.	Read and write numbers up to 9999. Solve simple multiplication problems.

We suggest that up to four tests could be used for each concept:

1. **Baseline:** Gauge students' existing knowledge and skills before teaching. Learning is better begun with questions, rather than simply telling facts.
2. **End-line:** Determine each student's learning level after teaching a chapter/topic.
3. **Progress:** After the end-line test, the teacher can go over again any areas that most of the class struggled with, or use peer-tutoring for areas that a few students found difficult. Then an assessment can be given to check the progress.
4. **Follow up:** The 'forgetting curve' is a well-known psychological model that describes how we gradually forget our knowledge over time. The best way to prevent this is to refresh and consolidate the knowledge with periodic reviews and tests.[103] Two subsequent assessments can be administered as surprise tests about a week and a month in the future to help them retain and deepen their new knowledge and skills.

A higher frequency of assessments is possible through apps like TargetPlus and many others, including Socrative, Gimkit, Blooket, Quizizz, Nearpod—enabling fun assessments with instant, automated, feedback. These assessments are formative, no-stress tests, used to inform

next actions. These multiple tests allow teachers and students to identify and fill gaps.

At the macro level, frequent formative assessments enable state and national policymakers to analyse in real-time and in fine detail the topics that students and teachers are most struggling with. This can trigger deeper qualitative research and potentially lead to curricular revision or extra teacher training to help address the issues.

Having high quality, timely data can help foster a sense of accountability at all levels—with each teacher taking responsibility for the learning of all their students, each principal taking responsibility for the performance of all their teachers, each block officer taking responsibility for the quality of all their schools, and so on. The next chapter discusses this crucial task: designing robust and holistic accountability mechanisms.

Policy Recommendations

- The purpose of assessment should be feedback for all stakeholders, not judging or comparing students. Reform exams to collect more meaningful, relevant data; increase use of surprise, formative low stakes tests, taken alongside regular classes rather than separately.
- Use TargetPlus (or similar) App to provide easy and real-time feedback relayed simultaneously to all stakeholders, from students to policymakers. This enables early intervention, saving time and leading to greater learning gain.

Consider Your Context

How are assessments done in your nation's education system? Are they constructive in identifying and rectifying learning gaps early?

The Foundation of Good Governance

Holistic Accountability

The active participation of the community and parents in the teaching learning process will inculcate the much-desired element of accountability and sustainability in the entire school education system.

– **NIPUN Bharat**, India

Every day, millions of teachers mark the roll, taking the attendance of their students. But as we've seen, absenteeism among teachers is a huge issue in itself: in India, 15 per cent of public school teachers are absent on any given day—equating to missing almost one day each week (the children don't know which day).[104] So imagine what would happen if roll-marking was reversed, and students kept an eye on their teachers' attendance?

This sort of system has been trialled with considerable success. In a randomised control trial in Rajasthan, western India, some teachers were given a tamper-proof camera. They were required to have a student take two photos of the teacher in the classroom, at the start and end of the day. Teachers were then paid based on the number of days they taught at the school. This system halved the number of teacher absences relative to the control group.[105]

The public education system in India, and many LMICs, sorely lacks accountability. As we have seen, teacher absenteeism and time spent on non-teaching activities are huge issues. When teaching takes place, it is often using outdated and ineffective rote-learning pedagogy. Millions of learners spend years in school without gaining even foundational literacy and numeracy skills, yet no one is being held accountable for this failure.

We need effective mechanisms to hold the various stakeholders—from teachers and principals to education department officials—accountable to ensuring that all children are in school and learning well. To design and implement better accountability systems, we first need to understand why the current mechanisms are not working.

The Accountability Vacuum

The predominant form of accountability for teachers in India and many LMICs is de-facto arbitrary accountability to school heads. That is, teachers will occasionally face disciplinary action if they infringe some rule (for example, the prohibition of corporal punishment) or their students have exceptionally poor outcomes (for example, terrible test scores). However, this narrow form of accountability is ineffective and even destructive for several reasons.

Firstly, principals and administrators are seldom heavily involved in the classroom, so they are not in a good position to monitor and support the teacher. If principals only visit a class occasionally, and educational officials only drop in once in a blue moon, they leave an impression that nobody really cares. When such visits are announced well in advance, they can become mere rubber-stamping exercises.[106] In countries like India, teacher lobby groups typically prevent any rigorous forms of accountability.[107]

Secondly, this form of accountability can become merely bureaucratic red tape without clear, fair and transparent criteria that teachers are being evaluated on. This form of hierarchical accountability is often viewed negatively by teachers. It's not just teachers who are dissatisfied: a survey of Indian block education officers, whose task it is to inspect schools regularly, revealed that many of them also felt unhappy with their jobs, perceiving themselves as 'disempowered cogs in the hierarchy'.[108] They talked of themselves as 'postmen', whose job was simply to deliver information from the field to their higher-ups and vice-versa.

Finally, there are often negative effects when high stakes outcome-based accountability systems are used. A focus on 'marks' can lead to teaching to the test and a rush to complete the syllabus within the prescribed time period; rather than ensuring that every child has mastered key foundational skills.[109]

As we discussed in the previous chapter, high stakes exams are often detrimental for students. In much the same way, judging and comparing teachers with each other based on their students' results can lead to teacher burnout[110] and even teacher-facilitated cheating. This disturbing reality—that some teachers game the system when the stakes are high—was brought to public attention by the famous book *Freakonomics*, whose opening chapter deals with the example of teachers filling in papers for their students to inflate their test scores. For reasons such as these, America's No Child Left Behind Act, which held schools and teachers

accountable based on the standardised test scores of their students, was jettisoned in 2015 in favour of a more holistic approach.

Indeed, research shows that the best forms of school accountability structures are holistic.[111] Rather than simply 'upward' accountability towards principals and administrators, teachers also need 'sideways' accountability to their professional peers and 'downwards' accountability to parents and students, as shown in Figure 7.1. Such a balanced paradigm for accountability can foster strong teacher motivation and ensure every learner thrives.
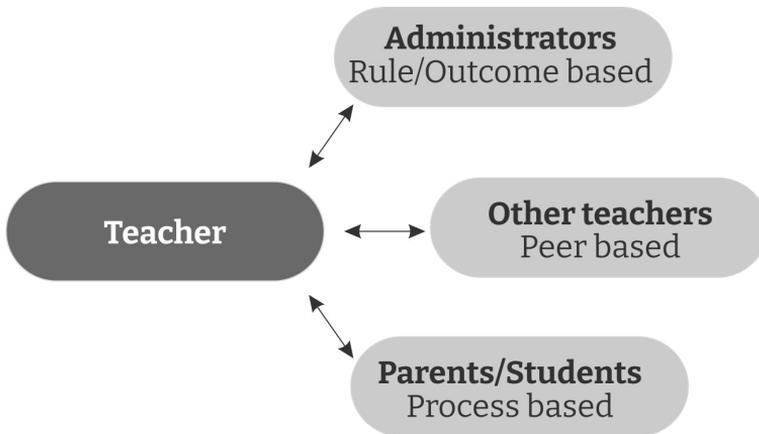
Figure 7.1: A Holistic Teacher Accountability Paradigm

Effective 'Upwards' Accountability

While we have discussed above some problems with narrowly focused accountability towards school principals and administrators, upwards accountability can still be an important part of a holistic paradigm.

Unannounced supervisory visits are generally more effective than announced visits. The educational official can easily do a spot check on children's learning with a quick teaser test.

A principal or official visiting a classroom may take some time to observe the teacher's pedagogy and classroom management against a transparent checklist, noting some of the teacher's key competencies:

- Is the teacher well-versed in their subject matter?
- Is the classroom environment warm or fearful? How are the teacher-student relationships?
- Are all children involved in the learning process?
- Do the students understand what is being taught, or is it simply rote-learned?

- Are innovative approaches like activity-based, hands-on and peer-learning being used?

Much as students need to get detailed, specific feedback for exams to be of any use, teachers should also receive detailed feedback from such visits, including follow-up action lists for any areas of improvement, with timeframes for meeting them. Ideally, such visits shouldn't be viewed by teachers as a threat but rather as support.[113] The feedback reports should begin with several positive points about the teacher's performance, before offering any suggestions for improvement.

'Sideways' Accountability: Professional and Peer Networks

Many professions make excellent use of peer accountability. Young doctors are closely supervised and guided by their seniors. Scientists and researchers strive to have their work published in peer-reviewed journals. Yet, in education, there has long been a lack of such peer accountability.[113]

One way to leverage peer accountability is to have teachers visit each other's classes for observation. Without any direct consequences attached and in the presence of a peer rather than a formal supervisor, these observation sessions can help teachers learn from each other. In terms of accountability, the mere presence of an observer can make a large difference. Some top-performing US schools have teachers observe each other's classes as frequently as twice a week![114] Dwight Allen, a renowned American educationist, developed the concept of microteaching: teachers observing a colleague teach a short lesson, giving them feedback, and then having them re-teach it.[115]

Another format for peer accountability is to have regular professional sharing sessions. This could take the form of a meeting for teachers of a local geographical area, with each asked to briefly present something new and innovative they have done this year, along with data on its impact on student achievement. Exceptional teachers can be awarded prizes, as judged by juries of their peers according to transparent criteria.[116] As we will discuss in the next chapter, peer-sharing is not only a powerful form of accountability but also goes a long way towards fostering teaching professionalism and intrinsic motivation.

'Downwards' Accountability: Involving Parents and Community

The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded educationists around the world that parents and communities play a huge role in the learning process. It takes a village to raise a child! Yet too often, parents are not constructively

involved in the education process. Particularly in government schools, many teachers find it difficult to involve parents, while parents sometimes complain that they find the teachers aloof and unresponsive. How can we revamp the teacher-parent-student nexus and foster community accountability?

One mechanism, the School Management Committees (SMCs), are a nice idea on paper, yet sadly, many are not properly functional. This is partially because village communities often have much lower social and educational status than the teachers serving there, impeding the teacher-community relationship.[117]

We need much greater community involvement in the day-to-day functioning of the school—from ensuring that every child is enrolled and attending to verifying that teachers are present and teaching well. We suggest monthly town hall meetings in which the community and parents are invited to see displays of the students' work. This creates enthusiasm among children, and wider transparency and accountability. The town hall can also be attended by SMCs, and by the occasional government official. Rather than a formal, rubber-stamping parent-teacher meeting, these forums could be a platform for the whole class to share with their parents what they have been learning. A sample of every child's work would be on display, as well as their performance of an activity. This transparency and a greater level of communication between teachers, children and parents strengthens community involvement in the process of education.

Greater transparency and informal accountability can be powerful in resolving most issues. International evidence suggests that community accountability is effective in improving the quality of education, and especially in reducing teacher absenteeism.[118] For instance, teachers who know that their students' work will be on display every month in a town hall will be motivated to attend regularly and teach diligently. Not only the teachers, students too will feel the need to attend school regularly, and parents will be accountable for this. For problems that remain unresolved, a helpline could be set up to receive community complaints and suggestions about schools.

Public-Private Partnerships

So far, we have primarily discussed accountability at the level of the teacher, but school-level accountability is equally important, especially in government schools. Government schools around the world provide a vital service in that they offer free education for all, ensuring that even the most socio-economically disadvantaged have educational access.

Indeed, education is a public good and every person's birthright. However, in many LMICs, private schools typically have some advantages over public ones. This is not because private school teachers are better paid or better trained than their public school counterparts: in India's case, it is quite the opposite![119] Rather, a key reason for the better performance of private schools is the benefit of market economics: competition brings accountability. If parents are dissatisfied with a particular school, they can shift to another one. This dynamic provides a strong incentive for schools to improve.

Is there a way to combine the best of both worlds—to marry the market-based accountability of the private sector with the free education provided by the government? This is the thinking behind many successful Public Private Partnerships (PPP) in education. Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya is one form of this, in which private parties can start schools, with funding provided by the government. To take another example, the Akanksha Foundation is an inspirational NGO that runs municipal schools in Mumbai and Pune in a PPP model, providing a better education for many disadvantaged students.[120]

Such models are gaining increasing traction internationally. Charter Schools in the USA offer people autonomy to create a unique institution, yet also have a high degree of public accountability.[121] I (Sunita) have first-hand experience running charter schools in Iceland. After establishing the Education Society of Iceland, I won the bid to run the nation's first two charter schools. The advantage of these models is the high level of accountability they can offer. If management is not handling the school well, the responsibility for running the institution can be transferred.[122]

Conclusion

A holistic accountability framework is crucial, relying not just on 'upward' accountability towards administrators but also 'sideways' professional accountability with peers and 'downwards' accountability towards parents and children. As we'll see in the next chapter, moving beyond the carrot-and-stick approach is also crucial to fostering sustainable intrinsic teacher motivation.

Policy Recommendations

- Revamp 'upward' accountability mechanisms: use clear and transparent criteria on which to evaluate teachers, and give importance to surprise rather than announced visits.

- Increase the opportunity for teachers to meet and share their work, fostering a culture of mutual accountability and working towards greater innovation, professionalism and intrinsic motivation.
- Strengthen communities' roles in ensuring accountability. This includes measures such as the publication of data on teacher absenteeism, town halls displaying student work for the whole community, and a helpline for complaints, as a recourse for the parents and children.
- Leverage public-private partnerships in education to increase school-level accountability.

Consider your Context

What are the main accountability mechanisms for schools and teachers in your country? Would any of the ideas discussed above be helpful to build greater accountability?

CHAPTER 8

Rethinking the Teaching Profession
Training and Motivation

If we look at the challenges of designing in-service training programs for school teachers, we find that they are mostly designed at the state level, and often do not address real classroom issues, like multilevel learning situation, language diversity, etc. Many training programs cover topics for all primary classes and are not focused on early primary classes. Training sessions are often delivered in lecture mode, with little discussion and activities. There is inadequate scope for experience sharing and practising new methods to demonstrate their effectiveness. Trainings are not followed up with further refresher workshops and on-site or other forms of mentoring for teachers.

<div align="right">

– **NIPUN Bharat**, India

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Do you know anyone who still uses a landline phone?

Telephone technology has changed dramatically over the past few decades, and new smartphones are vastly more convenient, powerful, flexible and effective than the old landlines. But where is the smartphone equivalent in education?

Transformation is not possible through incremental change to the existing system of education. Rather, it is a paradigm shift. No matter how much we improve the old landline phone, it can never become the smartphone. The smartphone required vastly different thinking and design.

Yet the creative thinking that led to the invention of the smartphone is often lacking in education. For too long, we have assumed the teacher will teach and the taught will learn. Nineteenth century industrial education methods haven't been able to get us to universal literacy and numeracy—let alone the key skills of the 21st century—yet we stick to these outdated methods. But what if teaching and learning can take place predominantly between children interacting with each other, and reflecting and discovering on their own?

We need research-driven groundbreaking pedagogy that dramatically improves learning outcomes, and prepares children for life by integrating the 6Cs of collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking, character, and citizenship into the fabric of the teaching-learning process itself.

Having a highly motivated and well-trained teaching force is crucial. Yet current systems of motivation and training are largely ineffective in many LMICs, because they remain embedded in outdated paradigms about the purpose and means of education. A radical overhaul is required: much as merely tinkering around with a landline won't get you to mobile phone, marginal changes around the edges of the education system won't do. A paradigm shift is needed in how we train our teachers and foster their motivation.

Teacher Training

Most teachers have completed their pre-service training in the form of a Bachelor of Education before entering the profession. Yet many report not being adequately prepared for the challenges they face in the classroom. Teachers typically view in-service training as a box to be ticked. Even if a workshop inspires them, the excitement fizzles away in a few weeks or months, as they return to their regular routines and regimes. Teachers usually default to teaching the same way they have always taught—which is often the way they themselves were taught—regardless of what new techniques they may have learned along the way.

Beliefs and habits are hard to change. It's worth quoting from a Boston Consulting Group report that dissects what is wrong with the current Indian training system:

> *First, most states train teachers for 7–10 days in a year, which doesn't even address the large capacity gap in teachers. Second, almost none of the teacher training is on basic content. Attending a typical teacher training program is a curious sight—peppered with ice-breakers and teachers singing and dancing, or it goes into complex pedagogical philosophies far removed from reality. Third, teacher training is usually delivered through a three-level cascade of a master trainer, trainer and then the teacher. This manifests itself as the game of Chinese whispers, where the delivery to the end-user is an extremely diluted form of original content. Fourth, training content is not personalised to the needs of the teacher and never translates to change in strategies inside the classroom.*[123]

There are several key changes needed to overhaul the training system.

Firstly, training needs to be designed to address worldviews and mindsets underpinning education. Everything begins with the belief system. Our current teacher training recommends new practices but often fails to address the worldviews which underpin them.[124] For instance, if the teacher believes that education is about transmitting information from the textbook to the student, they are unlikely to adopt learner-centred methods. They may perceive hands-on activities and discussion-based learning as a waste of time or an optional extra because their worldview frames their role as the transmitter of the syllabus.[125] To break through these reluctancies, we need training programs to help teachers introspect and form new worldviews, which prioritise students learning how to think and not just what to think.

What exactly are the worldviews holding teachers back? Suzanna Brinkmann identifies eight key dimensions along which teachers' beliefs range (Table 8.1). It is vital to design experiential training which enables teachers to critically reflect on their worldviews and beliefs.

Table 8.1: Contrasting Different Worldviews of Teachers[126]

Belief Dimensions	*Traditional Approach*	*New Paradigm*
1. **Inequality vs equality**	Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less capable of learning.	All children can learn, if teacher gives enough effort.
2. **Hierarchical vs democratic relationships**	Children should be controlled through fear and discipline.	Teacher-student relationship should be democratic and friendly.
3. **Uniformity vs diversity**	Sameness and conformity are seen as positives. Learners are assumed and preferred to be alike.	Diversity seen as positive, uniqueness to be encouraged.
4. **Competition vs Collaboration**	Children should compete against each other to score the best marks on exams	Children should collaborate with and learn from each other
5. **Knowledge as transmitted vs constructed**	Knowledge must be passed down from teacher/ textbook. Children learn by listening and memorising.	Children construct knowledge through active exploration, discussion and reflection.
6. **Purpose: individual vs collective advancement**	Doing well in exams in order to get a good job.	Promoting values and skills that will prepare children to live and do well in society.

Belief Dimensions	Traditional Approach	New Paradigm
7. **Teachers' duty: task-completion vs ensuring results**	A teacher's duty is to 'complete the syllabus'; if students don't learn it's their own fault.	Teacher feels personally responsible for ensuring that students learn.
8. **Low vs high professional commitment**	Low sense of commitment, accountability or work ethic.	Teaching seen as a calling, higher sense of professionalism.

Secondly, training needs to empower teachers with practical skills. Teachers need modelling and support to embrace new disruptive pedagogies. We can't expect teachers to teach with activities, discussions, group projects and the like if their instructors haven't demonstrated those techniques themselves. Often training is done in lecture mode and is not interactive enough for the lessons to sink in.

It is also vital to overhaul the curriculum and textbook design to embed peer- and independent-learning. When teachers themselves experience the power of the new educational paradigm, and see the rapid progress it generates, they will become highly motivated. So, what are these practical skills that teachers need to excel in the classroom? Some of the critical skills needed in every teacher's toolkit are portrayed in Figure 8.1.

Innovative pedagogy. How to…
- ask thought-provoking questions
- give time for students to think
- facilitate experiments, hands-on activities & games, real-life learning
- involve children in story-telling

Peer-learning. How to…
- divide a class into pairs and groups
- facilitate group discussions
- adapt to classrooms with very diverse learning levels, including multi-age classrooms

Student-teacher relationship. How to…
- ensure all children are feeling comfortable & well (including those with physical/ intellectual disabilities)
- use language of encouragement that provides specific feedback and doesn't label children as 'good' or 'not so good'
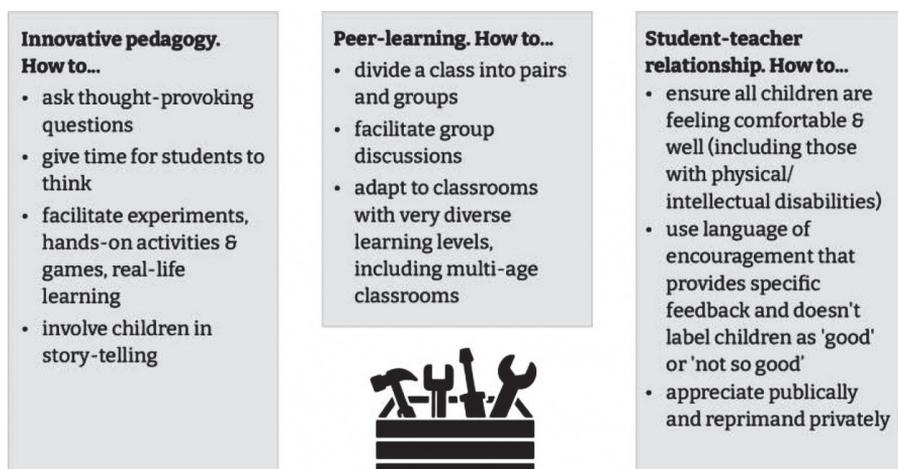- appreciate publically and reprimand privately

Figure 8.1: Some Essential Practical Skills Every Teacher Needs

Finally, effective teacher training needs to incorporate ongoing support in the practical implementation of new methodologies. Teachers sharing their work with each other is one of the best ways of ensuring that training is translated into action. Ideally, the trainers who instruct teachers will

also visit schools and act as mentors/guides. We need an apprenticeship-based approach, in which master teachers guide new teachers till the habits are changed. As discussed in the previous chapter, teachers sharing with each other is a powerful way to both build motivation and develop new skills.

Teacher training should go hand-in-hand with the training of mid-level management and school leaders. We need to ensure that the school heads are buying into the idea of pedagogical change so that they can guide and motivate the teachers. School heads also have to become pedagogical leaders, who can demonstrate these new methods.

Policy Pro: Singapore Invests in its Teachers

When Singapore became independent from Britain in 1965, it was a backward, poverty-stricken nation with limited natural resources. Five decades later, it is a stable, prosperous country with a global reputation for education, business and IT. This miraculous transformation was achieved because of strong political will and a deep commitment to the public education system, with clear-sighted policies for investing in a high-quality teaching workforce:[127]

- Prospective teachers are recruited from the top one-third of secondary school graduates and then given extensive training.
- All teachers are entitled to 100 hours' paid professional development each year. Each school has a fund to support teachers' growth—including the opportunity for trips abroad to study other countries' education systems, and funds for teachers to conduct their independent research.
- Every year, each teacher's performance is assessed—on the academic gains of their students, on the quality of their interactions with parents and other staff, and their character development. After three years in the job, there is the opportunity for excellent teachers to specialise, becoming either curriculum experts, master teachers, or entering school management.
- Teachers have many opportunities to interact with their peers, and be mentored by their seniors.

Teacher Motivation

Much as teacher training requires a radical reworking, so too how we motivate our teachers needs a paradigm shift. Rather than using a complex system of carrots and sticks (extrinsic motivation), we need to foster

teachers' intrinsic motivation through peer-sharing and professional responsibility.

What do we mean by teacher motivation? Here are some indicators which show that a teacher is highly motivated:

- Spending their own money on learning materials
- Asking each other for help and guidance
- Researching best practices and developing new teaching methodologies
- Spending additional time on lesson planning, designing activities, etc.
- Following up with struggling students and being concerned for their well-being

In many LMICs, though, teachers are often not highly motivated. A few of the mindsets holding some teachers back are depicted in Figure 8.2.

Figure 8.2: Mindsets that are a Hindrance to Teachers' Professional Growth

Could it be that teachers lack motivation due to low pay? On the contrary, in India, government teachers are paid very well—indeed, far more than would be dictated by market forces, as indicated by substantially lower salaries among private school teachers.[128] Yet counterintuitively, despite this high pay, many teachers report feeling trapped in unsatisfying jobs and lacking community respect.[129] To quote from an influential World Bank report: 'The teachers in government schools were less satisfied with nearly every aspect of their jobs and careers than were private school teachers: they felt they got less respect from management, less respect

from parents, they felt the school's leadership was weak and the work environment was worse.'[130]

This is in stark contrast with the world-beating education system in Finland, where teachers are paid less than the OECD average. However, the teaching profession has such a high stature and teachers are so respected that many young people aspire to become teachers. Indeed, only the top 10% of the country's graduates are able to enter the teaching profession.[131] This rigorous selection process means that most of those who make it and become teachers are highly motivated.

A highly motivated teaching force is crucial to students' learning outcomes. However, not all types of motivation are equal. Psychologists have long distinguished between extrinsic motivation—based on a reward or punishment—and intrinsic motivation, generated by the pleasure and satisfaction of the activity itself.[132] In various studies, it has been found that extrinsic motivators can actually undermine intrinsic motivation.[133] In countries like Finland and Singapore, teachers are motivated not so much by their pay packets but by their sense of professionalism and dedication.

Teachers' intrinsic motivation will flourish when they are given regular and ongoing opportunities to share techniques and peer-group experiences. Coaching and mentoring communities of practice are the key. Schools can be viewed as 'learning organisations' in which both the students and the staff have a culture of inquiry.[134] Teachers who are connected with their peers, and sharing their best practices, as well as the challenges they face, are likely to better engage their students and ensure they are learning well.

Fred Mednick, founder of Teachers Without Borders, has done extensive research on the issue of teacher motivation.[135] He finds that communities of practice, that is, teachers sharing their learnings, questions and research with each other, contribute to drastic changes, including:

- More flexible classroom arrangements
- Increased pedagogical choices to accommodate and serve multiple learning needs of students, as well as the teachers' own content mastery
- Greater use of visualisation techniques and manipulatives
- Increased willingness to try new pedagogies
- Greater sharing of resources and willingness to discuss failures as well as successes
- Greater focus on the relevance of learning (for students) by connection to accessible and engaging content

Stories Behind the Statistics

The Power of a Motivated Teacher

When Ugrasen Verma, a government teacher, was confronted with extremely low rates of learning in his school, he didn't despair, nor did he make excuses. Instead, he jumped online and researched effective literacy programs, coincidentally finding Global Dream. He downloaded the materials for free and then, using his own funds, printed many sets for use in his classroom. Seeing how interested the students became in the material, and their rapid rate of progress, he again went online and used his own funds to order colour hardcopies of the Global Dream materials, including picture and letter cards for further accelerating learning. Mr Verma's school is in Shravasti, one of India's lowest-literacy districts. But he remains undaunted by the task, with a passion to serve his students and society.

Photo 8.3: Students in Ugrasen Verma's School, Shravasti District,
Engage in Peer Learning

> **Stories Behind the Statistics**
>
> *City International School*
>
> When I (Sunita) founded City International School, Lucknow, I realised that excellent teachers are not plucked from thin air; they are grown! Providing forums for peer sharing is a key way for teachers to build their skills and motivation. Every Saturday, teachers meet to share what they've been doing that's new and different. To maximise results from these meetings, the teachers share a slide presentation with their hypotheses, research design, intervention, data on student improvement, photos and videos as evidence. The observers offer appreciation for their peers' work, and then may also share a suggestion. This serves as a great motivator: teachers want to be appreciated by their peers, and through the process, they are constantly learning new ideas from each other.

In this part, we have examined the vital importance of strong political will and government mission-mindedness in prioritising literacy, and discussed the structural reforms required to the education system in order to reach these goals. These changes are crucial to lay the groundwork for the second key element of the paradigm shift, which is discussed in the next part: a mobilisation of all segments of society towards the common goal of literacy for all.

Policy Recommendations

- We need a paradigm shift in education, incremental change to the old system without transformation will not suffice to develop the 6Cs in students.
- Focus training on changing beliefs, worldviews and mindsets.
- Focus training on building practical skills. Training should be highly interactive, giving teachers a taste of 'learning by doing'.
- Embed new pedagogical practices in the curriculum.
- Training should be supported by ongoing pedagogical leadership and practical guidance of principals.
- Provide teachers with peer forums to share their experiences and best practices, thereby fostering motivation.

Consider Your Context

What type of training do teachers receive in your country? Are the gaps discussed above also issues there? What are the mechanisms for fostering teacher motivation?

Part C

A New Mobilisation:
Energising the Campaign

*To put an end to this intolerable situation, we recommend a
nation-wide, coherent and sustained campaign. The campaign
should... involve the central, state, and local governments,
all governmental agencies, all voluntary agencies and private
organisations and industries, all educational institutions
ranging from universities to primary schools, and above all,
all educated men and women in the country.*
– Kothari Commission Report, 1966

POINTS TO PONDER

**How can we mobilise all segments of society,
under committed government leadership, towards the
common goal of universal literacy?**

**What role can individuals, community groups, schools,
colleges, voluntary organisations and corporations play?**

Harnessing the Power of One
Individuals on the Frontline

If every literate member of the community could commit to teach one person how to read, it would change the country's landscape very quickly.
    – **National Education Policy**, India, 2020, Chapter 2.7

Be the change you want to see in the world.
    – **Mahatma Gandhi** (attributed)

If you can read this line, you are literate. No other qualification is needed! You are ready to become part of this transformative movement to empower people with the gift of literacy. We invite you to take part in several ways— by teaching at least one person how to read, by involving your friends and colleagues, and by advocating for broader change.

Doctors and nurses have done a heroic job in the battle against COVID-19. But we cannot leave the struggle up to them alone. The war against the pandemic will be won or lost depending on all segments of society, and millions of individuals coming together for a common cause. By wearing masks and socially distancing, we do our bit to make the world safer. As we have with COVID-19, let's put in the same effort towards eradicating illiteracy. We cannot leave the illiteracy crisis just to teachers. All segments of society, and all of us as individuals, need to work together to attain universal literacy.

Mahatma Gandhi preached that teaching was the one means through which a person could enact social change without having to wait for anyone.[136] Do you know someone who is illiterate? Perhaps a maid or a guard who works in your own community? Or maybe one of their children? Think of the local labourers, children who beg at the nearby intersection, the residents of a slum community or nearby village, or someone working at the neighbourhood shop. Perhaps even one of your neighbours or relatives. If you are willing to teach even one of them, you

can make a profound impact in their lives. Imagine the joy of personally witnessing the difference that literacy can bring!

You may never have done it because you don't know how, or because you believe it will be too hard. It was the same for us, until we started developing the Global Dream Literacy Program.

A Disruptive Methodology

The Global Dream Literacy Program (available in both booklet and free app forms) enables basic mother tongue literacy and numeracy to be taught in only 30–50 instructional hours over three to five months.[137] Each lesson is just 15–30 minutes long. Short lessons keep the focus sharp and enable people to take time to learn despite busy workdays. The progress is visible every day, which motivates both you and your learner. As discussed in Part D, the key principles of the program are to ask questions, give the learner time to think, and use plenty of games and activities.

Every learner is unique: they will come from different starting points and learn at different paces. But if you are patient and keep the learning process fun, you will see the learners make progress faster than you could ever imagine. Do you doubt your ability to teach? Consider Saniya's story (overleaf). If an eight-year-old can teach, why not you?

In just an hour or two, you can teach someone to write their name. Another 15–20 hours is enough to teach basic reading and writing skills. A similar time is required for basic numeracy. In total, you can give the gift of a lifetime in just 30–50 hours! If you want to keep going with financial literacy, legal literacy, English or other skills, that's fantastic. The initial foundational skill of reading is the key, as that fosters the desire and the ability to learn more.

Approach the person who you'd like to teach to read and see if they want to get started. If they aren't sure, convince them. Many people who are illiterate don't understand how easy literacy can be. Sometimes they're afraid to try. You can inspire them to a new outlook with kind words and encouragement.

The Ripple Effect: Scaling Up Change

Many of us are daunted by the scale of the problem and wonder what difference we can make. We wonder this ourselves; we have each taught a few people how to read, yet this pales in comparison to the hundreds of millions who are still illiterate. We must remember, though, that individual

actions can have a powerful combined effect. Alone, we may not be able to achieve much, but together, we can change the world.

Stories Behind the Statistics

Saniya: The Eight-Year-Old Teacher

Saniya was only six years old when she joined our program, but she learned incredibly quickly. Though she knew only three letters at the start, she could identify 10 letters and combine them to form words by the second session. By her 16th session, she had passed the Book 1 post-test with flying colours.

Though she was a quick learner, Saniya also had a reputation for getting into trouble. Sometimes she teased other students who didn't read as fast as her. Other times she refused to read. She also delighted in teasing her teachers. But even with the occasional misbehaviour, Saniya's reading never slowed. We were excited when her mother enrolled both Saniya and her older sister Saiba, 10, in the neighbourhood school for the first time. By her 34th session (meaning just 10 instructional hours), less than two months after she started, she was certified as literate at a third grade reading level. Even after this, she continued coming to our centre to read stories.

Over a year after she'd become literate, seven-year-old Saniya was waiting to read a storybook when another student complained that they had been waiting too long. Saniya offered to teach her. She proceeded to give a perfect rendition of the Global Dream teaching style, nailing every phrase and inflection and using them all at the right time for the right reasons. There was no doubt that she could have taught anyone if she had the patience. Unfortunately, she didn't quite have the patience for it. On other days, when she tried to teach a student, she could get frustrated with their reading errors, and the student would get upset and ask to have someone else teach them. But even though the maturity wasn't quite there yet, the technical capability certainly was.

At the next Education Leadership Conference (Lucknow, India), now eight-year-old Saniya got up in front of hundreds of educators and gave a demonstration of the teaching method, a bit more timid than she was in the classroom but again using perfect technique. Little Saniya received an award up on stage alongside all the other student mentors—children who towered over her! Later, she was able to star in a video about the program demonstrating that students of any age can teach literacy so long as they have the patience to do so. The same applies to adults.

The COVID-19 crisis offers a profound reminder of the power of individual actions when multiplied across a large number of people. In much the same way, the struggle for universal literacy will be won only by our collective efforts to reach and teach people who are illiterate, which in turn will have a ripple effect.

A wonderful example comes from one of our partner organisations, MS Education. They are magnifying their impact by encouraging newly literate people to start teaching others. In their initial batch of 25 women who became literate, five went on to teach others how to read.

Can newly literate people themselves become literacy teachers? In our experience, people who've learned to read using the Global Dream methodology make some of the best teachers because of their familiarity with the program and their patience with the learner. The idea is to set off a chain reaction of literacy being passed on. The contagious spread of the 'reading bug' can help our small actions multiply to make a big difference.

The COVID-19 crisis also serves as an example of the power and the pitfalls of technology in organising large numbers of people. In India, the Arogya Setu App has been successfully utilised for contact tracing and the CoWin App has been widely used for vaccine registration. Why not develop a similar app that helps link people who would like to learn with those who can serve as volunteers? We have recently been developing such an application, which not only enables zero-cost teaching but also facilitates surveying of slums and villages, and linking of mentors and learners.

However, the COVID-19 experience also warns us that hundreds of millions of people remain on the wrong side of the digital divide, and have

ZERO COST APP: Survey, Teach, Learn, Evaluate

REGISTER
an individual, group, family or
an organization to volunteer for literacy

CONDUCT SURVEY
in communities around you and
Identify potential learners and volunteers

ADD LEARNERS
and update their details, GPS location,
ID, pre-test scores and other details

CREATE BATCHES
of your learners and teach them
using the App
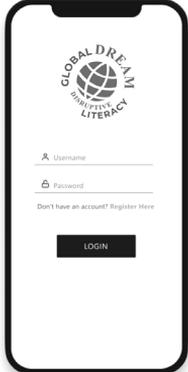
COMPLETE COURSES
on Literacy and Numeracy with
your learners starting with Name Literacy

MONITOR
the progress of your learner(s)
using real-time tracking dashboard

CONDUCT THIRD PARTY EVALUATIONS
of your learner(s) and receive
badges and certificates

TAG
other volunteers to teach learner(s)
and make them literate and numerate

Figure 9.1: Global Dream Literacy Now App

been unable to access crucial services. In addressing the literacy crisis, we need both newer technology and the tried-and-tested methods of street plays, print and visual materials, and radio and television programs to ensure that the whole of society is engaged.

As well as teaching people how to read directly, we can also advocate for our institutions—governments, NGOs, schools and colleges—to play their part. This happens at many scales. We can encourage our own children's school or college to start a literacy program. We can invite colleagues at our workplaces to join the campaign. We can volunteer with NGOs, and request our religious institutions to get involved. We can visit the local district education officer about the functioning of government schools in the area. We can sign petitions to state and central governments, demanding literacy be given top priority, and advocate for the systemic changes our education system needs, as discussed in the previous part.

Convincing your friends and co-workers to take up the cause, lobbying NGOs and the government, and sharing about the positive impacts of literacy are all vital. Each person we reach with the message is a potential teacher and a new voice to reach others. The next chapters examine some of the crucial groups which can help us multiply our literacy impact: schools and colleges, community organisations, NGOs, corporations and government.

Call to Action

☐ If you know one or more illiterate people, can you commit to giving them the priceless gift of literacy? Think through the practicalities: Who do you want to teach? What time of day is suitable for both of you? When can you start?

☐ If you don't personally know anyone who is illiterate, go to a nearby slum or village and chat with people. Are there people who don't know how to read and would like to learn?

☐ Make a list of people you know who might be interested in joining you in teaching. Ask them if they can commit 15–30 minutes per day for 3–5 months to give others a lifelong gift.

Capturing the Idealism of Youth
Students as Agents of Change

Due to the scale of the current learning crisis, all viable methods will be explored to support teachers in the mission of attaining universal foundational literacy and numeracy. Studies around the world show one-on-one peer tutoring to be extremely effective for learning not just for the learner, but also for the tutor.

– National Education Policy, India, 2020, Chapter 2.7

Knowledge is the only quantity that increases for oneself when one gives it away to others.

– Ancient Indian saying

I will teach at least 10 persons who cannot read and write to do so.

– Dr A.P.J. Kalam, former Indian President
'Oath of an Enlightened Student'

When Sunita's son Robert was in Grade 4, he was a volunteer in a literacy program. He started teaching two children in a slum near his school. Along with studying, they would often play together, and friendships formed quickly.

One day when he visited them, Robert was surprised to see that one of them was totally naked, and asked him why so. The answer left Robert thinking for many days: his new friend had only one set of clothes. Robert had found, like many other school student volunteers, that while teaching others how to read they were learning a lot themselves too—about life and inequality, service and values.

Schools and colleges form an integral part of a literacy movement. As well as engaging their students as volunteers, schools and colleges can fuel the movement by conducting surveys, performing awareness-raising activities and mobilising learners. As we'll see in Part E, many successful

literacy movements around the world—from Cuba to South Korea—have been driven by the hard work and dedication of school and college students, some of whom relocated to the countryside for several months to further the cause of literacy!

Much of the effort required from school students will be closer to home. Many primary schools, especially those catering to disadvantaged populations, struggle with low literacy skills among their own students. If the school's students struggle to read, this is the first issue to address. In a pilot project in five government schools of Hamirpur district, Uttar Pradesh, India, we used a model of high literacy students tutoring lower literacy peers with the Global Dream materials. It resulted in a rate of literacy gain ten times higher than the baseline, proving that even Grade 1 students could effectively help each other learn to read.[138] This type of peer-tutoring (one student helping another) and peer-learning (students helping each other, both directions) transforms the challenges of diverse ability levels within the class into an opportunity and a strength.

Upper primary, secondary and college students are well suited to becoming literacy mentors. The school campus is a natural place to run a literacy campaign. Literacy classes can be run in the zero period or assembly time, so as not to disturb the timetable. The student mentors often report teaching others to be a wonderful experience. Many forms of service learning, that is, gaining new skills and insights through serving a community, are gaining traction internationally.[139]

Another model involves adopting a nearby slum or village and running literacy sessions there. This is often more convenient for the learners. It also exposes the volunteers to a social environment they may not have experienced before. One of the most beautiful aspects of such programs is the friendships that can form between student volunteers and the slum and village dwellers they work with—as seen with Robert.

These sorts of community service projects deepen character and are correlated to greater motivation, lower absenteeism and higher academic success.[140] We have found that such projects contribute to the all round development and life skills of students.[141] They learn valuable patience and problem-solving skills in helping the learner work around their roadblocks. Ultimately, interacting with underprivileged people helps students develop empathy and greater social awareness. Some of the school students volunteering to teach literacy themselves ended up getting excellent scholarships to study at top universities around the world, in part because these institutions want well-rounded students with a passion to contribute to the world.

Stories Behind the Statistics

Interviews with Student Mentors

'The day I started to teach my learner, I saw tears rolling down her cheeks. I asked her why she was crying. She replied that people used to make fun of her because her Hindi [reading] was not that good. After a couple of weeks of teaching her, she told me with pride in her eyes that there is no one who can make fun of her anymore. I feel a sense of achievement … putting all my energy into teaching her; she can now read a newspaper with ease.'

– Elina Singh, 12-year-old student of Study Hall School

'I made five people literate over the summer. One learner was Dharya, who is seven years old. Dharya started off slow, but as time passed, he was able to understand as much as the others. His parents were very happy to see the improvement in him.

When I first met Mohit, who is 16 years old, I was shocked that a boy my age didn't know how to write his own name. Slowly, I was able to see an improvement in him. His parents started to send him to school, which made me feel really proud…

…My final learner was Sushila, who is 43 years old. She had never been to school, so in the beginning, she lacked confidence. But after she finished learning from me, the difference I saw in her was immense.'

– Kawalpreet Kaur, 15 years old, Bal Vidya Mandir School

'I am very grateful for a wonderful chance to connect with these people [in a slum]. I learned a lot from them: the difficulties of survival, poverty, etc. Despite all these circumstances, they have a tremendous learning attitude and attraction towards studies. From the scenario [where] they were not able to identify letters to being able to read paragraphs, they faced a lot of problems, and sometimes they thought that they would not be able to do it. But it was their learning attitude which made their dream come true.'

– Nilesh, 3rd year student of Chandra Bhanu Agricultural College

'Before joining [the Global Dream Literacy Campaign], I was a bit concerned whether I would be able to manage my time… but after joining this program, I am really happy. I don't want to miss these classes … the quality time spent there [in the slum] makes my day a happy and good one. Not only do we teach but also learn different things. Each moment there is well spent … I just love it.'

– Sanyukta, 1st year BA student of Shri Krishna PG College

Some schools and colleges operate decentralised literacy programs. Particularly if there's no illiteracy hotspot in the vicinity, you can ask the students to teach somebody in or around their home. Many wealthier students will have maids, support staff or their children, who might be illiterate. Students from humbler backgrounds may have relatives or friends who don't yet know how to read. One promising idea is for first generation school-goers (both public and private schools) to teach their own parents at home. This can be a voluntary service project, or ideally, even can be made one of the requirements for graduation. As we'll discuss in Part E, many inspirational literacy movements made teaching illiterate adults a requirement for school students.

Stories Behind the Statistics

Interview with Gargi Kumar, Grade 10 Student

TD Hi Gargi, thanks for your great efforts in teaching with Global Dream. When did you first start this project?

GK When I was in Grade 4, I went to a nearby slum and met a girl named Sanskriti. She was 14 years old, and didn't go to school, so couldn't read at all. I taught her how to read over the summer break.

TD And you've kept teaching since then?

GK Yes, I love it. I'm in Grade 10 now, and have taught seven people how to read—four children, and three adults.

TD That's fantastic! What has kept you motivated over all those years?

GK The learners themselves! Their eagerness to learn feeds into my desire to teach.

TD Were any of the children you taught already in school?

GK No, all of them were out of school for some reason or another— some child labourers, others doing domestic chores, some families just too poor to afford an education. But of those four children, three are now in school, as we encouraged their parents, and supported a couple of them financially.

TD Tell me about some of your adult learners.

GK I taught one maid, a rickshaw rider, and a painter. Some of them, especially the men, were embarrassed initially. But when they saw me teaching their children, they were also happy to learn.

TD What are some of the challenges you've faced when teaching?

GK *Matras* have been the hardest, it often takes just 2–4 weeks to finish Book 1, but Book 2 which teaches *matras*, usually takes longer.
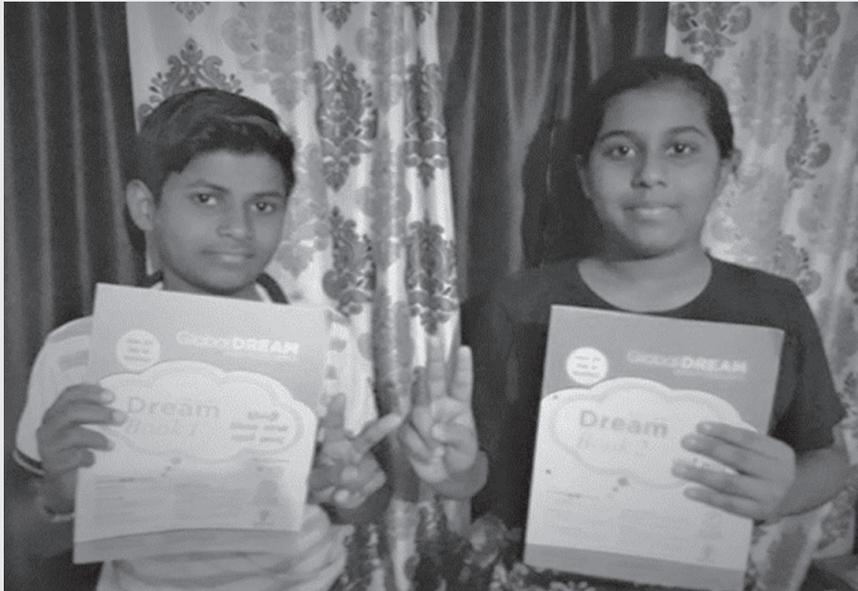
TD Do you teach during the summer holidays, or during the school term too?

GK No, during the school term as well. I often teach a learner for six months or more—after they learn to read Hindi, I start them on English and Maths too.

TD So what does a typical day look like during school term for you?

GK I get up at 6 am, get ready and go to school. When I come home at 2.30 pm, I have lunch and a break. My learners arrive at 4 pm, and I teach them until 5.30 pm. Then I have a short break and start my own studies.

TD Does giving so much time to your learners impact your studies?

GK Not really—I study three hours every evening, and achieve a rank most years.

TD Wow, that's incredible. So, is your family supportive of you teaching literacy?

GK Absolutely. My brother Sparsh, in Grade 7, has just started also teaching with me. When I got sick a couple weeks ago, my mum taught the learners instead!

TD Thanks Gargi, I'm really impressed with your work. Any parting message you'd like to give our readers?

GK Join me in helping make India literate!

Table 10.1: Comparison of Literacy Program Models for
Schools and Colleges

Location	Description	Advantages	Other Considerations
Campus peer learning	Students who can read well teach other pupils with lower literacy skills, during class time.	Can deepen relationships between students as well as rapidly improve literacy.	Only addresses literacy issues within the student population.
Campus literacy centre	On-site literacy centre attended by nearby residents. Run by the students, e.g., during zero or assembly period.	Convenient for volunteers, teachers can supervise.	May be less convenient for adult learners (unless the school organises an early morning/ evening session).
Slum	School/ college takes students to the slum area for regular classes.	New exposure for student volunteers.	May be hard to find a suitable place to teach.
Village	School/ college takes students to the village for regular classes.	Convenient for learners.	Logistical issues like transportation.
Home	Decentralised: students take the materials and find someone in their own household/ neighbourhood to teach.	Convenient for volunteers and learners. Minimal imposition on the institution.	Harder to supervise. Volunteers may face difficulties finding a learner.

The Global Dream Literacy Program was kickstarted in the summer holiday of 2014 when some 67,000 students in and around Lucknow pledged to make one person literate. Some taught their maids, others their guards. A few taught elderly relatives, and some taught young children in nearby slums. Some of these literacy mentors were from elite schools, but many others were themselves first-generation students teaching their own parents. Many reported it to be a fantastic and formative experience, and a large number continued to do so in subsequent years. Up until the COVID-19 pandemic, several hundred thousand students have taken part.

With many children missing an education over the last two years due to the pandemic, decentralised learning models have become all the more

important. Even with schools gradually reopening, tens of millions of students are well behind grade level. There is a tremendous opportunity for students to serve society by helping their peers learn.

School and college faculty members have a crucial role to play. Along with motivating and organising the students, they help monitor and direct the process. We have attempted literacy projects in over 160 schools and 20 colleges, and find that the involvement of teachers and faculty is strongly connected to the project's success. Teachers also often receive a new level of respect as students gain a greater degree of understanding and empathy for their role. In the words of one student to their class teacher: 'I appreciate your work much more now!'

Conclusion

India has 67 million upper primary (Gr 6–8), 38 million secondary, 23 million senior secondary and 34 million college students.[142] If each of these students taught just two people how to read, India could close the chapter on illiteracy in six months!

Schools and colleges play a powerful part in the literacy movement. So too do community groups.

Call to Action

If you are part of a school or college, you can play a key role in the literacy movement by:

- ☐ Running a peer-to-peer literacy support program for students within the school struggling with reading.
- ☐ Encouraging students to teach their parents, relatives, neighbours and other local community members how to read.
- ☐ Motivating every student to make someone literate during the summer holidays. This could even become a requirement, a part of the students' report card.
- ☐ Hosting literacy classes for children/ adults from a nearby slum or village area on campus.
- ☐ 'Adopting' a nearby slum/ village area and have students and staff teach there.

Photo 10.1: Literacy classes 'Each One Teach One' at
City International School, Lucknow

Photo 10.2: A Grade 8 Student of City Montessori School, Lucknow,
Teaches a Child from a Nearby Slum Community

Photo 10.3: Students of Chandra Bhanu Agricultural Degree College Teach Women in a Slum Community

Unleashing the Potential of Community
Creating Scalable Models

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.
<div align="right">

– Margaret Mead
</div>

There's no greater joy than being able to share my knowledge to serve others.'
<div align="right">

– Karauni literacy volunteer
</div>

Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.
– Frederick Douglass, former slave turned abolitionist

Can twenty two people make a whole village literate? Can the power of commitment overcome a lack of material resources? We were surprised by the answers as a reading revolution took hold in the sleepy hamlet of Karauni.

Teaching and learning is a community experience. Individuals working alone may struggle to continuously motivate themselves, but communities working together for literacy can generate powerful momentum. As literacy spreads, it has the power to transform a community.

After establishing projects in several slums of Lucknow, we decided to take on a village as an experiment for a community-based model of literacy work. Karauni is a small village around 30 kilometres southwest of Lucknow's city centre. Out of a population of 4,365, our survey revealed that 1,211 people aged 7–70 were illiterate in their mother tongue, Hindi; two-thirds of them were women.

With our modest financial and human resources, it was clear that a conventional approach—renting literacy centres, paying tutors, heavily structuring and supervising a program—would not work to reach this large group of people. We started wondering: is it possible for people of all ages and qualification levels to become literacy tutors? Would people be willing to volunteer without a payment?

To begin, we knew we had to motivate people and generate interest. We organised songs and marches for literacy, tapping into local art forms and folklore to mobilise potential learners and volunteers. This culminated in a village level meeting, gathering curious people to explain the program.

Why is this promotion necessary when we all know literacy is such a key skill? We humans are social creatures—afraid to stick our necks out in some new activity but delighted to jump on the bandwagon. As our own experience testifies, people are much more likely to join a literacy program when their friends and relatives are taking part. When those people who matter to us care about an issue, we start caring about it too.[143] This is why it is so crucial for a literacy movement to generate and harness the power of social momentum.

Once people had been mobilised, there were some surprising discoveries to be made. In partnership with Lawrence & Mayo, and Essilor Foundation, we ran eyesight screening camps and provided free glasses for those who needed them. We were astonished that as many as 40 per cent of those tested required glasses. Many people, who had never been able to read, realised that they had weak eyesight. Getting a check-up and glasses acted as an incentive and enabled many to consider learning to read for the first time.

Ultimately, having already identified over 1,200 people who were illiterate, we were able to find 22 women who were willing to become mentors—and give their time to this cause, without payment. The group was quite diverse: for instance, some of them were college graduates, whereas others had only passed Grade 5. Many were young and unmarried, but plenty of older, married women were also there.

We conducted a four hour training for this group of mentors on how to teach literacy effectively (see Part D). We provided each with a Literacy Box containing enough materials to teach 20 people: mats, chalk and slates, movable plastic letters and, of course, the Global Dream ALfA books. This tiny group then set forth with a big mission: to make the village literate.

The mentors, whom we had drawn from a number of hamlets across the village, started spreading the word amongst their neighbours, relatives and friends. Quickly and organically, small groups of women started meeting in open spaces or in the mentors' houses, typically for an hour or so each afternoon, to learn how to read and write. Along with learning literacy, these groups provided a nice environment for socialising and building community networks.

These 22 literacy mentors reported that the first batch of 180 women had become literate in just two months. In August 2015, these women sat the National Literacy Mission test. For some of them, this monitored exam was their first time inside a school! 135 formerly illiterate women passed the test on their first attempt. The women were delighted to receive certificates of literacy from the Government of India—certificates which they could now read.

In subsequent batches, hundreds more have become literate. Many of the neo-literates have continued meeting to further their education, including some learning English and a few pursuing formal qualification through the National Institute of Open School. Some have formed self-help groups and built livelihoods together, running small pickling or craft-making businesses. Most have felt the impact of literacy in multiple spheres of life, from greater domestic dignity to empowerment in broader society.

Stories Behind the Statistics

Literacy Matters

A week ago, 40-year-old Gudiya, a native of Karauni village in Lucknow's Sarojini Nagar block, went to a nationalised bank to inquire about the balance in her savings account.

The bank staff told her a figure, but Gudiya insisted he recheck it. When the staff refused, she told him that only that morning she had received a text message, according to which ₹15,000 had been credited into her account. The staff rechecked and found her to be right. He apologised.

'I told him I wasn't illiterate. I learned how to read and write ever since the Global Dream Literacy Mission started in my village,' Gudiya told *HT*.

– *Hindustan Times* Report, September 8, 2019[144]

And what of our mentors? A few from that initial group still continue teaching, sincerely taking out time to serve their fellow villagers. Why do they do this, with no monetary benefit? Many earned newfound respect among their neighbours—they were now not just someone's mother, sister or wife; they were teachers! Others found a sense of fulfilment from life beyond their daily domestic duties. Global Dream Literacy's efficient and enjoyable teaching methodology helped keep both mentors and learners motivated, as progress was rapid and visible.

Of course, it wasn't all easy, and we made mistakes along the way. In the early stages of our experiment, we needed to visit the village frequently to build momentum. And throughout our experience in Karauni, we found it challenging to motivate men to become volunteers and learners.

While we still reflect on what could have been done better, the overall success of the experiment shines through. With minimal expenditure and limited external inputs, hundreds of women learnt to read and write within a short period, which ultimately led to greater social and gender equality.

Karauni is only one village, but the idea of leveraging local community institutions can be widely scaled up. India, for instance, has decentralised some power to the local village council (panchayat) level. The panchayat is tasked with responsibility of strengthening the village's economic development and social justice.[145] Literacy being a key factor for socio-economic progress, it is well within the remit of the panchayat to sponsor and organise literacy campaigns similar to the one in Karauni village. Beyond formal institutions, there are many informal community groups—from youth clubs to the local temple or mosque—that can help mobilise the community for the cause of literacy.

Karauni stands as a powerful example of what community mobilisation for literacy can achieve. The next chapter examines how voluntary organisations can also play a key role in the mass movement for literacy.

Call to Action

If you are part of a community organisation, you can play a key role in the literacy movement by:

- [ ] Conducting surveys to establish the extent of illiteracy in an area.
- [ ] Conducting awareness-raising activities to motivate people to join the movement as both mentors and learners.
- [ ] Organising community events to promote the importance of literacy.
- [ ] Mobilising literacy mentors and helping match them up with learners.
- [ ] Helping neo-literates with vocational training and continuing education.

Photo 11.1: The First Batch of Volunteer Literacy Workers in Karauni Village, With Their Literacy Box Kits Containing Books, Slates and Chalk

Catalysing Transformation

The Critical Role of Voluntary Organisations

Collaborative involvement of a wide range of governmental and non-governmental institutions and services is crucial for nationwide mobilisation for literacy.

<div align="right">

– **UNESCO,** The Evolution and Impact of
Literacy Campaigns and Programs, 2015

</div>

India is a land of many religions, languages, cultures, foods—and many voluntary organisations! Some 3.1 million NGOs are registered in India alone, and over 10 million globally.[146] Voluntary organisations, both large and small, religious and secular, have a vital role to play in the literacy movement.

If you are an NGO, you can be a key local partner with the government in conducting surveys to establish the extent of illiteracy in an area. We have experienced the rewards, and the challenges, of conducting surveys. In 2015, our NGO, DEVI Sansthan, trained 3,957 government pre-primary and primary teachers to conduct a literacy survey of 1.5 million people in Lucknow district. The data collected from that survey set the thinking in motion which led to this book.

Another aspect in which you can help is by orchestrating awareness-raising activities to mobilise new learners and volunteers. India's most famous and effective mass literacy movement, conducted in Ernakulam district, was initiated and directed by an NGO, the Kerala Science and Art Organisation. As literacy is widely regarded as a positive by all segments of society, the array of groups willing to participate in such work—from clubs to religious institutions to registered charities—is quite broad. Literacy movements around the world, from Nepal to Bolivia, have relied on numerous non-government organisations to facilitate marches, plays, songs and all sorts of activities which mobilise the population towards participating both as volunteers and as learners.[147]

Nowadays, these traditional ways to mobilise can be complemented with television shows and social media campaigns. The means may have changed, but the goals remain the same: spreading the message to everyone that they can be part of a movement for change. People are waiting for a cause to associate with.

You can also play a role in helping monitor and report on the progress of literacy. Again, this can be assisted by technology. We frequently use WhatsApp groups to organise volunteers, Facebook posts to spread the news of an event, and Google forms to gather data. If we ever conduct another large scale survey, we will be eager to incorporate digital technology. In the 2015 survey, the data entry of four hundred thousand households' paper forms was a nightmare. We have since designed an app that facilitates the process.

A key principle is to mobilise community networks rather than trying to teach everyone yourself, as we saw in the chapter on Karauni village. In many of our slum literacy programs, too, we have found that our best volunteers are those who are from the community themselves.

Another key initiative is to experiment with different programs and approaches. As a small NGO, we are acutely aware of the limited impact that we can directly make. However, by innovating new ways of teaching and gathering robust data on the same, we can showcase ideas that better-resourced and larger organisations, including governments, can adopt to scale up, thereby catalysing a larger transformation. Instead of organisations scaling up ourselves, we can make a large impact by influencing the actions of others at scale.[148]

A further key role that you can play is creating contextualised curriculum in various local languages and dialects. We have developed the Global Dream ALfA materials in most of the major Indian languages, but many regional vernaculars lack high quality literacy materials. NGOs who are deeply involved in their local communities can do a fantastic job replicating literacy materials in their own contexts.

Of course, literacy is one cause among many. Numerous NGOs are doing excellent work in healthcare, sustainability, social justice, food rights, children and women's rights, and many other important causes. However, literacy is a mission that NGOs with many different focuses can still mobilise for because it intersects powerfully with all these issues, as argued from the outset. We have partnered with NGOs as diverse as Oxfam, Teach for India, Magic Bus Foundation, Piramal Foundation, HCL Foundation and many others doing great work in various fields.

Along with registered charities, many other non-governmental organisations can play key roles in the literacy movement. Take religious institutions, for example. The Vedas state: 'Do not forsake learning and teaching'. Allah revealed to Prophet Muhammad to 'Read, in the name of thy Lord'. Christian reformers have long emphasised that everyone should be empowered to read on their own. Baha'u'llah, the founder of Baha'ism, famously said: 'Illiteracy and ignorance must be eliminated from the planet. To fail in this is a sin before God.'[149]

Furthermore, all religions preach justice and equality, abhorring the fact that such a large proportion of people still cannot participate in their own progress. Many religious organisations are socially active, conducting relief work and almsgiving. As we've seen, literacy is a gift for life, the best alms to give! Religious organisations can and should be at the forefront of a people's literacy movement.

Call to Action

If you are an NGO or religious organisation, you can be a key part of the literacy movement by:

- [ ] Conducting literacy surveys to establish the extent of illiteracy in an area.
- [ ] Orchestrating awareness raising activities and social media campaigns to promote the importance of literacy.
- [ ] Mobilising community networks for literacy.
- [ ] Replicating high quality materials, such as the Global Dream Literacy Toolkit, in a regional/local vernacular.
- [ ] Advocating for governments to give top priority to literacy.
- [ ] Partnering with other NGOs to share resources and ideas.
- [ ] Participating in SMCs and other mechanisms to help hold schools to account, particularly through doing social audits.

Rethinking Corporate Social Responsibility

The World's Best Investment

The highest priority of the education system will be to achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy in primary school by 2025. The rest of this Policy will become relevant for our students only if this most basic learning requirement (i.e., reading, writing, and arithmetic at the foundational level) is first achieved.
— **National Education Policy,** India, 2020, Chapter 2.2

For every dollar spent on literacy, society reaps $7 of returns.
— **Literacy Partners,** New York

Shoppers love 'buy one get one free' offers. But a lesser known concept of 'buy one give one free' was started by a shoe company in 2006—for every item of footwear they sold, they gave away another to a disadvantaged child. So far, 100 million shoes have been distributed to kids in over 70 countries![150] Like many companies, they discovered that, rather than cutting into the bottom line, doing good increases brand value and attracts both customers and employees.

Corporations are engines of economic growth but are not often thought of as drivers of social change. Yet, in recent years, companies have begun significant Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) spending. In the financial year 2019–20, corporations in India spent ₹88 billion ($1.2 billion) on CSR. Globally, the Fortune 500 companies spend upwards of $15 billion per year on Corporate Social Responsibility.[151] Spent the right way, for the right causes, this could be transformative.

It has long been known that literacy is one of the best investments— it yields a tremendous return both to the individuals becoming literate and to society at large.[152] The cost of becoming literate is minimal, yet the cost of remaining illiterate is huge (Figure 13.1, overleaf). As the

world becomes increasingly digitised and information-rich, the costs of illiteracy continue to increase. Meanwhile, improved techniques bring the cost of making someone literate down. Just as prevention is much cheaper than cure in medicine, so too avoiding the costs of illiteracy by investing in literacy is both a social responsibility and a smart move economically.
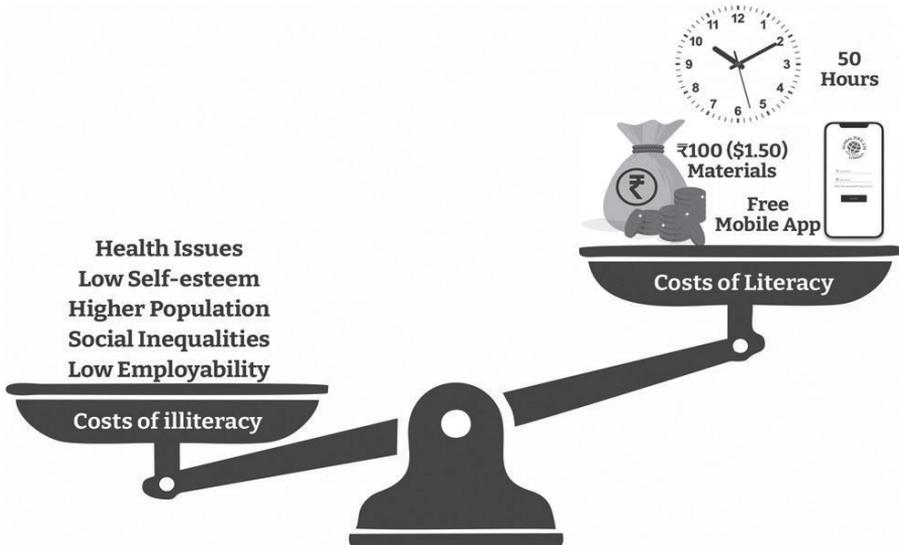

Figure 13.1: The Costs of Illiteracy Far Outweigh the Costs of Becoming Literate

International foundations and development agencies also have a key role to play by investing in literacy. The International Monetary Fund, World Bank and other players should invest heavily in education and literacy, particularly in building back better after the devastation of the COVID-19 crisis.[153] In this respect, it is encouraging that the World Bank recently granted India a $500 million loan towards improving the quality of education in six states.[154]

Corporate Social Responsibility funds and philanthropic foundations may not be able to provide the bulk of educational funding in the way that the government does. But they can take greater risks and invest in educational innovations and start-ups in a way that governments may be reluctant to. Even a relatively small amount invested in the right way can catalyse a huge transformation. Corporations can invest in both large and medium-sized NGOs, who can collaborate with thousands of smaller organisations. For instance, our NGO has had the opportunity to partner with SBI Foundation to work in several slums of Lucknow, and develop an app to scale up literacy programs.

Understandably, over the past two years, the focus of much corporate giving has been on the COVID-19 crisis. However, an under-appreciated aspect of COVID-19 and lockdowns is the devastation wreaked on education. While there are myriad important causes to spend money on, the power of literacy is that it plants seeds for long term change in a host of critical areas.

The Indian government has prescribed 13 areas for CSR funds to be spent on (Schedule VII of the Companies Act, 2013).[155] As discussed in Chapter 1, literacy is a key to making progress in all of these areas. Table 13.1 shows some of the direct connections. We suggest that a subsequent revision of the Companies Act include literacy directly as a CSR area.

Table 13.1: Selected CSR Area and Connection with Literacy

CSR Area (in brief)	Connection with Literacy
1. Ending hunger, poverty and malnutrition; promoting preventative healthcare and sanitation	Literacy improves educational opportunities and therefore employment prospects and income, thus contributing to ending poverty, and thereby hunger and malnutrition. According to UNESCO, if all students in low-income countries left school with basic reading skills, 171 million people would be lifted out of poverty.[156] Literacy has a huge impact on lowering child mortality,[157] increases awareness of sanitation and preventative health issues, increases ability to engage with the healthcare system.
2. Promoting education	Literacy is the foundation of all education; without literacy, education is impossible.
3. Promoting gender equality	Literacy empowers women, both helping them gain greater self-confidence and respect within the family, and greater freedoms outside the home. For example, in Sub-Saharan Africa, 20 per cent of illiterate girls are married before the age of 18, compared to 4 per cent of literate girls.[158]
4. Reducing inequalities faced by socially and economically backward groups	Literacy fosters greater social equality, empowering people from disadvantaged castes and classes to stand up for their rights.[159]
5. Ensuring environmental sustainability and ecological balance	Literacy aids greater awareness of environmental issues, and is also critical in reducing population growth.[160]
(11 and 13) Rural and Slum development projects	Literacy is critical to people's ability to know their rights and engage in development projects.[161]

As well as directly giving CSR funds, there are many creative models for you to engage with your employees and help them feel connected to the cause. For instance, some run one-for-one matching donation schemes with their employees: for instance, if the employee donates $100 to a charity of their choice, the corporation matches it with $100. Other corporations, as discussed in the opening, use a 'buy one give one free' model.

You can also play a key role by providing volunteers for the literacy movement. Many large corporations employ thousands of factory workers, some of whom may not be literate. Companies can utilise a peer-to-peer support program to reach 100 per cent staff literacy, which will both build team morale and upskill workers, leading to improved productivity.

Once full in-house literacy has been achieved, employees can engage with their local area, boosting the literacy rates of the neighbourhood by running a literacy centre for all within the company premises or in a nearby slum or village. Providing these opportunities to volunteer and give back to the community makes a company more likely to attract and retain passionate employees. Employees and customers alike tend to respect companies that are working on crucial social issues.

As well as engaging with literacy work directly, corporations can offer pro-bono back-end support to NGOs working on the frontline. For instance, some NGOs are doing good work on the ground but lack the technical know-how to operate an effective social media presence, limiting their ability to multiply impact. Corporations specialising in communications and IT can help provide expertise to NGOs, offering in-kind support for the creation of videos, reports, etc. Many foundations also offer crucial support to NGOs in helping them to monitor and evaluate the impact of their work.

Through funding, providing volunteers and offering in-kind/ advisory support, corporations and foundations can play a vital role in the literacy movement. There is no greater social responsibility than to ensure everyone gains the crucial foundational skill of literacy and numeracy.

Call to Action

If you are part of a corporation or a philanthropic foundation, you can play a key role in the literacy movement by:

☐ Supporting districts in your catchment area to implement a mass movement for literacy.

☐ Funding and providing back-end support (e.g., building capacity by training on monitoring, fundraising, auditing) to organisations that are doing crucial and innovative literacy work.

☐ Setting up a global pool of funds to promote literacy across the world.

☐ Leveraging funds to accelerate literacy in different contexts.

☐ Running literacy programs to ensure all workers in your supply chain are made literate, through the efforts of their peers.

☐ Encouraging and facilitating employees to take up the cause of literacy, in your own special formats (for instance through matching employees' donations to NGOs).

☐ Adopting a nearby slum or village and/or support those working to make it fully literate.

☐ Advocating for governments to make literacy a top priority.

Part D

A New Method: Revolutionising Pedagogy

In learning you will teach, and in teaching you will learn.
– Phil Collins, British musician

POINTS TO PONDER

How can it be that so many children do not learn foundational literacy and numeracy despite years at school?

Is there a way to teach these skills efficiently and enjoyably?

A Tale of Two Teachers

How to Teach in Three Months What Normally Takes Three Years

Tell me and I will forget.
Teach me and I will remember.
Involve me and I will learn.

– Ancient Chinese proverb

To prevent learning losses from accumulating once children are back in school, countries should adopt learning recovery programs consisting of evidence-based strategies... Without remedial measures, learning losses may grow even after children return to school, if the curriculum and teaching do not adjust to meet students' learning needs. Learning recovery programs can prevent this [by] making learning more efficient through targeted instruction, structured pedagogy, small-group tutoring, and self-guided learning programs."

– The State of the Global Education Crisis,
combined UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank report

Many years ago, I (Sunita) left my job at the World Bank to commit full time to work for literacy. However, my initial attempts did not produce a satisfactory response: teaching literacy was proving lengthy and labourious. Then in 2014, I began to dream wildly, asking a seemingly impossible question: can reading skills be taught in just a month rather than taking years?

This question propelled my journey to move away from the traditional approach to foundational literacy and numeracy in search of a disruptive new one. It led to the birth of a set of materials and methods which, we hope, will help the dream of a literate world become a reality: hence the name of our program, Global Dream Accelerating Learning for All (ALfA).

So far in this book, we have explored the importance government *mission-mindedness*, and the need for society-wide *mobilisation* for the cause of literacy. This part zooms from the macro to the micro level, focusing on the third key element of a literacy movement: *methods* of teaching literacy. The current chapter describes in broad brushstrokes the pedagogical paradigm shifts needed. The next two chapters provide a practical guide on how to apply these new methods and materials for teaching literacy and numeracy, respectively.

Diagnosing the Disease: The Industrial Education System

Consider how much technology has changed in the last hundred years. Today's cars are far more powerful than those in the early 1900s. Telephones have changed almost beyond recognition. Computers have gone from the size of a room to fitting in a purse. Yet when we consider photos of classrooms a hundred years ago and compare them to classrooms today, it is the similarities which are most striking:

- Rows of desks facing the teacher
- A fixed, rigid, one-size-fits-all syllabus
- High-stakes assessments used for comparing and judging children
- Teaching from the front on a board (even if it's gone from a blackboard to an interactive whiteboard)
- Children filling worksheets (now on fancy apps)
- Children divided by age and career streams
- Rote learning

The technology may have evolved, but the fundamentals of these practices have barely changed.

Figure 14.1: A Typical Classroom, 100 Years Ago and Today

This worldview of learning has its roots in the industrial revolution.[162] Early factories were defined by production lines, the division of labour,

repetitive mechanical activities and quality testing. Industrialists required workers for these factories, and so schools were created to prepare them for the same: subjects were divided, repetitive drills and rote learning taught skills and facts, exams enforced quality control. The goal was to churn out conforming, punctual, obedient, hard-working, docile young adults. Much as factories strive to produce identical products, the education system was designed to produce identical people. Even the external appearance of school buildings was not dissimilar to factories!

The world is increasingly recognising that the industrial education model is long past its use-by date. The workers and citizens of today need to be creative, collaborative, critical thinkers, not docile factory cogs. In a world flush with information, memorising facts alone has little utility. With Google searches, calculators and spell checkers at our fingertips, mechanistic skills are less relevant in and of themselves. We need to be able to problem-solve across different disciplines, including complex and multi-faceted issues: poverty, hunger, climate change and biodiversity loss, to name just a few.

Yet most classrooms in India and many LMICs remain chained to the industrial education model. Decades of this system have not succeeded in ensuring that all of our children gain even the most basic skills of literacy and numeracy, let alone the crucial 21st century skills of creativity and critical thinking!

Even a cursory glance at child psychology reveals why the industrial, rote-learning model is ill-suited to genuine learning. When we ask students what a particular letter is, many need to recite the entire alphabet up until that point to be able to tell us. They cannot remember the letter in the context of a word, only in the context of their memorisation exercise. The common 'repeat after me' style of teaching ensures that the student uses their ears and their mouth, but their eyes (and mind) can be wandering anywhere. Even if they are trying to focus, they are unable to connect the newly acquired facts to their existing knowledge. We see a similar issue in mathematics. Almost all school children, aged seven or above, are able to rattle off the numbers from 1 to 100, both verbally, and in writing. Yet the same children can't recognise and name a two-digit number, nor write it. Much like the alphabet can be memorised without any understanding or genuine recognition, so too numbers.

The industrial education model overloads children's ears, but doesn't give them the opportunity to use their hands or their brain. This system has not achieved universal literacy over the last hundred years—nor will it in the next hundred if we allow it to continue!

Paulo Freire, the great Brazilian educator, penned *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which is the third most cited book of all time among social sciences.[163] Among Freire's key contributions was the critique of the industrial education system in which students are viewed as empty vessels to be passively 'filled' with knowledge by teachers. Instead, Freire espoused a critical pedagogy, in which students learn to critique the dominant social and economic systems. He argued that learning does not take place in a vacuum but is connected to students' real-life experiences.

Freire's radical pedagogy brought some remarkable results. He taught some 300 sugarcane farmers how to read and write, in just 45 days![164] His work also landed him in prison when the military dictatorship decided that his vocation to empower the oppressed was a threat to their rule. But Freire's pedagogy and his groundbreaking work on adult literacy remain an inspiration to educators around the world.

The Paradigm Shift: How Global Dream Works

Years of research and trial and error have helped demystify the principles and practices that can help both children and adults learn reading, writing and numeracy effectively. We have crystallised these approaches to create

Figure 14.2: The Six Principles/Practices of Global Dream ALfA

a groundbreaking methodology and curriculum to help people master these foundational skills in a remarkably short 30–50 hours of learning time over three to five months, as compared to three to five years in school! Global Dream ALfA (Accelerating Learning for All) works because it is based on the following scientifically proven principles and practices, as depicted in Figure 14.2 and elaborated below.

Asking Questions

In the traditional approach, the role of the teacher is to transmit information to the student. However, research shows that this is not how we learn: the brain is not a blank slate to be written on; rather, it's a melting pot of existing knowledge and experiences, on which new learning is built. The teacher's role, then, is primarily to ask meaningful questions of the learner to help them make the connections between their existing knowledge and their new learnings. Asking questions stimulates thought and provides the opportunity to use existing knowledge. It makes the process interactive, interesting and memorable.

For instance, Figure 14.3 shows the key questions to start the literacy journey.
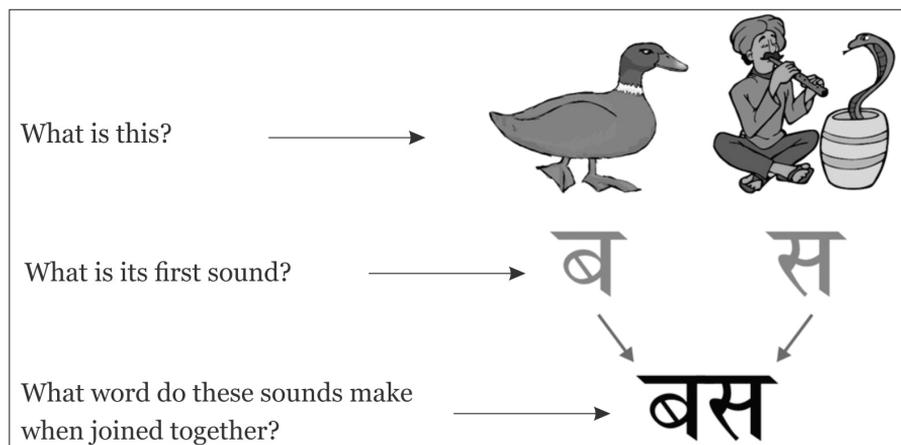

What is this?

What is its first sound? ब स

What word do these sounds make when joined together? बस

Figure 14.3: The Key Opening Questions for a Person Learning How to Read for the First Time (*Source:* Global Dream Hindi)

Similarly, when teaching numeracy, we use a variety of word problems and ask the learner to try to solve them with their peers. Questions should be interesting and engage with a learner's existing life experiences. We encourage learners to create their own questions, too, for each other to solve.

Thinking Time

The traditional approach often does not give learners sufficient thinking time. The curriculum is viewed as a rigid constraint, which must be gotten through in a certain time, regardless of whether the student has actually learned.

A key principle of Global Dream is that learners are given time to think of the answers themselves. Research shows that giving students thinking time after asking a question leads to significant improvements in their academic performance.[165]

What does this look like in practice? Suppose a learner is unable to join together two sounds to form a word. We might help in a variety of ways, for instance, using hand gestures: 'If this hand is /i/ and this hand is /n/, when I bring my hands together, what does it make?' Or we might use rhyming words: 'If /o/ + /n/ makes /on/, then what does /i/ + /n/ make?' While trying these creative approaches, we give the learner plenty of time to think. We don't tell the answer; the learner reaches it on their own.

From Known to Unknown and Concrete to Abstract

Another key aspect of Global Dream's approach is to support learners in understanding new and abstract concepts by helping them connect with their existing knowledge of the language. Even if a learner is not able to decode text, she still has the knowledge of the spoken language and visual understanding of their environment, which we build upon. That's why we use pictures to tap into learners' existing oral knowledge of the words and sounds of the language. We use a picture (which the learner recognises), ask its first sound (which the learner can derive themselves) and only then introduce the unknown—the written character. Whereas in the traditional approach, 'a for apple' is used, Global Dream flips this upside-down: 'apple: /a/'. This is so that the learner can make associations between their existing knowledge (the picture) and their new learning (the letter).

Similarly, even a learner who doesn't recognise mathematical symbols is still able to count objects in their day-to-day lives. Thus, in teaching numeracy, we use concrete objects for counting and operations before introducing abstract representations. Learning scaffolds in a logical, scientific manner, with each new concept building on the existing knowledge, and each module flowing on from previous ones.

Evidence shows that this is the key to effective long-term memorisation. According to Cowan, 'New information must make contact with the long-

term knowledge store in order for it to be categorically coded.'[166] Once associations are constructed, they need to be rehearsed, which in turn leads to consolidation into longer-term memory, and recall becomes faster with more association cues during the learning process.[167]

Immediate, Useful Feedback

In the rote learning approach, the teacher and the student don't know whether or not genuine learning is taking place. The learner successfully parrots back what they've heard or writes down what's on the board—but this is no guarantee that they are actually learning with understanding. The teacher will sometimes give feedback to the learner, but this may not be specific. This is not useful feedback, as it does not lead to changes. Teachers also often use praise and reprimand, which research shows can be harmful to the students' instrinsic motivation.[168]

In contrast, the Global Dream approach integrates the Montessori concept of 'Control of Error', a technique that allows learners to check their own learning frequently. Each lesson has a list of words made using the letters newly introduced in that lesson, presented without the picture prompts.

Independent and Peer Learning

The traditional approach makes it very hard for students to learn on their own because the entire process is teacher-driven. When the whole classroom is taught together, a few children give the answer every time; others very seldom speak and usually only repeat an answer they have already heard.

On the other hand, the Global Dream approach facilitates and encourages peer learning. Learners feel greater self-confidence and are in control of the learning process. We often hear our learners boasting to each other: 'I learned it all by myself, nobody told me.' Once a learner has understood the technique of decoding letters and their sounds from images, they are almost able to teach themselves how to read! Similarly, if a learner 'gets' the concept of addition or subtraction, they are able to solve larger and harder calculations on their own.

The key is to enable peer learning, that is, students helping each other. We encourage learners to pair up or form small groups on their own, or allocate them randomly. Peer learning has benefits with evidence indicating academic gains, including reading accuracy and comprehension, and social gains in motivation, enjoyment, confidence,

relating to others, and self-esteem.[169] It also helps students to feel a sense of belonging and fosters community within a school or classroom, leading to greater learning levels. Peer learning is critical to developing the '6C' skills of the 21st century: Collaboration, Communication, Creativity, Critical Thinking, Character and Citizenship.

Games and Activities

Renowned educational researcher John Hattie conducted a meta-analysis of global research on student achievement. He found that boredom has an effect size of –0.49, the third most negative factor after ADHD and deafness![170] Rote memorisation is incredibly boring. In contrast, Global Dream ALfA is a joyful learning process because of its reliance on games and activities. Some of our favourite games are:

- **Matching game:** Each learner is given either a picture or a letter card at random. On 'go', they search for their partner with the matching letter/picture.
- **Anagram game:** Each learner is given a set of 6–8 letter cards, and has a few minutes to form as many words with them as they can.
- **Ascending/descending game:** Each learner is given a card with a number written on it. They need to arrange themselves into a line from smallest to the largest number (or vice versa).

The table below summarises some key philosophical and pedagogical differences between Global Dream and the traditional industrial education model.

Table 14.1: Contrasting Two Teaching-Learning Paradigms

Area	*Old Paradigm*	*New Paradigm*
Worldview of learning	Abstract to Concrete. Students are given facts and theories to learn, and only later (if at all) apply these to the real world.	Concrete to Abstract. Students use their existing knowledge to generate new understandings and form abstractions from their experiences.[171]
Teacher's role	Reading the textbook to the students, writing on the board for students to copy.[172]	Facilitating the students' learning by asking questions and enabling thought-provoking hands-on and real-life experiences.
Teacher-student relationship	Teacher should be dominant, student subordinate: a 'sage on the stage'.	Teacher should be a friend, facilitator and mentor: 'a guide by the side'.

Area	Old Paradigm	New Paradigm
Role of curriculum	Teacher's job is to complete the curriculum in the specified time.[173]	The curriculum is there as a guide, but each learner can progress at their own pace.
Assessment	High-stakes assessments with fixed dates and timings, which lead to classifying students as high or low performers. Delayed, non-personalised, summative feedback, which does not guide future learning.[174]	Formative assessments, conducted frequently and as an integral part of the learning process. Immediate, personalised feedback which informs next actions for both student and teacher.
Approach to literacy teaching	Drilling of sounds, memorisation of the letters of the alphabet, 'repeat after me' reading.[175]	Use pictures to associate with sounds (known) and letters (unknown).
Approach to numeracy teaching	Repetitive tasks like 'write from 1 to 100' and copying of sums.	Using concrete objects, and real-world problems, games and activities.
Role of independent learning	Very difficult, since the whole process is teacher-driven.	Quite possible for students to learn and progress on their own without any input from the teacher.
Role of peer learning	Students should learn individually, focus on their own work.	Peer learning is key, students can help each other.[176]
Role of activities, games, practical demonstrations	An optional extra to be done only once the 'theory' is complete.	A primary part of the learning process, used to stimulate curiosity and help explain concepts at a deeper level.

When we examine the deep differences between the traditional approach and the Global Dream way, it no longer feels surprising that we are able to drastically accelerate the rate of learning. And the best news is that anyone, without needing impressive qualifications or extensive training, can take up this approach and use it to give the gift of a lifetime. Not only have these methodology and materials been developed based on international research, but they have also been extensively tried and tested with learners young and old.

The next two chapters examine the Global Dream way of teaching literacy and numeracy in greater depth.

Reflection Questions

1. What do you think of the critique of the industrial education model made in this chapter? Visit a local school. What style of education is being offered?
2. How do you feel about the six principles of the Global Dream approach? Which appeal to you most? Which, if any, do you have doubts over?

CHAPTER 15

Literacy Acceleration
The Science of Learning to Read

Before reading to learn, you must first learn to read.
– Unknown

Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other."
– Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed

'What's this a picture of?' we ask Shubham, one of our learners.

'Batakh' (Duck).

'What's the first sound of batakh?', we ask again.

Shubham looks confused, surprised that we didn't know what sound a duck makes.

'Quack, quack!', he tells us.

A couple onlookers break into laughter. That wasn't what we had meant by the duck's first sound! But by the end of the session, their laughter is replaced by impressed smiles as Shubham slowly but surely reads six words on his own.

We discussed in the previous chapter some of the key philosophical and pedagogical shifts needed to accelerate literacy and numeracy teaching. This chapter focuses on the practical implications of this approach, specifically for teaching how to read. We explain some of the roadblocks to literacy learning in the traditional approach before exploring the structure of the Global Dream ALfA materials.

Why People aren't Learning to Read

Literacy has many components, including oral language development, phonological awareness, blending, decoding, vocabulary, reading comprehension, reading fluency and writing.[177] Despite having good oral language skills (phonological awareness, vocabulary, comprehension),

many people do not have decoding skills, and hence are not able to read.

The traditional methods of teaching decoding—that is, associating sounds with their written symbol—have focused on rote memorisation. These methods are not working effectively, as witnessed by the low literacy rates within schools in India, and many LMICs. In the traditional approach, children are introduced sequentially to one new letter at a time until the entire alphabet is mastered. Letters are introduced and learned through association with pictures (e.g., A for Apple) and memorising the phrase through repetition. Children are expected to memorise the letter by repeatedly copying it down until it is internalised through repetitive practise.[178] Only after repeatedly memorising the alphabet, often for a year or more, are children given a chance to read words made with these letters.

This memorisation of isolated letters is meaningless for learners of any age. Rote memorisation is boring, ungratifying, and fails to catch attention and imagination. When children memorise, they use one of the most primitive parts of the brain: the hippocampus. Rote learning doesn't activate the parts of the brain, like the frontal cortex, associated with reasoning and creativity.[179]

The old adage 'in one ear, out the other', rings true: in the rote learning approach, learners use their ears (listening to the teacher) and their mouth (repeating their sounds), but they need not use their eyes or their frontal cortex. Children parroting letters after their teacher is fundamentally ineffective because there is no need for them to look at and recognise the letters, and no scope for them to use their reasoning and think for themselves. Similarly, learners writing out a letter repeatedly engage their motor skills more than their cognitive skills.

Instead, we need a vastly different way of teaching—one that is learner-centric, gives greater thinking time, and is joyful. We set out to create a simple-to-use curriculum that facilitates this style of teaching. There was a need to move away from bulky, text-heavy books and primers to a short and attractive program that could be used by any volunteer with basic literacy skills.

The first draft of the Global Dream ALfA toolkit had 25 booklets. However, too many booklets would reinforce the attitudes of mentors and learners that literacy is a lengthy and tedious prospect. It would also have been expensive and hard to scale. With many iterations and trials, the curriculum was successfully reduced to two thin booklets for literacy. In the case of Hindi and many Indian languages, the first booklet introduces all letters and words without *matras* (vowel symbols when part of a whole

syllable), and the second booklet introduces words with *matras*. For English and many other languages, the first booklet uses single-syllable words, while the second booklet introduces multisyllabic and sight words.

Starting the Literacy Journey

Suppose you want to teach someone how to read and write: how would you go about it? Once you have introduced yourself to a potential learner and explained what you are offering, you can start by checking if they can read and write their name. The Name Literacy Challenge, as we call it, is a great place to begin. Much like an appetiser before a meal, teaching someone how to write their name is easy and builds their motivation and interest level.

First, ask them to verbally identify the different sounds (syllables) their name is made up of. Then write the different syllables of their name on cards. Play games: ask them to identify each syllable, and to join them together to make their name. As they become familiar with reading their name, ask them to try writing it in a tray of sand or flour. Then give them the chance to practise writing their name on paper. If they have a last name, repeat the process. Soon they will be able to sign fluently. The whole process takes just a few 15 minute sessions and can be completed in under a week.

Photo 15.1: Name Literacy Challenge

After you've completed the Name Literacy Challenge, or if your learner is already able to sign, do a reading pre-test to determine their baseline level. The learner is shown a set of letters, words and sentences and asked to read each one.

In the case of people who are learning a second or third language, they may need to brush up some vocabulary before getting underway with learning to read. Using games and activities, we can quickly teach the learner the name of one picture for each letter of the alphabet.

Lesson Structure: A Reverse Process of Teaching to Read

An important objective of the toolkit is to show success to both the mentor and learner in a short span of time. Lessons are brief, usually 15–30 minutes. Each lesson introduces several letters at once that combine to form meaningful words from the very beginning. It follows a reverse process compared to the traditional: we use 'Car (picture): /k/ (sound)' instead of 'C for Car'. This draws on the learner's existing visual knowledge of the environment and oral knowledge of the language. Rather than teaching the whole alphabet before the learner reads words, they join sounds to make words immediately from a small set of letters, and only later learn the entire alphabet in the dictionary order. The lesson is broken into several simple steps.

Figure 15.2: Global Dream Lesson 1 (English)

- **Step 1: Picture** – We help scaffold new knowledge onto existing information by asking the learner, 'What is the name of this picture?'
- **Step 2: First Sound** – When the learner answers, we ask: 'What is its first sound?' and wait again. We are specifically interested in the sound, not the name of the letter, which often leads to confusion in languages like English. If the learner is unable to answer, we can break the word into sounds (for instance, /m/ + /u/ + /g/) and ask again. Another way could be to give an example of a different word: 'If the first sound of "duck" is "/d/", what is the first sound of "mug"?' It is crucial to give cues to the learner to think for themselves, rather than telling them the answer.
- **Step 3: Symbol** – When the learner has identified and spoken the first sound, then we introduce the symbolic representation of the sound /m/, which is the letter 'm'. Steps 1 to 3 are repeated for the subsequent picture-sound-letter combinations in the same word.
- **Step 4: Joining sounds** – Here we help the learner combine two sounds to form a word, asking, 'What do the sounds /m/, /a/, /t/ make together?' Again, it is important not to tell the learner the answer, and give time and cues until the learner can blend the sounds to form the word themselves.
- **Step 5: Practice** – After repeating steps 1 to 4 for each word being introduced pictorially, we check the learner's understanding of the letters and words by asking them to read the practise words at the bottom of the lesson. These words are made of different combinations of the same letters already introduced. This gives feedback to both the learner and mentor. If the learner is unable to read some words, the mentor repeats the above steps for those specific letters. If the learner is able to read these words, complete abstraction of learning has occurred (that is, the learner no longer needs the picture prompts to decode the letters), and we can move to the next lesson.
- **Step 6: Games** – To further consolidate the lesson enjoyably, we play games with the learner using letter and picture cards.

Moving Towards Fluency

Unlike the traditional approach, which focuses on memorising the alphabet at the outset, Global Dream ALfA helps learners decode meaningful words within the very first lesson. The first few words are a struggle, but once the learner has grasped the concept of 'first sound' and joining sounds together (blending), the process accelerates drastically. It boosts

the learners' confidence when they are able to read words within the very first session. From the outset, we check that the learner is comprehending what they are reading by asking questions.

All the letters are covered in just five lessons. After that, some sessions are dedicated to reading short sentences to keep practising all the letters of the alphabet. We give the learner plenty of three- and four-letter words to practise with. To help achieve greater reading fluency, the booklets introduce interesting short stories.

Book 2 teaches letter combinations, longer words, and high-frequency sight words. Each lesson has several parts: first introducing the key concept with the help of some pictures, then practicing it in reading new words and a passage (see Figure 15.3).

Book 2 ends with some short passages in which the learner is able to practise their new skills and have fun reading stories. The passages are followed by questions for the learner to answer about what they have read, emphasising that the goal of reading is ultimately comprehension.

Figure 15.3: Global Dream Literacy, English Book 2 Sample Lesson

We ask the learner to explain in their own words what they are reading. We also enjoy asking the learners to bring a story to life creatively by doing a drawing or acting it out. With fun activities like 'compare and contrast' (Figure 15.4), we help learners build their vocabulary, syntactical awareness, and above all, love of language.

Compare & Contrast

	size	colour	number of legs	food	habitat
A horse	big	brown, black or grey	four	grass hay oats	field stable
A rabbit	small	brown, white or black	four	grass carrots lettuces	field burrow
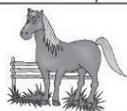
A horse   A rabbit

1. Pair up. Let one of you be horse and the other rabbit. Write down in a rough notebook as many lines as you can about your animal friend using the information provided: My horse is big. My horse is brown. It has four legs. It likes to eat _____. Write similarly for the rabbit. My rabbit is small. My rabbit lives in a _____.

2. Now put 'and' or 'also' in the middle (without My) and write neatly in your notebook: A horse is big and a rabbit is small. A horse has four legs and a rabbit also has four legs.

Figure 15.4: Global Dream ALfA English Materials, Compare and Contrast Activities to Build Fluency

When we learn a language for the first time, we generally follow the well-established sequence of listening, speaking, reading, writing (LSRW).[180] Global Dream ALfA, operating with this principle, encourages the teaching of writing only once reading has been mastered. Indeed, once a person has learned to read, they are usually able to teach themselves how to write without too much trouble.

As this book goes to press, Global Dream is currently available in 25 languages: English, Hindi, many regional languages of India, and several key international languages including Swahili, Arabic, French and Spanish. We are also working on converting it to many more languages, both regional dialects of India and further international languages. If you would like to help replicate these toolkits into your own language, please be in touch!

We have found that Global Dream is so simple and intuitive to use that many of our learners become mentors. When children experience rapid progress from the first lesson, they are energised to

self-learn and teach their peers. This leads to a focus on peer learning, as shown in photo 15.5.

Photo 15.5: Children Help Each Other Learn to Read at a Literacy Centre on the Outskirts of Lucknow

Teaching someone how to read can seem like a daunting task. But remember, all of us were once illiterate; reading acquisition should not have to be hard! When done the right way, using well-crafted materials and methods like the Global Dream toolkit, the process is a joy for learners and mentors alike. Using similar methods, even the much-dreaded subject of mathematics can also become easy, as the next chapter explains.

Stories Behind the Statistics

Reading Prowess of Tiny Tots Impresses All

Students in the age group of five to seven of City International School (CIS) Manas Nagar Campus drew praise from one and all during a special ceremony when they read newspapers in both English and Hindi with elan.

'The credit for the students' phenomenal reading prowess, reading fluency and confidence in speaking goes to the groundbreaking Accelerating Learning for All or ALfA pedagogy,' said director CIS Sunita Gandhi on Saturday.

She said: 'ALfA is a child-friendly, process-led pedagogy in which children work in pairs and learn to decode and blend sounds to make words from the beginning. The teacher's role is to motivate and support this process, ask, wait, but not tell or teach.'

Former chief secretary Alok Ranjan, who was the chief guest of the function, said he was surprised to see the 'Reading Revolution' accomplished by kindergarten students.

– Hindustan Times **Report,** February 20, 2022[181]

Reflection Questions

1. How did you learn to read as a child? How long did it take? Do you remember the process—was it labourious, enjoyable, or both?
2. What stood out to you in the Global Dream process for teaching literacy?

Concrete to Abstract

The Art of Teaching Numeracy

One plus one equals eleven
Nahi hota beta!
Baaki subjects mein hum cool
Bas maths mein dabba gol gol gol!
(One plus one doesn't equal eleven, kid!
I'm cool with other subjects but zero in Maths!)
    – Lead song in Nil Battey Sannate, a Bollywood movie
        following students' struggles with mathematics

'I had 10 chocolate bars and ate 9. What do I have now?'
'I don't know, diabetes?'

– Anonymous

'I understand now! I can do it myself.' Noor Jahan sounded delighted and a little shocked by her own brilliance.

Just earlier, she had told us, 'I can't do subtraction.' After a little cajoling and explaining, she had given it a try. With the help of some matchsticks and ice cream sticks as counters, she was soon performing two-digit subtraction with borrowing. What years of school had failed to teach her, she had now learned in a matter of minutes.

In teaching basic numeracy, the vital thing is not just that the learner gets the correct answer but that they understand the question and the processes of solving it. As with literacy, the traditional approach to teaching numeracy is slow and ineffective because it doesn't help build a deeper understanding—it often teaches learners to manipulate symbols without really comprehending what they are doing. This chapter examines the difficulties with the traditional way of teaching maths, and then explores the Global Dream ALfA approach.

Why do People Hate Mathematics?

When we ask people what subjects they love most, we usually get a variety of responses: Hindi, English, Science, Physical Education, etc. Yet when we ask about a least favourite subject, a large proportion of children (and adults) seem to choose maths! Our experience testifies that there is nothing inherent about mathematics that makes it a harder or scarier subject; rather, it is all about how it is taught.

Some of the key reasons people who've been taught with the traditional approach often struggle with and dislike maths, are:

- It seems very abstract, totally disconnected from lived experience and irrelevant to solving real-world problems.
- Formulae and techniques are to be memorised, practised ad nauseum and drilled into the brain. But they remain shrouded in mystery and not understood.
- Maths can be a lot of hard work if you lack conceptual understanding. Once, we gave a child the problem '78 minus 32', and he solved it by making 78 tally marks in his notebook and crossing out 32 of them!

Given these difficulties, Global Dream follows an entirely different approach. We use a learner-centred, activity-based pedagogy. Regarding numeracy, this means specifically:

- We use word problems that are relevant and interesting to the learner as a starting point.
- We invite the learners to use concrete objects, and only later introduce pictorial and then abstract representations. This 'Concrete-Pictorial-Abstract'[182] approach was refined in Singapore, which has one of the best education systems in the world.

Let's take a look at the journey of a numeracy learner using this approach.

Understanding Numbers

The first step in any maths program is counting. Here, we invite the learner to count using concrete objects (for instance, matchsticks) and then also represent this symbolically (for instance, tally marks on a page) and finally using an abstraction (for instance, the digit '5').

In the traditional approach, many children struggle with two-digit numbers. We have known many kids who can count and write from 1 to 100, but if you show them a random number, like '74', they won't be able to identify it. They have memorised the names of the numbers but have no real idea what the numbers actually mean or how they relate with each other!

Instead, we use ice cream sticks to represent 'tens' and matchsticks to represent 'ones'. For instance, the number '36' would be represented as three ice cream sticks and six matchsticks. Later, to teach hundreds and thousands, we use the representation of apple cards as ones, 10 apples in a basket (10), 10 baskets in a crate (100), and 10 crates in a van (1,000). This means learners grasp the real-life significance of numbers and place value.
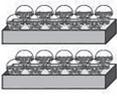
	Hundreds	Tens	Ones
	2 crates	6 baskets	4 apples
Chits of Paper	100 100	10 10 10 10 10 10	1 1 1 1
264 =	2 of 100s	6 of 10s	4 of 1s
264 =	+ 200	+ 60	+ 4
264 =	Two Hundreds	Six Tens	Four Ones

Figure 16.1: Teaching Place Value

A primary goal is to help the learners develop their 'number sense', that is, an intuitive grasp of numbers and quantity. Much like phonological awareness (an understanding of how words are made up of different sounds) is a crucial pre-requisite to literacy, so too, number sense is the key to foundational numeracy.[183]

Number Operations

The same process of using word problems, physical objects, pictorial representations, and only then abstract symbols applies for teaching operations like addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. Suppose we are teaching addition with carrying. We start with a word problem, and then ask the learner to represent it using their ice cream sticks and matchsticks.

In this case (Figure 16.2), '38' is represented as three ice cream sticks and eight matchsticks, while '56' is represented as five ice cream sticks and six matchsticks. When they add the two piles together, they see that now there are 14 matchsticks, so they can put 10 back in the 'bank' and take an ice cream stick in exchange, leaving nine ice cream sticks and four matchsticks, that is, 94. From here, it is relatively easy for them to grasp the meaning of symbolic carrying, and soon they can do so without needing the physical objects.
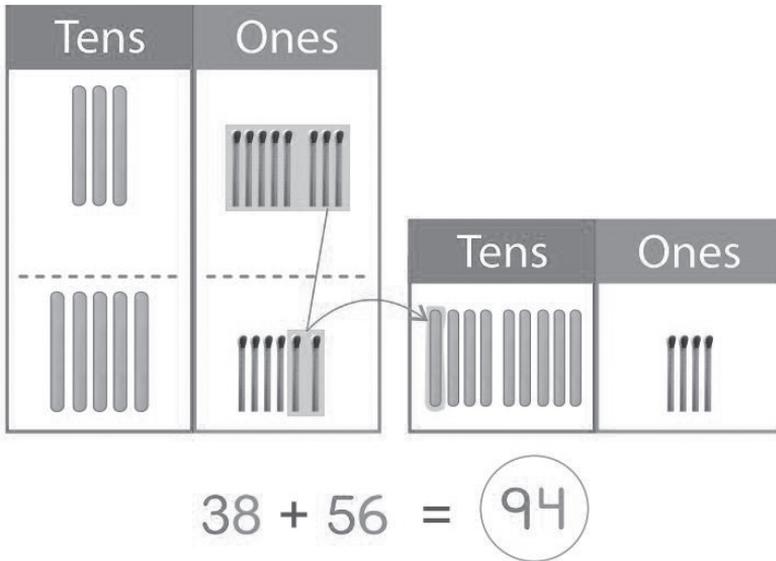
38 + 56 = 94

Figure 16.2: Addition with Carrying

To take another example, suppose we are teaching the concept of subtraction with borrowing (Figure 16.3). To solve a word problem the learner represents the number using chits of paper representing notes. They soon find that they sometimes need to 'get change' for a larger note—from here, it is easy to understand the meaning of symbolic borrowing.
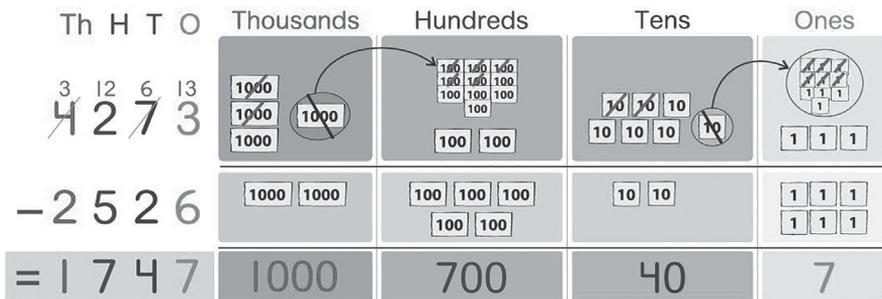
Figure 16.3: Subtraction with Borrowing

Mathematics in the Real World

As learners build their ability to manipulate numbers, we move forward with measurement, time and shapes, again using word problems and real-world applications. There is no way to learn measurement without getting your hands on a ruler or measuring tape and giving it a try (Figure 16.4)!

Similarly, concepts like area can be made easy by use of graph paper and fun activities (Figure 16.5).

Figure 16.4: Teaching Measurement

Figure 16.5: Global Dream ALfA Numeracy Materials, Area Activities

When taught with interesting problems, concrete objects and activities, numeracy skills need not be daunting or scary to understand. Rather, they can be a real joy to learn.

This part examined in depth the new materials and methods that enable literacy and numeracy to be taught much more efficiently and enjoyably. As we'll see in the next part, the three key ingredients of a movement—mission-mindedness, mobilisation and methods—are not just a theory but have been combined in the real world to produce astonishing results.

Reflection Questions

1. Do you enjoy mathematics? How were you taught it as a child?
2. What stood out to you in the Global Dream process of teaching numeracy?

Part E

The Anatomy of a Mass Movement: Lessons from Around the World

[We need] a worldwide movement for the eradication of mass illiteracy in the one and indivisible cause of human progress and fulfilment, so that, through their united efforts, this vital task may be achieved in the shortest possible time.
– UNESCO Declaration on the Eradication of Illiteracy, 1964

POINTS TO PONDER

We have examined the three key ingredients of a mass movement: government mission-mindedness (Part B), the mobilisation of all segments of society (Part C), and improved methods and materials (Part D).

But is this simply a nice theory, or has it actually worked in the real world?

As Simple as Hopscotch

Ten Steps of a Mass Movement

Volunteerism and community mobilisation are key success factors of adult literacy programs, in conjunction with political will, organisational structure, proper planning, adequate financial support, and high-quality capacity building of volunteers.
    – National Education Policy, India, 2020, Chapter 21.3

The year is 1989. A people, long captive, become free. Thousands of ordinary citizens participate in this liberation by knocking down a barrier to progress and prosperity, demolishing an impediment to dignity and democracy.

The fall of the Berlin Wall was indeed an iconic moment in world history. But the above lines also ring true for another chapter of history, unfolding quietly in the same year on the other side of the world. In 1989, Ernakulam united in a mass movement for literacy which liberated tens of thousands from the bondage of illiteracy, and saw it become the first fully literate district of India. Even today, three decades hence, there is a lot we can learn from the history of literacy movements in Ernakulam and around the world.

As we've discussed so far in this book, mass literacy campaigns are defined by three key elements:

- Mission: Strong commitment from the top, and across all levels and departments of government, to giving literacy top priority, setting ambitious goals, and taking rapid action, including systemic reform of the education system.
- Mobilisation of all sectors of society: community groups, schools and colleges, NGOs, corporations and individuals from all walks of life. Youthful energy, volunteerism and passion for the cause are crucial.
- Methods that enable anyone with minimal qualifications to teach literacy efficiently and enjoyably with easy-to-use, learner-centred materials.

In this context, Global Dream has launched the '90 day challenge' for individuals and countries to be convinced that literacy and numeracy are possible within 90 instructional days, using a highly disruptive methodology: Accelerating Learning for All (ALfA). We invite everyone to adopt this in their own contexts and scale up their efforts with greater confidence to ensure foundational skills for all.

Far from being an abstract theory, many nations around the world have used mass literacy movements to achieve tremendous gains in short periods of time. In this part, we offer a framework for a successful mass literacy movement by analysing historical precedents. We examine outstanding campaigns from Cuba, Nicaragua, Tanzania, South Korea and Vietnam. Further, we examine how lessons from Ernakulam can be used to launch a national movement in India.

Table 17.1 presents a statistical summary of these six mass campaigns, showcasing their astonishing achievements.

Table 17.1: Statistical Summary of Selected Literacy Movements Around the World[184]

Country/ District	Time Period	Baseline Number of Illiterates	Number Made Literate	Literacy Rate Shift (%)	Number of Volunteers/ Teachers	Present-Day Literacy Rate	Typical Learner : Volunteer Ratio
Cuba[185]	1961	979,000	707,000	77 to 96	268,000	100	3 : 1
Nicaragua[186]	March– Aug 1980	722,000	406,000	50 to 77	96,000	83	4 : 1
Tanzania[187]	1971–75	5.3 million	3.1 million	33 to 61	88,000	78	30 : 1
South Korea[188]	1945–48	7.9 million (12 years+)	5.4 million	22 to 59	300,000+	100	20 : 1
Vietnam[189]	1945–58	25 million (12–50 years)	20 million+	5 to 93	800,000+	96	25 : 1
Ernakulam[190]	1989–90	200,000 (5–60 years)	175,000	77 to 96	20,000	96	10 : 1

While there are many differences in how these movements played out across various times and places, there are also striking similarities and themes. Based on analysis of these landmark campaigns and our own modest experiences, we have created a ten step roadmap for a mass literacy movement, presented in Figure 17.1 (overleaf).[191]
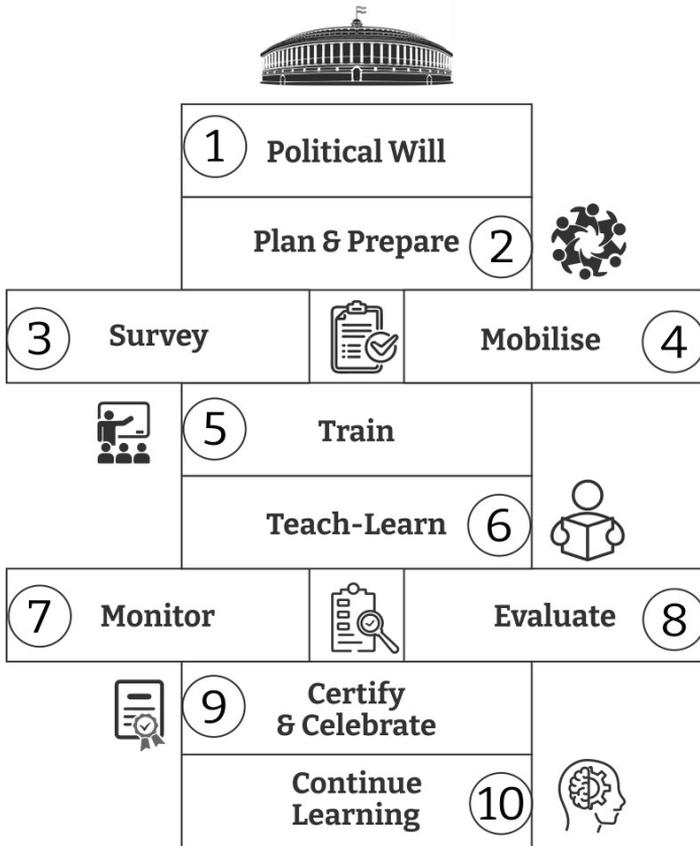
Figure 17.1: Mass Literacy Movement Roadmap as Hopscotch

The metaphor of a hopscotch game is used for several reasons. Firstly, a mass movement can be simple and joyful, like a good game—it's not rocket science! Second, a certain order is important: you cannot jump straight to a later stage without completing the earlier one. Finally, as in hopscotch, if you keep hopping forward, you can maintain your balance, but if you stop moving, you might fall over. In much the same way, it is vital for mass movements to maintain momentum towards their goal of literacy for all.

The remainder of this book goes through these ten steps in detail, drawing on inspirational examples from around the world. Chapter 18 examines two key preparatory steps: generating strong political will, and thorough planning that involves all stakeholders. Chapter 19 explores the take-off phase (steps 3 to 5): mobilising all of society, conducting a survey to identify and match up learners and volunteers, training and

logistics. Chapter 20 discusses the crux of the movement (steps 6 to 10): the teaching-learning process, evaluation and monitoring mechanisms, celebration and certification of neo-literates and their continuing education. Chapter 21 concludes by tying together some lessons learned from the successes—and the struggles—of these remarkable campaigns. It looks forward to examining the potential for a new wave of mass movements in the 21st century.

Consider Your Context

Has your country had a mass literacy movement comparable to the examples mentioned in this chapter? What is the history of literacy rate improvement in your nation—has it been gradual and steady, or sudden at a certain period?

Laying the Foundation
Political Will and Planning

Our people plan to wage a great battle against illiteracy with the ambitious goal of teaching every last illiterate person to read and write. To this end, organisations of teachers, students, workers, that is, the people as a whole, are preparing themselves for an intense campaign, and Cuba will be the first country in America which, at the end of a few months, will be able to say that it does not have a single illiterate person!

<div align="right">

– **Fidel Castro,** President of Cuba[192], 1960

</div>

The examples of Cuba, Nicaragua, Tanzania, South Korea, Vietnam and Ernakulam show that astonishingly rapid literacy gains are possible through mass movements. For this to occur, it is crucial that the ruling class have a strong political will and commitment towards literacy.

Political Will

Strong political will is the most important component of any mass movement. Rapid gains for literacy will be achieved only if there is strong political will from the very top leadership of the country. This political will is forged in an ideology that recognises literacy's centrality to the nation's social, economic and political progress. This commitment for literacy needs to be communicated strongly from the top leadership to all levels of the government and the wider society.

Giving literacy top priority entails taking urgent action throughout the nation, with clear-cut targets and their allocation amongst stakeholders. It means a no-excuses mission mode, in which all of society is united towards a single goal of literacy for all.

Strong political will and national unity are most often seen in times of war (or other crises, like COVID) when tremendous resources are mobilised, and remarkable sacrifices are offered for the cause. It's no

surprise, then, that some leaders used this metaphor in declaring war on illiteracy, as we saw in the opening quote from Fidel Castro.

Ho Chi Minh, the great Vietnamese leader, had an actual war of liberation on his hands. Most leaders in his position would focus on the fighting and leave education on the backburner, but Ho knew that in order to help his people gain freedom, the war on illiteracy was just as important as the war with the French colonialists. Indeed, a propaganda poem from the time made the explicit connection: 'Fighting the disaster of illiteracy is like fighting against a foreign invader!'[193]

Ho Chi Minh wrote, 'The government has decided that within a year from now, all Vietnamese should know writing.'[194] Even while a raging war delayed his ambitious timeframe, the political leadership of Ho and the efforts of millions of his compatriots enabled Vietnam to go from 90 per cent illiteracy to 90 per cent literacy in just over a decade.[195]

Vietnam is not the only country to wage a physical war alongside a war on illiteracy. After decades of brutal Japanese occupation, South Korea had a literacy rate of just 22 per cent when it was liberated in 1945 following the end of World War II. The government made a powerful effort to eradicate illiteracy by establishing compulsory elementary education and providing literacy classes to adults. By 1948, just three years after their independence, the literacy rate had grown sharply to 59 per cent.[196] The unlucky country was soon torn apart by war again when it was invaded by Soviet-backed North Korea, resulting in a three-year war that killed some three million people.

Yet, even the magnitude of this loss couldn't stop the South Koreans' passion for education. In 1954, the South Korean government launched a five-year movement to eradicate illiteracy. This was linked to the ideology that literacy will enrich the democratic process of the Korean Republic and allow all citizens to fulfil their right and duty to vote in national elections.[197]

By 1958, their campaign had achieved a literacy rate of 96 per cent.[198] In the decades to come, strong investment in education laid the groundwork for remarkable development, transforming one of the poorest countries in the world into an economic powerhouse. Today an astonishing 86 per cent of South Korean school graduates enter university.[199]

For many countries, mass campaigns were deeply linked to national liberation struggles from colonial rule. Literacy was identified as a priority for national development. This ideology was promoted to the very grassroots.

For instance, after a hard-fought struggle for independence from Britain, Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere launched the first Five Year Plan in 1964. It emphasised the vital and immediate importance of adult literacy to national economic development.[200]

Some years later, in 1970, he declared to the nation that illiteracy should be completely eradicated within one year in six of the nation's 80 districts. A year later, the ruling party declared that all citizens should become literate by the end of 1975.[201]

In Nicaragua, within eight months of freeing themselves from a dictatorship, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) committed to a massive campaign to eradicate illiteracy. The government declared 1980 to be the 'Year of Literacy'. Literacy was viewed by the government as integral to national development, re-construction, equality and unity.[202]

The Total Literacy Program in Ernakulam district, Kerala, India, was launched under less dramatic circumstances but demonstrated a political will no less than any of the other campaigns. It was initiated in 1989 by the chief minister of Kerala and personally led by the district collector, targeting universal literacy among 6- to 60-year-olds within a year.[203] Throughout the campaign, the state and district level governments both demonstrated that literacy was top priority for them.

These examples go to show that, even in times of crisis, visionary leaders have prioritised literacy for all, and achieved astonishing results which brought lasting benefits to their nations. As we can see, political will requires a mission-minded ideology that emanates from the top, identifying literacy as a central pillar in the socio-economic development of the country. When the need to become literate, and to help others become literate, is seen as a patriotic duty of every citizen, it sets the stage for bringing together all the stakeholders in the planning process.

Planning

To translate political will into successful action requires thorough planning. For planning to be effective, top leadership needs to set up a coalition of various government departments aligned to the common goal of achieving mass literacy. A coalition would, from the outset, involve the various implementation partners, including NGOs, voluntary associations like unions, mass media and corporations. School, college and university heads should also be invited in the planning process, as many of the volunteers of the movement will be students. The coalition needs to plan for the upcoming steps of the movement.

Carrying out a nationwide campaign requires active involvement across all government departments and levels. This should be reflected from the outset of the planning phase. For instance, South Korea's movement involved collaboration between numerous ministries, including not just the Ministry for Culture and Education but also Home Affairs, Defence, Health and Welfare, Public Information, and even Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.[204]

The planning phase often involves the creation of coalitions between many different organisations to enable them to work together towards the common goal of universal literacy. In Ernakulam, the movement was headed jointly by the district collector and a prominent non-government organisation, the Science and Education Centre of Kerala. The district was divided into 20 project areas, and a coordinator was allocated to each area, reporting directly to the district headquarters.[205]

In Nicaragua, the Ministry of Education appointed delegates of 25 different civil organisations, unions, media, churches, ministries, universities and other institutions to set up the National Literacy Commission.[206] Several layers of parallel commissions were established at the municipal and local levels. This decentralisation of responsibilities was intended to promote direct participation of the population.

The advantage of decentralisation over one-size-fits-all approaches is that it enables the campaign to be tailored according to local contexts and needs. Considering the differences between rural and urban areas in Nicaragua, and the varying amounts of time that each of the volunteers had available, two kinds of literacy contingents were organised. The *Alfabetização Populares*, or Citizens' Literacy Promoters, were those who could only spare a couple of hours a day, and taught in urban neighbourhoods—these were mainly factory workers, government employees, housewives and all those who could not travel. In contrast, many of the secondary and university students, organised into a 'Citizen's Literacy Army', devoted themselves full-time to the literacy work, which involved moving to rural areas for five months! But decentralisation shouldn't impede coordination: in Nicaragua, a network of some 47 short-wave radios was established to enable constant communication between the different groups and the National Literacy Commission.[207]

The Cuban model was similarly decentralised, with a huge number of student volunteers. Cuba scholar Marvin Leiner describes the organisational structure: 'The teaching structure was built around a ratio of 2:1, two illiterates to each *alphabetizer* [literacy volunteer], and a Literacy Unit composed of about twenty-five literacy workers… Each

province and each municipality had Commissions of Coordination, Execution, and Inspection… the mass organisations were integrated in a decentralised mode of operation that built on the [local] experiences.'[208]

Bold decisions sometimes need to be made during the planning process. In 1961, the Cuban National Literacy Commission decided to close schools for a few months to allow 100,000 adolescents to participate in the campaign. In a similar step, schools and universities in Nicaragua were shut down so that students and their teachers could participate wholeheartedly.

Another crucial planning area in which bold decisions sometimes need to be made is the creation of literacy materials. Some countries, rather than making piecemeal improvements to literacy teaching, have radically reinvented their scripts. Back in 1446, the far-sighted King Sejong the Great invented the Korean alphabet Hangul to liberate his people from the need to learn the incredibly complex Chinese characters. To this day, Hangul is considered one of the easiest scripts to learn. King Sejong laid out his remarkable vision, perhaps the first recorded aspiration for universal literacy: 'I have made a Korean writing system that is fit for the Korean language so that the people can be relieved of this difficulty [of Chinese Characters]. I hope that from now on, all the people can easily learn to write in and enjoy the use of their own language.'[209] Much later, after World War II, the Chinese also drastically simplified their traditional characters, which greatly accelerated their literacy gain.[210]

Some other countries haven't needed to reinvent their scripts but have still put deep thought into the creation of materials and methods which optimise the learning process. In Vietnam, the authorities decided to abandon traditional methods, which had involved requiring students to spell words by sequentially sounding out their letters, indicating the tone, and then stating the whole word. Instead, they adopted a unique method that used rhymes to describe the shapes of the letters. For example, to distinguish between 'i' and 't', students were taught:

i, t both are like hooks,
i is short and has a dot
t is long and has a bar.

In addition to its clarity and simplicity, the use of poetic forms enhanced the ease of remembering the distinctions between letters. This method continues to be employed in contemporary Vietnam.[211]

Another important part of the planning process is fundraising for the costs of the campaign. In Tanzania, the Swedish International Development Authority supported the government by providing funds

and paper supplies. A large number of volunteers were paid a small honorarium per month. Similarly, the Nicaraguan campaign relied mainly on crowdfunding through a national publicity campaign.[212]

In some cases, governments have dug deep in their own pockets: South Korea's literacy program was launched with the help of reserve funds. In other cases, like Erankulam, funds from the Central government's National Literacy Mission were complemented by in-kind contributions of local community members, like the provision of food for volunteers.

Stories Behind the Statistics

Interview with Rosa Acosta, Cuban Student Volunteer[213]

KR How old were you when you started to teach people to read and write with the Literacy Campaign?

RA Well, imagine! I was 10 years old when the Literacy Campaign started. I taught three or four people to read and write.

KR Do those people still live in the town? Do you still have contact with the people who you taught to read and write?

RA Only one of those people is still alive—the boy that was the youngest of them… He's always very happy to see me and introduces me to his children and tells them that I was the one who taught him to read and write.

KR What difficulties did you face during the Literacy Campaign and during that time in general in the countryside in Cuba?

RA There were a lot of difficulties back then. In 1961 the living conditions in the countryside were still very poor. Most people lived in houses without concrete flooring—the floors were just dirt. All the houses I taught in had earthen floors. There was only radio, no other means of communication. People only had the radio. The only time in the day that they had to learn was with me, the rest of the time they just worked in the fields. Sometimes I would arrive at 7:00 PM and the boy still hadn't arrived back home and I would have to wait until 8:00 or 9:00 to make sure he wouldn't miss a class.

KR It's funny—you had just learned to read and write yourself when you first began to teach others to do the same.

RA Yes, exactly… It was decided that I would teach the illiterate families instead of the elementary teacher or my father because I was more patient. I would really take them by the hand in learning the vowels. They felt more comfortable with me because I was just a child.

KR A lot had changed after the Cuban Revolution in 1959, perhaps in every area of society. As a specialist in pedagogy, how do you believe the educational system changed after the revolution?

RA Everyone in Cuba will always recognise this incredible feat in literacy that was a product of the revolution. A million illiterate people were taught to read and write. It was truly something to witness how the tears would run down the people's faces when they were finally able to read the cartilla (student workbook) or to read the newspaper when it began to be distributed in the town. Some of the people I taught would call me because they wanted to show me that they could read the newspaper.

In the end, the revolution virtually eliminated illiteracy. People that lived even in the remotest mountainous areas totally isolated, with parents and grandparents that were totally illiterate, were suddenly able to get as far as studying at the University of Havana. I am an example of that. I am a Black woman. That a very poor Black person could end up studying at the University of Havana… it was really a huge feat. I have a doctorate. Before the revolution, that would've been completely impossible. Unthinkable.

KR Of course, it's incredible. And that happiness, that excitement, felt by the people who you taught to read and write, was really at the national level, isn't that right? It was felt all over Cuba.

RA Yes, exactly. It was felt all over the Cuba. Some people weren't even able to read medicine labels. It was such a huge difference after.

KR You are from the countryside originally, but isn't it true that most of teachers in the Literacy Campaign were from the cities?

RA Yes, from Havana, from the city of Pinar del Río, or from other provincial capitals.

KR In that regard, isn't it true also that for those that went to the countryside for the first time to teach, ended up learning a lot about life in the countryside and nature, paradoxically?

RA Yes, that's true. For the teachers that formed the brigades from Havana, the Literacy Campaign was a very important experience. It was a tremendous experience for everyone involved. Both for those that learned to read and write and for us teachers that taught literacy. All in all, we really showed what was possible. Some were saying that the Cubans are crazy, how are they ever going to be able to teach people to read and write who don't even know how to write a single letter? But yes, it was possible!

Consider Your Context

Do government leaders in your country display a strong political will and commitment for literacy? What do you think are the key factors in generating stronger political will?

Launching the Campaign
Survey, Mobilisation and Training

Let those who already know it teach others; let them make their contribution to popular education. Illiterates should make an effort to learn. Husbands should teach their wives, those who are older should teach the younger, children should teach their parents, the head of the household should teach those living under his roof.
<div align="right">

– Ho Chi Minh, President of North Vietnam
</div>

If I am asked about the most important single experience in my life, I have to say that it was the literacy campaign, because it was this event which has most profoundly affected my individual beliefs... it put me in contact with a kind of poverty, a kind of reality which I never had dreamed could exist in this world.
<div align="right">

– Rene Mujica, Student literacy volunteer, Cuba, 1981
</div>

Having generated strong political will and planned thoroughly, it's time to kickstart our campaign with a survey to establish the baseline level of literacy.

Survey

A Target Population Survey provides critical information for the effective implementation of the mass literacy campaign. It provides vital baseline data about learners, including their numbers, level of literacy, location and what are convenient times for them to learn. It also helps identify family and community members who can work as volunteers and enablers for literacy activities. This provides important information for the allocation of funds and human resources.

In many of these movements, surveys have been powered by volunteers. In Cuba, the illiteracy Census was carried out by teachers and volunteers from mass organisations such as the women's federation, trade unions, and the farmworkers federation.[214] In Nicaragua, the Census brigades

were composed of students, parents, teachers, labour union and citizens' association members, army personnel and peasants. All surveyors, who usually worked in pairs, were given a letter of identification which helped them to get free transportation.[215]

Surveys should ideally use direct methods to assess a person's literacy level. Indirect methods of assessment, that is, the respondent self-reporting their literacy status, routinely overestimates literacy rates. Direct methods of assessment like reading a text from a newspaper or solving basic numerical operations are more reliable. A UNESCO study of 20 countries, primarily in Sub-Saharan Africa, found that the literacy rate calculated from direct testing was, on average, 8 percentage points lower than the official self-estimation-based literacy rate.[216] For this reason, most of these movements directly tested the literacy of their populations.

We also used direct testing of literacy in Global Dream's Target Population Survey, which covered more than one million adults aged 15–60 in Lucknow. The survey checked Grade 3 level foundational literacy, including the ability to read short paragraphs in Hindi. It was found that the literacy rate of Lucknow was 65 per cent, much lower than 77 per cent as per the Census 2011, which used self reporting.[217]

The survey also helps identify illiteracy hotspots—these may be geographical areas, e.g., urban slums and remote villages, or socio-economically disadvantaged groups, e.g., women, religious minorities, economically weaker sections. In Ernakulam, the surveyors identified groups and areas where illiteracy was disproportionately high, which was important to plan logistics.[218] The Ernakulam movement successfully mobilised religious minorities, Scheduled Caste/Tribe members, and women to become literacy instructors, which was crucial to reaching these lower-literacy groups.

The Ernakulam survey was done with great fanfare, using street plays, marches and traditional folklore to generate excitement. Indeed, in many of these countries, the survey was taken as an opportunity to do more than just collect information, also spreading the word about the campaign and getting people on board. In Nicaragua, the Census was a miniature campaign in itself because it helped inform people about the upcoming literacy movement, overcome cultural barriers between urban and rural areas, and connect learners and volunteers.

Mobilisation

As we've seen, the survey naturally flows into an effort to mobilise the whole of society to take part in the movement as learners and volunteers.

It is vital to use a variety of approaches to attract a large number of people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.[219]

In Cuba, a large-scale drive was conducted to recruit literacy instructors called *alfabetizadores* (adult volunteers) and *brigadistas* (school-age volunteers). The campaign was promoted widely as a brave and patriotic project on radio, in newspapers and through billboard posters, developing great excitement in the youth to participate.

Nicaragua, partially inspired by the Cuban campaign's success, used a similar model. School and college students, who were overwhelmingly urban, were sent to rural and remote areas for five months. Along with them went volunteer health brigades from medical schools who provided the brigadistas with basic medical services, and cultural brigades from universities who travelled throughout the country recording folktales, histories, music and customs of the rural people. Meanwhile, back in the city, literacy in the workplace was organised by the labour unions, such as the Workers' Militia of Literacy Promoters.

In South Korea, a wide array of organisations and groups joined the campaign: teachers and students of each school, the Adult Education Association, the National Society, the Wives' Association, the Young Women's Association, rural guidance personnel, and community leaders.

In Ernakulam, hundreds of thousands of learners and tens of thousands of volunteers were motivated through science-art processions, literacy foot marches, public skits, radio and television messaging, flyers, banners and cinema slides.[220] Tanzania similarly used mass radio broadcasts, including songs for literacy which were listened to and sung by students in adult literacy classes. Regional newspapers, rural library programs, and vans to show films in villages were also crucial ways to mobilise volunteers and learners, building momentum for the movement.[221]

Training and Logistics

Along with surveying and mobilising, it is crucial to train the literacy volunteers and organise the campaign's logistics. In Cuba, a teacher's manual was created as a guide for the literacy instructors to provide the background knowledge for the themes of the lessons. Volunteers were also provided training to orient them to the hardships of rural life, including small houses, lack of electricity and running water!

Ernakulam provides a beautiful example for training and logistics. Nearly 20,000 volunteers came forwards, out of which 700 people with better academic qualifications were identified as master-trainers. A

three-day camp was used to train these master trainers in how to use the primers and on building the motivation of volunteers and learners. After this, the master-trainers conducted workshops for literacy volunteers in 20 locations throughout the district, in batches of around 50 people. The food was arranged through local contributions from the community.[222]

Over 9,000 Nicaraguan teachers assisted in the preparation, supervision, and in-service training of their literacy workers. In Tanzania, the teachers were trained in workshops organised by regional and district adult education staff. The teachers were supported by two weekly radio broadcasts, and the literacy students by a full range of other educational programs.[223]

Thought also needs to be given to the logistics of the campaign. In Cuba, 1.5 million copies of the primer were printed such that every learner could receive a copy. Each volunteer received a package that included the primer and the teachers' manual, a pair of boots, two pairs of socks, two pairs of pants, an olive-green beret, a hammock, and a lantern to provide light for lessons in homes without electricity, and for travel on unlit country roads.[224] These lanterns helped spread the light of literacy—both literally and figuratively!

Consider Your Context

What are some government-initiated campaigns in your state/country? How do people in your area usually respond to these efforts? What could the government do to be more effective in mobilising people for widespread literacy?

Realising the Vision

The Teaching-Learning Process

I was thirteen years old... We were given forms to be signed by our families. All my friends and classmates were involved in this, and I wasn't going to be left behind. We all got together, some of us with more support from our families than others, but we all decided to fulfil this duty... Nobody [in my family] wanted to sign... I signed it myself... when the time came, I got on the bus with nothing but the clothes I had on, and off I went.[225]

> – **Brigadista Leonela Relys Diaz,** a student volunteer from Cuba, who went on to found the 'Yes I Can' Literacy Program

Had I been paid for my service, I would not have been able to make and maintain the emotional attachment that I could develop with my learners and they with me.[226]

> – **Volunteer literacy tutor,** Ernakulam District, India

Schools held night classes for illiterate adults, while during vacations, students had to teach the illiterate members of the village as part of their 'vacation homework'. They even had to receive written confirmation from the village head that they indeed had taught the illiterate. I also did this 'homework' when I was in fourth grade. The first illiterate adults I taught to read and write were three women. They were my mother and her two friends.[227]

> – **Kim Shinil,** a student volunteer, who later went on to become South Korea's Deputy Prime Minister

The groundwork has been laid with extensive surveying, mobilisation and training. Now it's time to teach! Our campaign also requires a structure for monitoring and evaluation. To bring the movement to a successful close, we need to certify and celebrate the achievements of volunteers and learners, and make arrangements for their continuing education.

The Teaching-Learning Process

As we've seen, many countries relied on students to do the heavy lifting of volunteer work. In Cuba, nearly 100,000 young people from schools and universities were mobilised, with an average age of 14 to 16 years, and more than 50 per cent being female. Three-quarters of the young volunteers were from urban areas, who were allocated for teaching in rural areas. But it wasn't just students; the whole of society was involved, with ordinary people teaching neighbours and relatives in their own homes. Literate factory workers taught their unlettered colleagues, unpaid, after shifts.

Photo 20.1: Many Urban Brigadistas (Student Volunteers) of Cuba were Allocated to Teach in Rural Areas

The South Korean government opened literacy classes in each village and town for two to three months, twice a year.[228] Local schools and public areas were used for learning spaces. Classes were also opened in factories under the active support of employers. Civil servants and the general public who had teaching skills could also join the program as instructors by the appointment of the superintendent or the district chief.

As we've seen, each of these movements was driven by strong political ideologies. This was reflected in the content that was taught. In Cuba, a teaching strategy called 'social motivation' was used, which included the transaction of content based on political, social and economic aspects of the Revolution. In Ernakulam, the campaign primer included lessons on

food, work, the dignity of labour, disease prevention, drinking water, oral rehydration therapy, India's freedom struggle, panchayats, post offices, the equality of the sexes, fair-price shops and immunisation.[229] Sometimes this discussion-based approach, in which learners talked about issues relevant to their lives, worked well. In other cases, like Nicaragua, some discussion topics were frequently ignored. Their beautifully named primer, *Sunrise of the People*, contained 23 lessons, each opening with a picture to simulate discussion—but students were often reluctant to debate issues publicly or question authority.[230]

In several of the countries which had large rural-urban disparities, the migration of thousands of young volunteers to the countryside entailed a two-way learning process. While the urbanites taught literacy, they themselves learned a huge amount about the realities of rural life from their compatriots. These campaigns thus laid the foundation not only for decades of economic development but also for heightened national unity and solidarity.

These movements were an integral part of women's empowerment. In all of the examples, the substantial majority of learners were women. They found that new skills of literacy gave them greater dignity and power, both within the household and in broader society. Further, the often-overlooked point is that in many of these countries, the majority of volunteers were also women, who stepped up to deliver for their communities and their nations.

Monitoring

However well the movement has been planned, and despite the enthusiasm of hundreds of thousands of volunteers and learners, all campaigns experience challenges and hiccups along the way. In this context, it is vital to monitor the whole process to provide greater support where needed.

The well-organised South Korean society had many institutions in place to ensure the campaign's rapid uptake and smooth completion. With compulsory military service for all young men, the military screened out those among each year's new recruits who were illiterate.[231] They were included in military training only after being taught to read and write, thereby making all young men literate. As discussed in the opening quote, school students were given 'holiday homework' of teaching illiterates in their village, and had to receive written confirmation from the village head that they had indeed taught someone how to read. For adult literacy

programs conducted within the school premises, principals personally inspected the classes as well as appointed teachers to be responsible for them.[232] County chiefs encouraged township leaders to join the project, and police chiefs made the heads of each police sub-station promote the project and encourage more people to join. Indeed, the process could be quite strict. As Jong Im Byun writes:

> '*Police officers would even question people on the street in order to find people who could not or did not join the program. All organisations that participated in the literacy movement reported the number of illiterate people they had taught throughout the year to a supervisory organisation. The government would compile these statistics and present the accomplishments of the year along with the current literacy rate. Regions with a low accomplishment rate were chastised by the central government, which gave them plenty of incentive to do better the following year.*'[233]

Other movements wisely adopted friendlier policies but were no less clear in their expectation that everyone should participate. In Ernakulam, a decentralised monitoring system of people's committees at the local municipal and panchayat (village) levels ensured that the campaign's momentum was maintained.[234]

Stories Behind the Statistics

A Tale of Transformation from Nicaragua[235]

In Nicaragua, a huge number of *brigadistas* (young volunteers) went for five months to mountainous and rural areas. Besides teaching literacy, these young people also shared the life and work of peasant families in their homes and fields.

Julia was one such brigadista, who, being from an urban middle-class background, enjoyed dressing up and filing and painting her toenails. Julia was a self-described snob who would not greet the *campesinos* (peasant farmers) or take any interest in them.

Julia now, at the end of the literacy campaign, knows personally how most Nicaraguans live. She spent five months eating beans and tortillas, sleeping with fleas, getting up at 4 am, sharing a bedroom with a whole family, hiking for miles through mud without the convenience of even a toilet. She knows lots of neo-literate people, from her host peasant family, whom she regards as more talented and intelligent than herself.

Evaluation of Neo-literates

Along with monitoring the whole process, each country had a stream of neo-literates to evaluate. This evaluation process was crucial to ensure volunteers had done their job well, and people really had been made literate rather than just 'on paper'.

Cuba used a mid-line evaluation to determine the progress of the students, as well as a final test. This was composed of reading two short paragraphs from the primer, a brief dictation, and writing a letter to Fidel Castro, who surely never was able to read the hundreds of thousands of epistles he received![236] In South Korea, the principal of each school marked the exams of the literacy learners.[237]

One interesting question facing those designing the evaluations was to consider where exactly to draw the line between literacy and illiteracy. As we've seen, literacy is better conceived as a spectrum of skill levels. Indeed, Nicaragua used a series of tests to determine the progress of literacy students during the campaign. From an extremely basic exercise— drawing a straight line—to writing their own name, the learners were then tested on their ability to read and write letters, words and sentences. The test concluded with some harder exercises: comprehension of a short story, and having the learners write a composition of their own. People who completed all sections successfully were considered literate, but those who could read and write only a few words were classified as semi-literates. People who could write their own name but no more were classified as illiterate. Nicaragua adopted a very caring approach: along with test results, volunteers recorded observations about individual learning difficulties, health problems, and areas of personal interest for future study.[238]

Certification and Celebration

Everyone who participates in the movement as a learner, a volunteer, or a supervisor deserves to be honoured. In many campaigns, this has been done through certificate ceremonies and celebrations at local, regional and national levels. Various exceptional volunteers and learners have had their stories highlighted in the media to foster excitement about the movement.

In 1990, one year after the launch of the Ernakulam movement, Prime Minister V.P. Singh declared that Ernakulam had become the first fully literate district of India. The postal department of India issued a stamp in celebration.[239] As a mark of recognition, the Kerala government awarded certificates to learners, instructors and master-trainers in public functions.

Figure 20.2: Stamp Issued in International Literacy Year, 1990,
to Commemorate Ernakulam's Remarkable Mass Movement

In Cuba, there were mass graduations of students, with ceremonies to celebrate in work centres and union halls. More than a million people participated in these events, at which leading popular musical groups and singers performed. Outstanding workers received both material rewards and social acclaim.[240]

Continuing Education for Neo-literates

Neo-literates need post-literacy classes to prevent loss of newly acquired skills, and to enable them to continue their education. For the achievements of short-term movements to be sustained over the long term, it is crucial that they be integrated into national learning systems.[241] In each of these remarkable movements, learners found that their lives changed dramatically, thanks to their new skills. Once they started learning, they didn't want to stop!

In Tanzania, the Department of Adult Education began post-literacy classes in 1976. Enrolment grew dramatically year on year.[242] In Cuba, the national campaign initially made people literate to a Grade 2 level. In the post-literacy phase, a national commission was established to ensure that workers and farmers achieved a greater level of literacy (Grade 6). Again, this ongoing education program was driven by strong ideological motivations. In the words of Castro, 'Without this minimum of knowledge, it is difficult to participate with efficiency in the process of revolutionary changes and the construction of socialism.'

The Cubans have found that workers teaching each other is the most effective form of instruction. Thus, in 1976–77, 53 per cent of the 24,200 adult education teachers were themselves workers.[243] Flexible academic

calendars were adjusted to specific working conditions in different industries. Further, thousands of new texts were developed to achieve advanced literacy goals. An independent study program was also created, utilising TV and radio, classes in factories and farm centres, and night schools. To this day, Cuba has one of the best education systems among low- and middle-income countries, and adult education is a major focus.

Stories Behind the Statistics

Tanzania's Neo-literates Speak[244]

These days when people see me, they say to themselves, 'You cannot deceive or intimidate this old man... he knows [how to read].'

Now that I have become literate, I feel that before I was carrying a small lantern, but now a [bright] pressure lamp has been brought to me.

The word 'education' used to terrify me... [it] had the aura of some kind of magic. But now I know that anyone can learn and anyone can get education....

Consider Your Context

Many of the movements discussed here had school and college students as a large part of the volunteer force. Do you think students in your area would be interested to take part in such a movement? Why or why not?

Six Guides, One Road

A Global Literacy Movement in the 21ˢᵗ Century

To learn to read is to light a fire;
every syllable that is spelled out is a spark.

— **Victor Hugo,** French Novelist

The rapid successes of movements around the world demonstrate how quickly universal literacy can be achieved if the problem is tackled in a mission mode by motivating and mobilising the masses and using swift and effective materials and methods.

It's time now to draw together the strands and learn from the campaigns as we look forward to a new wave of literacy movements in the 21ˢᵗ century. Each movement has a distinct flavour due to its own unique local and national context; there can be no 'one-size-fits-all' approach. That said, there is much we can learn from the experiences of these six campaigns.

Challenges Faced

Each movement experienced its share of challenges along the way— though these were small compared to the gains they unlocked. The way the countries dealt with these challenges are instructive as we seek universal global literacy.

The recruitment of volunteers was a challenge for many of the movements. For instance, in Nicaragua, one month before the campaign started, many parents still had not given their permission for their younger children to participate (minimum age was 12). In the face of this predominantly middle-class opposition, which was based on a mixture of political hostility and parental anxieties, a massive campaign to convince parents took place through the media and youth organisations.[245]

Further, about half of Nicaragua's teachers did not participate in the literacy campaign, with some faking sickness and other excuses in order to stay in the urban areas.[246] Many school teachers were afraid of losing their status and facing new kinds of horizontal relationships with their students. A second recruiting campaign had to be carried out after the beginning of the literacy campaign, directed at secondary and university students who had not previously responded because there was still a lack of brigadistas. In the end, only 35 per cent of the 266,501 persons who claimed in the Census that they wanted to teach actually volunteered in the campaign.

Other movements faced different unforeseen difficulties. In Ernakulam, of the 185,000 people identified in the survey as illiterate, many had weak eyesight and thus could not learn to read immediately. The campaign trained many volunteers to run massive eyesight testing camps. It turned out that some 75,000 (that is, about 40%) of the people who were illiterate required spectacles. This was a major expense, which the campaign had not budgeted for. But fundraising from the community was successful, with thousands of local residents chipping in for the cause. And the gift of free spectacles motivated many who otherwise may have been reluctant to join the classes. Ernakulam once again showed the truth of the saying: 'Behind every challenge lies an opportunity.'

Movements in the 21st Century

The movement approach seemed to lose momentum in the 1980s and 90s. The decolonisation process, which had driven political will for literacy in many new nations, had largely run its course. Socialist ideology, which often emphasised the importance of government action towards achieving universal literacy, had also waned in the face of prevalent neoliberal assumptions in favour of the small state. But the movement approach need not be confined to socialist nations—as we've seen, literacy is the key to unlocking tremendous national and economic development. Governments of all ideological stripes would do well to pursue the agenda of universal literacy.

Another reason behind the weakening of the literacy movement model is that many governments began to view the universalisation of primary school education as the long-term solution to adult literacy problems. However, as we've seen, this attrition approach takes far too long and is highly unjust for the hundreds of millions of adults who lack literacy right now. While many countries have succeeded in drastically improving their

primary school enrolment rates, merely being in school is no guarantee of a child learning.

Thankfully, the pendulum is swinging, and there is renewed interest in literacy campaigns as we move further into the 21st century.[247] Cuba's recently developed literacy program 'Yes I Can' has been exported to some 29 countries and has facilitated over five million people becoming literate.[248] This method enabled Timor-Leste to make a remarkable jump in literacy rates, from 38 per cent to 64 per cent over a five-year period— the swiftest large improvement in literacy rates during the 21st century.[249] Morocco and Egypt also deserve mention, each achieving a gain of about 20 percentage points over a decade.[250] Movements continue to produce lasting increases in literacy rates, leading to strong economic growth and greater social equality.

As we look forward to a worldwide movement, it seems the passage of time has given us several advantages which make the task easier:

1. **Better Materials and Methods:** New, research-based, disruptive techniques such as the Global Dream Program enable basic literacy to be taught even more rapidly than the programs used by many of the above movements. Selecting the right primers can make a big difference in easing the process. This ensures that the transaction of literacy happens a lot more quickly and that it meets the imagination of both learners and volunteers, who may themselves be young school students. Global Dream is available in many languages, and easy to replicate in others.

2. **Increased Value of Literacy:** In a world saturated with text, the public understands the value of literacy more than they did several decades ago. There is increased demand for literacy, as people realise the importance of reading, writing and arithmetic in their daily lives. As we've seen, in Global Dream, the learner starts recognising 6–10 letters in the first session itself, which is only 15–30 minutes long. This rapid gain motivates and keeps them coming back to classes, hungry to learn. Another way to increase demand for literacy is to start by teaching the learner how to write their own name. The dignity that comes from signing one's name rather than using a thumb impression is a powerful motivation, and a pull strategy to continue the learning process until fully literate.

3. **Technology:** The 20th century movements discussed above used technologies which we now consider outdated—like paper forms to conduct surveys, and short-wave radio to co-ordinate! These days, survey apps on smartphones enable much easier data collection

and coordination. Technology also enables decentralised, zero-cost teaching through the use of mobile apps. An app similar to Arogya Setu (India's COVID-19 tracker app) can be used for the purpose of collecting data on learners and volunteers, matching volunteers with learners, monitoring progress and facilitating collaboration.

Conclusion

The time is ripe for a mass movement to achieve universal literacy throughout the world. We can harness the power of the 20th century's idealism and passion, and combine it with the technologies and pedagogies of the 21st century, to make rapid gains towards universal literacy, in shorter timeframes than ever before. Let's work with passionate purpose and perseverance to make our dreams come true.

Reflection Questions

As you come to the end of this book, do you feel hopeful about the possibility of a mass movement for literacy for all? What actions are you ready to take?

We Have a Dream

Vision of a Literate World

Dreams are not that which you see in your sleep.
Dreams are that which prevent you from sleeping.
　　　　　　　– Dr A.P.J. Kalam, former Indian President

The struggle for universal literacy resonates around the world. From East to West, too many people remain unable to read and write their own mother tongue. From North to South, too many young minds remain uneducated, not reaching their full potential. From Afghanistan to Algeria, from Zimbabwe to Zambia, too many suffer from not being able to transact basic sums.

But we refuse to accept a situation in which hundreds of millions of our sisters and brothers remain unable to read and write their own name. We refuse to accept that hundreds of millions of children sit for years in school without learning even the basics.

This is no time to make excuses, no time to make incremental changes. Now is the time for disruption. The time is now to unlock the potential of each and every person. The time is now for all of us to work together for literacy, so that literacy can be made possible for all.

We have a dream.

A dream that one day we will rise from the shackles of ignorance and illiteracy into the freedom that comes with learning.

A dream that one day thumb pads will be discarded into the dustbin of history as everyone proudly signs their own name.

A dream that one day everyone will feel confident to go new places and be able to read the road signs.

A dream that one day all children will be in school and learning well, in joyful classrooms.

A dream that one day rich and poor, old and young, rural and urban, will together read stories and write their own.

This is a dream that can come true soon—depending on the actions taken by you and me! Let's work together and make this dream a reality. Together we can.

Policy Recommendations

We need a mass movement for literacy, which entails government mission-mindedness and giving top priority to literacy; mobilisation of all sectors of society, and materials and methods that enable literacy to be taught swiftly and effectively.

Bold New Steps

- Decisive leadership and commitment to change, combined with practical steps and openness to disruptive solutions are the way forward, rather than improving old systems incrementally.
- Increase education spending to 6 per cent of GDP, as is worldwide best practice.
- Introduce cash transfers conditional on school attendance.
- Transformative groundbreaking research-based solutions will need to be low-cost, replicable, scalable and sustainable. This requires a serious consideration of learner-centred programs that are freely available like Global Dream Disruptive FLN.

Bold New Accountability

- Revamp 'upward' accountability mechanisms: have clear and transparent criteria on which teachers are evaluated during surprise visits. Increase the opportunity for teachers to meet and share their work, fostering a culture of mutual accountability and working towards greater innovation and professionalism.
- Strengthen communities' roles in ensuring accountability. This includes measures such as the publication of data on teacher absenteeism, town halls displaying student work for the whole community, and a helpline for complaints, as a recourse for the parents and children.
- Leverage public-private partnerships in education to increase accountability.

Bold New Teacher Training and Motivation

- Focus training on changing beliefs, worldviews and mindsets.

- Focus training on building practical skills that teachers need in the classroom.
- Training should be supported by ongoing mentorship and practical guidance.
- Provide teachers with peer forums to share their experiences and best practices, thereby fostering motivation.

If You Are A…
How to be Part of the Movement

Individual

☐ Enable at least one person to become literate.

☐ Enable at least ten people to become literate.

☐ Invite your friends and family to join the campaign. Together, make an entire slum/village literate.

☐ Sign the petition calling for government to prioritise literacy*.

Community Organisation

☐ Conduct surveys to establish the extent of illiteracy in an area.

☐ Conduct awareness-raising activities to motivate people to join the movement as both mentors and learners.

☐ Organise community events to promote the importance of literacy.

☐ Mobilise literacy mentors and help them match up with learners.

☐ Help neo-literates with vocational training and continuing education.

School/College

☐ Run a peer-to-peer literacy support program for students within the school struggling with reading.

☐ Encourage students (including from government schools) to teach their parents, relatives, neighbours and other local community members how to read.

☐ Encourage every student to make someone literate. This could even become a requirement, a part of the students' report card.

☐ Host literacy classes for children/adults from a nearby slum or village area on campus.

☐ 'Adopt' a nearby slum/village and have students and staff teach there.

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* Go online to sign at: dignityeducation.org/Petition

Non-government Organisation

☐ Conduct literacy surveys to establish the extent of illiteracy in an area.

☐ Orchestrate awareness raising activities and social media campaigns to promote the importance of literacy.

☐ Mobilise community networks for literacy.

☐ Replicate high quality materials, such as the Global Dream Literacy Toolkit, in a regional/local vernacular.

☐ Advocate for governments to give top priority to literacy.

☐ Partner with other NGOs to share resources and ideas.

☐ Participate in SMCs and other mechanisms to help hold schools to account, particularly through doing social audits.

Corporation/Philanthropic Foundation

☐ Support districts in your catchment area to implement a mass movement for literacy.

☐ Fund and provide back-end support (e.g., building capacity by training on monitoring, fundraising, auditing) to organisations that are doing crucial and innovative literacy work.

☐ Set up a global pool of funds to promote literacy across the world. Leverage funds to accelerate literacy in different contexts.

☐ Run literacy programs to ensure all workers in your supply chain are made literate, through the efforts of their peers.

☐ Encourage and facilitate employees of the corporation to take up the cause of literacy, in your own special formats (for instance through matching employees' donations to NGOs).

☐ Adopt a nearby slum or village and/ or support those working to make it fully literate.

☐ Advocate for governments to make literacy a top priority.

Petition for Literacy

Sign the petition online at dignityeducation.org/Petition

Or take the text below, adapt it to make it more specific to your local/national context, and create your own petition on change.org.

To Prime Ministers and Education Ministers around the world:

Literacy is the key to peace, progress and prosperity. It is a basic foundation for human dignity and opportunity, and paves the way for better health and social equity. Yet, hundreds of millions of people, both children and adults, are still unable to read and write. The COVID-19 crisis has reversed educational gains for hundreds of millions of children, and many have dropped out of school. UNICEF is warning that the scale of educational losses is 'nearly insurmountable'.

We urgently need disruptive solutions, to ensure that everyone – regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, and economic standing – learns the key foundational skills of literacy and numeracy.

To this end, we are calling on you to implement the following five-point action plan.

1. **Treat literacy as an emergency.** Much as tremendous energy and resources were mobilised towards the COVID response, so too we need to tackle the literacy crisis in a mission mode.
2. **Increase investment in education.** Two-thirds of low and middle income countries (LMICs) have cut educational spending during the Pandemic. This urgently needs to be reversed. Cash transfers conditional on school attendance, especially for girls and adolescents, may be utilised to help ensure regular attendance.
3. **Improve transparency and accountability in school education.** Improve transparency by organising regular town hall forums to showcase student progress, and setting up a helpline for complaints. Provide teachers with peer forums to share their experiences and best practices, to enhance their intrinsic motivation.
4. **Use disruptive methods to teach quickly.** It is possible to make a person foundationally literate and numerate within months, not years, using disruptive teaching methods such as Global Dream: Accelerating Literacy for All. These need to be adopted immediately as another year without rapid gains in literacy would be disastrous.
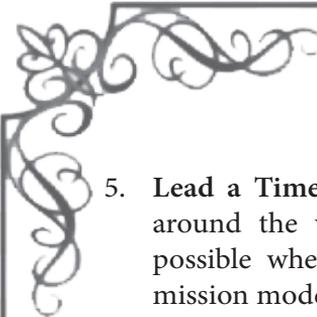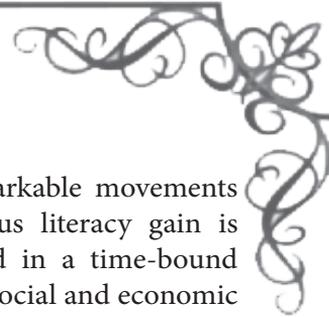
5. **Lead a Time-Bound People's Movement**. Remarkable movements around the world demonstrate that tremendous literacy gain is possible when entire populations are mobilised in a time-bound mission mode. They also show that tremendous social and economic benefits are unlocked through these literacy revolutions. This means:

   (a) **Mobilize all segments of society.** When governments lead people's movements, all segments of society get involved: corporations, NGOs, community groups, schools and universities.

   (b) **Involve students and women.** Students not only provide a substantial volunteer group, but also create a lot of enthusiasm and energy for the campaign. When women are involved, they can transform entire communities.

   (c) **Harness new technologies.** Mobile apps such as Literacy Now can greatly ease the coordination of literacy movements by matching people who are illiterate with those who can volunteer to teach.

We look forward to your taking the above measures forward to ensure literacy for all.

We thank you for your proactive leadership.

Sincerely,

Sunita Gandhi
Lead-Worker
Leave No One Behind Campaign for Literacy

Glossary of Acronyms

ASER   Annual Status of Education Report, a publication of survey findings on learning levels in Indian government schools.

CCT   Conditional Cash Transfer, a policy mechanism for fighting poverty and incentivising good decisions, such as school attendance.

CSR   Corporate Social Responsibility, the requirement for corporations to donate a proportion of their profits towards social causes.

FLN   Foundational Literacy and Numeracy

LMIC   Low- and Middle-Income Country

NEP   National Education Policy (India, 2020)

NGO   Non-Government Organisation (working not for profit)

NIPUN   National Initiative for Proficiency in reading with Understanding and Numeracy, India's flagship program for improving literacy and numeracy levels in primary school.

NLM   National Literacy Mission, India's peak body for promoting adult literacy since 1988; now renamed and revamped as New India Literacy Mission (NILM).

PPP   Public Private Partnership, a model in which the government shares some of the responsibilities for running a school with a private body.

RTE   Right To Education Act (India, 2009), providing the right to compulsory, free education for children aged 6 to 14.

SC/ST   Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, an Indian category for a group of castes and tribes which have historically been disadvantaged.

SDG   Sustainable Development Goal

SMC   School Management Committee, a group formed of parents and concerned citizens to monitor the day-to-day functioning of a school.

TLM   Teaching-Learning Materials

UNESCO   United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Acknowledgements

Disruptive Literacy
Global Advisory Committee

Name	Title	Organisation
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Alesha Anderson	Senior Program Officer	ProLiteracy Worldwide
Alexandre Romanovsky	Advisor to Companies	Dedicated to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
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Chetnaa Mehrotra	Founder	Rangbhumi
Cindy Charles	Founder & CEO	Kupanda Sisters Inc.
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Dr Sunita Gandhi has been passionate about education her whole life, starting her first school at the age of 14! She later got a PhD in physics from Cambridge University, UK, and worked at the World Bank for ten years before returning to India to campaign for literacy. She is Chief Academic Advisor for City Montessori School, Lucknow, the world's largest school; and founder-president of the Global Dream Literacy program. Sunita has received numerous awards, including 'Educationist of the Year' (2014) and 'Visionary of Uttar Pradesh' (2017). Amidst travels to 49 countries to study their education systems, she has made time to start schools in Czech Republic, Iceland and India. On the rare occasions she's not working, she likes spending time with her family, playing board games and watching old Hindi movies.

Tom Delaney is a teacher and trainer with the Global Dream Literacy Program. He is an Australian citizen, but was brought up living amongst India's urban poor. He is passionate about social justice, and has previously co-authored a book on climate change and simple living: Low Carbon and Loving It. Tom enjoys cycling around Lucknow and debating politics and philosophy.

Jonathan Hakim studied physics and biology at Harvey Mudd University, before going on to teach disadvantaged children in inner-city Los Angeles. He came to India in 2012, to live with and serve the marginalised. He is a literacy teacher and trainer with the Global Dream Program, and has educated many children in one of Lucknow's largest slums. Jonathan is a passionate nature lover and enjoys handling all kinds of reptiles!

Mashhood Alam Bhat is leading Programs and Partnerships at Global Dream Literacy. Previously, he has worked with Pratham and NIEPA on capacity building of teachers and educational administrators. He is currently an M.Ed Education Policy and Analysis candidate at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He is passionate about helping design and scale quality education programs for underprivileged learners. When he's relaxing, you will find Mashhood in the kitchen trying out new recipes or having fun on the squash court.

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To collaborate and to order hardcopies of the Global Dream toolkit, call us on the hotline:

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Can You Read This Line?

If so, you can help solve one of the world's greatest challenges.

Foundational literacy and numeracy are crucial to every person's well-being. A nation's literacy rate is a key predictor of its social and economic progress.

Yet the world still has hundreds of millions of children in school but not learning the basics, and adults deprived of these foundational skills. Why?

Disruptive Literacy tackles these hard questions, showing that, despite the huge setback of COVID-19, the world can attain universal literacy rapidly. This requires mission-minded government leadership, the mobilisation of all sectors of society, new improved learning materials, and disruptive methods for teaching—supported by mobile apps and ed-tech. Literacy for all is possible within months, not decades, if we make it top priority.

Drawing from remarkable examples of movements around the world, and sprinkled with stories from the authors' grassroots educational work in the Global Dream Accelerared Learning for All (ALfA) program, Disruptive Literacy is an easy-to-read but hard-to-ignore manifesto that will touch your heart and inspire you to action.

> "
> A much needed manifesto for achieving large scale transformation to the problem of the global literacy crisis.

Ernesto Schiefelbein
Former Minister of Education, Chile
*who helped remake and democratize education
in Latin America & beyond*

SDG 4
disrupting FLN at scale
Foundational Literacy & Numeracy