

The Good Sight



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Champions of Change

*A smile as bright as
her future*

Photo by Muhammad Ali Zaidi



Foundational Literacy and Numeracy: The Missing Ingredient

NIPUN aims to ensure universal FLN by 2026-27, but are our current reforms sufficient to reach this ambitious goal? Or are we missing something important?

A Literacy Crisis of Huge Proportions

Despite increasing recognition of the importance of literacy, children's literacy rates are at a historic low, thanks to Covid-induced huge disruptions and lengthy school closures. World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF estimate 70% of

10-year-olds in low-and-middle-income countries (LMICs) are unable to read, write, and do basic arithmetic. In South Asia, the loss has been even more severe – some 78% of children are in learning poverty.¹

“We are looking at a nearly insurmountable scale of loss to children's schooling,” says Robert

Jenkins, UNICEF Chief of Education, “Just reopening schools is not enough. Students need intensive support to recover lost education.”²

To understand why these low levels of learning are an emergency, we must recognize that global education levels in LMICs were low even before Covid: learning poverty rose from 53% in 2015 to

57% by 2019.³ Going back to ‘business as usual’ is not an option. Indeed, hundreds of millions of children are in danger of being lost to education altogether – with serious social, economic, and political consequences.

NIPUN Bharat and Pathway to Universal FLN by 2026/27



Children learn better through cognition. They also learn better when they take turns and work interactively with each other in a pair. Children of Shravasti, UP, in initial trial of the ALfA pedagogy.

Thankfully, India's New Education Policy 2020 accords FLN the highest priority. The National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN Bharat) aims to reach universal FLN from Balvatika to Grade 3 students by 2026-27.

This has led to a flurry of school reforms nationwide including the following:

- *Detailed prescriptions.* Specific instructions for every period including time for learning, revision and practice in pairs and groups
- *Curriculum Add-on's.* Elaborate workbooks for every child, supplementary hands-on learning materials (like shapes and currency cards), storybooks and print-rich environments
- *Testing and Remedial Measures.* Weekly testing on the key skills supposed to have been learnt, and use the test results to take remedial action in ability-based groups
- *Training.* More intensive teacher training, and provision of detailed and visual teacher guides
- *Supervision & Monitoring.* More rigorous

‘supportive supervision’ and use of innovative apps to monitor practice and teacher attendance

- *Systemic Change.* Appointment of more supervisory staff, and centralized policy and other changes at the system-wide level

What Trajectory Will Ensure India Is Literate By 2026-27?

Despite putting our best foot forward, we have not been able to reach pre-COVID levels one year after schools opened. ASER 2022 report released in January 2023 states that children's basic reading ability has dropped to ‘pre-2012 levels’, reversing the slow improvement achieved in the intervening years.

What type of trajectory would be required to achieve the FLN goals – all children being able to read, write and do basic arithmetic by 2026-27? To grow from our current 40% of Grade 5 children to universal FLN in four years, a cursory analysis would suggest we need to move

¹World Bank. 2022. *The State of Learning Poverty: 2022 Update*. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/e52f55322528903b27f1b7e61238e416-0200022022/original/Learning-poverty-report-2022-06-21-final-V7-0-conferenceEdition.pdf>

²UNICEF. 2022. *Scale of Education Loss Nearly Insurmountable, Warns UNICEF*. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/covid19-scale-education-loss-nearly-insurmountable-warns-unicef>

³World Bank. 2022. *The State of Learning Poverty: 2022 Update*. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/e52f55322528903b27f1b7e61238e416-0200022022/original/Learning-poverty-report-2022-06-21-final-V7-0-conferenceEdition.pdf>

with great speed to 55%, 70%, 85% and 100% respectively from the 2023-24 session to the 2026-27 session. If we think of Grade 3 children reaching the NIPUN skills, we have to move up a much steeper trajectory at a much faster pace. Are the current measures enough? Are the directions we are taking today sufficient to lead us out of literacy poverty? Maybe, we need to be far more circumspect.

We also need to go back to the drawing board and ask some bold new questions.

1. Are the measures given above both necessary and sufficient to reach the NIPUN goal of universal FLN by 2026-27?
2. What have been the gains this academic year when the entire nation has been working their utmost best, and when it has been India’s topmost priority in education post-Covid?
3. How are we going achieve what we could not accomplish historically in the past decades, when the best historical efforts could only reach FLN to 50% of the children after five years of schooling?
4. What pace of progress do we need now to reach universal FLN in the next four years?
5. What new policies and measures can drastically improve FLN now and change the direction of education?

Let’s accept that refinement of the old is not going to work. Education as in the past has had its day. We need new design thinking, new ground-breaking and transformative education that can forever change the fortunes of our children, and make the schooling experience far more empowering for the teacher and the taught. Let such a new education not just deliver on academic skills quickly, but also empower the children with real 6C Skills of the 21st Century: Collaboration, Communication, Creativity, Critical Thinking, Character and Citizenship. These are important outcomes of education in India’s New Education Policy 2020.⁴



Children are more engaged when they work without direction and constant vigil of the teacher. Here the children of Shamli schools are learning in pairs. The program has been supported by M3M Foundation.

⁴https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf

Let’s acknowledge that the old processes are incapable of delivering on the 6Cs. These were designed for an age gone by, for fulfilling the needs of employers in a rapidly industrializing 19th century. Our schools are still working with teacher-led, though often child-centric processes such as more joyful hands-on learning, and children often working in groups and pairs. However, role learning and teacher-led environments still dominate. It is hard to break the old moulds. We no longer need even the finest of landline phones. We need Instead, the smart phone. For this, we need to think dramatically differently.

Not only in the NEP 2020, as early as 1986, India’s National Policy on Education stated: “The most important aspect of this reform will be to make education a joyful, inventive and satisfying learning activity, rather than a system of rote.”⁵

Ensuring Inputs versus Driving Outcomes

The reforms above are often inputs. They are fine-tuning and incremental changes to the archaic education system – new worksheets, more teacher training, more supervisors, more monitoring, and

⁵https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/upload_document/npe.pdf

the like. With the teachers being held accountable on the detailed prescriptions, for example, what they do in every period, teachers do not have the time to think, or the freedom to deliver on outcomes.

Imagine the drastic change from a landline to a smartphone – nobody uses a landline anymore! But in education, we remain stuck with the landline: most of our pedagogy is outdated. It is as if we have polished the landline, given it some new buttons – group work, technology in the classroom – but the core remains unchanged. Imagine yourself as a cook who is given an extremely detailed recipe. If you follow it correctly, how will you feel if the dish is still not satisfactory? Instead, let us hold the cook accountable for the outcome, and like the master chefs who choose their own ingredients, deliver on a wonderful meal. This would surely foster the teachers’ sense of professionalism and creativity. The same goes for accountability and supervision instead of measuring a to-do list, measure outcomes—how are the children performing on the different goals of NIPUN Bharat, and assist teachers with becoming more innovative with new, more disruptive ideas for change, more sessions for teachers to share with each other their classroom successes, and more. Other input-based prescriptions may also lack the desired

outcome. A print-rich environment is helpful – but how much can it achieve when children are unable to decipher the text? Regular testing can be useful – but merely grouping ‘weak’ children together may be counterproductive.⁶ Sorting children as ‘remedial’ can weaken their self-esteem, and become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Without new systemic changes, attempts at tinkering around the edges may amount to little more than a band-aid. Transformative change is urgently needed, no longer incremental change.

The Missing Ingredient: Pedagogical Transformation

Could it be that the detailed recipe we gave the cook is missing a key ingredient? Pedagogy. The way we teach, is at least as important as the books we use to teach, but is often taken for granted. Consider how reading is taught. India’s schools continue to use whole language, even though the world’s largest meta-analysis of research by Prof. John Hattie shows phonics works far better.⁷ Whole language emphasizes sight words. Using whole language approach, it takes one year or more to teach ‘*swar*’ and ‘*vyanjan*’, and another year or more to teach ‘*matras*’. It is three years before many children can the read full text, and even after five years of schooling, by their 10th birthday, over half of children cannot read with understanding.

ALfA Transformation: Beyond FLN in 45 Days

A new disruptive approach is ensuring children are learning the foundational skills in a mere 45 days.



Learning by themselves in Shamli. When the electricity did not work, they went under the trees and sat on pavement but learning in pairs did not stop. Many teachers initially thought it would be impossible to get the children of Grades 1 to work in pairs but soon they began to believe they can. Changing beliefs is one of the outcomes of ALfA. Not only can little children work without a teacher's help, they can also learn to read a newspaper in just 30 days. Teachers changed their beliefs once they saw the rapid learning by their children.

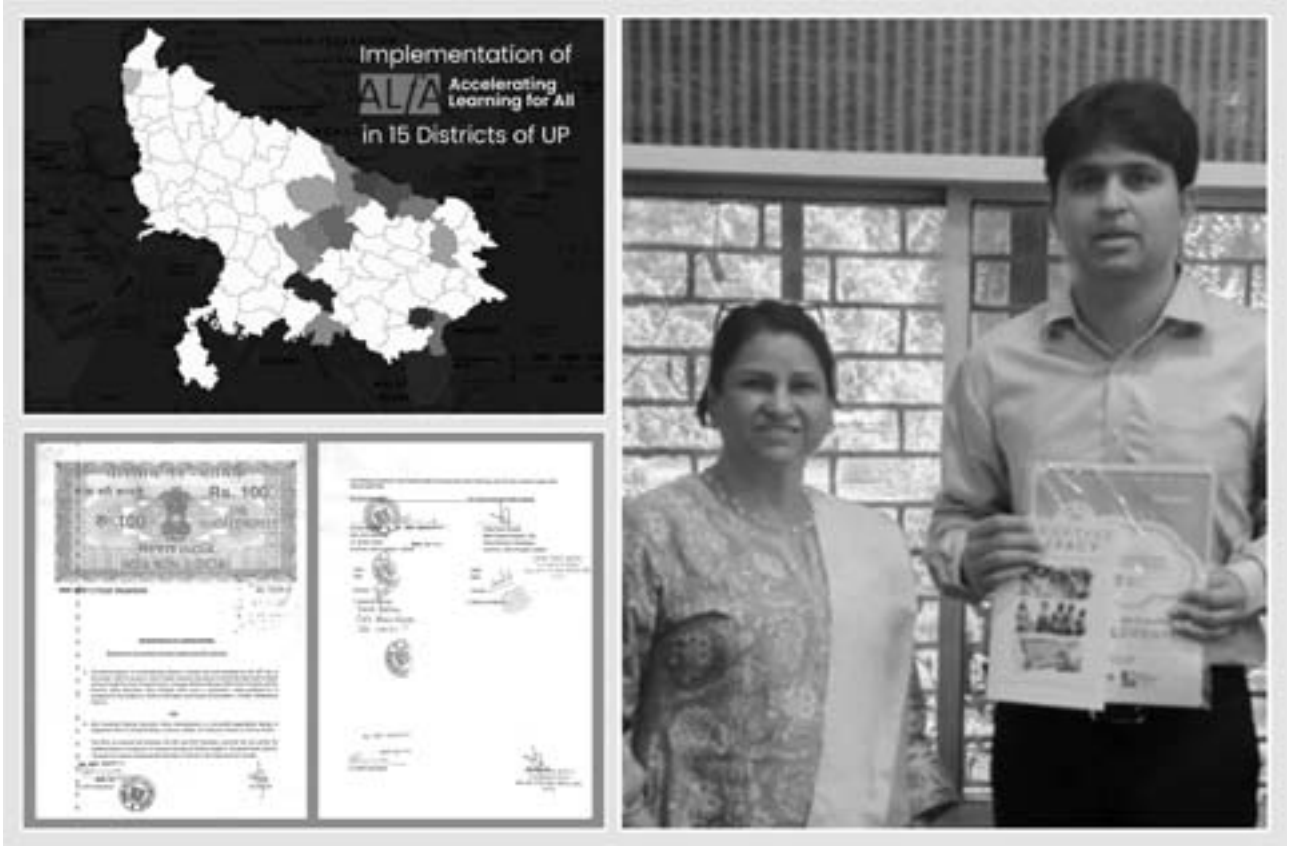
⁶Bright Hub Education. 2008. The Pros and Cons of Ability Grouping. <https://www.brighthubeducation.com/classroom-management/19620-pros-and-cons-of-ability-grouping/>

⁷Hattie, John. 2018. Visible Learning. <https://visible-learning.org/hattie-ranking-influences-effect-sizes-learning-achievement/>

The Secretary, MOE, invited DEVI Sansthan in 2022 to work on FLN in two of India’s Low-Performing Districts: Sambalpur in Odisha and Shamli in Uttar Pradesh. The results from the field were so compelling that after 30-school-days, the DM Shamli asked DEVI to expand its work from 20 to 290 schools (80 of these in the control group). Within 5 months of starting implementation, DEVI Sansthan received an MOU from office of the Director-General for School Education to work in 15 of the 75 districts of Uttar Pradesh, in some 3000 schools.

In this unique approach called ALfA—Accelerating Learning for all, the children work in pairs as the entire modality for learning. They take turns to ask each other questions, decode and blend sounds to make words from the very first lesson. There is no need to learn the letters of the alphabet first – this saves a year or more. In this process, they learn 10 letters a day instead of 1 letter a week. In ten to fifteen days, the children not only master the letters in this upside-down manner and by working in pairs on their own, they also read some 400 words.

The lessons unfold easily for the children as the pedagogy is based entirely on going from known to unknown. Teachers do not need to interfere, teach, or facilitate. They need to demonstrate



Signing of MOU with Shri Vijay Kiran Anand, Director-General for School Education, UP in November 2022 to work in 15 districts of UP.

the lesson and what the children are expected to do. They prepare the environment and motivate. They act as ‘galvanisers’ to a pair-led discovery process. Children use visuals from their daily life

as provided in the modules of the ALfA booklets like bataak (known) and derive its first sound /b/ (also known). They then blend first sounds of two or more objects to make words from day one. It

is interesting to note as our research shows: The children begin to associate with the unknown sound symbols very quickly.

In numeracy, ALfA adopts a concrete-to-abstract approach: children use manipulables like ice-cream sticks and matchsticks. They make or bring their own counters: leaves, pebbles, buttons, crumpled paper balls, and develop initiative, resourcefulness, and creativity.

Three Thin Booklets to FLN—that’s all

There are three thin booklets that enable the children to quickly acquire the FLN skills: Reading (28 pages), Writing (12 pages) and Numeracy (28 pages).

The lessons are presented in half or one-page modules that are visual and easy for the children to understand by themselves. Teachers use the prompts provided at the bottom of each module to demonstrate the tasks for the pairs. Learning explodes. Children make questions for each other, and learn crucial critical thinking skills and creativity. They write more than in the traditional system. A starting point to making questions is given in the prompts. Teachers learn valuable skills on the job and learn-by-implementing change. Children learn all 6C skills by design.



It is a winning proposition when the booklets are thin. The children ask, “Is this all? We can do these in no time!” Pink book is for reading, blue for writing and green for numeracy.

Children enjoy taking responsibility for each other’s learning. One makes a question, the other answers, then they reverse roles. There is random pairing, not pairing by performance level, nor grouping by ability. Children change pairs every day to learn the 6Cs.

The ALfA process is not only more enjoyable but learning also explodes. Primary-aged children can now learn basic FLN skills in just 90 working days on average. This is the kind of speed that will ensure every child in India and worldwide is reading, writing and doing arithmetic above grade level – within weeks and months, not years.

Speed Matters Most

One wonderful official was heard saying to one of our colleagues, “Why are you in such a hurry. We have until 2026/27!” What will happen to that child today in Grade 5 who is likely to drop out in Grade 6 without requisite foundational skills today? We don’t only need all hands on the deck but we also need to disruptive new pedagogies that can demonstrate massive impact in a short time.

- Two ‘speeds’ that matter the most are:
- The speed with which children learn the FLN skills. It cannot be three to five years to learn to read and write, for example.
 - The speed with which the governments embrace the disruptive methods. Old methods that take time to deliver on FLN need to give way to the new methods in a system-wide systemic change.

It is worth quoting here at length from a World Bank report:⁸

“Without recovery measures, learning losses may grow even more after children return to school, if the curriculum and teaching do not adjust to meet students’ learning needs. As students fall further behind the curriculum, the risk grows that many will become disengaged and ultimately drop out of school... Actions that countries take in the short term—even over just the next year—could therefore make a big difference for the longer-term learning trajectory of a generation at risk. Without action, the current generation of students now risks losing \$21 trillion in lifetime earnings in present value, or the equivalent of 17 percent of today’s global GDP.”

Embracing the ‘New’

Whenever something ‘new’ comes up, the ‘experts’ dismiss it. How many innovations we use today have had their critics who dismissed them for one reason or the other?

- We need to be circumspect about:
- About ‘assuming’ what will work without evidence of its efficacy
 - About ‘historical’ claims without dramatic impact on learning levels
 - Shunning what ‘challenges’ established practices

Instead, we need to think afresh and trial the

new, just like we embraced the mobile phone and shunned the old landline phone. Mobile phones are doing a lot more than just connecting the world, they are completely changing the fundamentals of how we live.

NGOs need the opportunity to scale-up idea-in-action that are supported by evidence. A better enabling environment will truly help, for example, removal of overlapping teacher mandates, and a clearer path to scaling up those ideas that work at a district or wider level. Though they can leverage change, act as catalyst, or knowledge partners, NGOs cannot create the volume of change that a system-wide approach can create. Even the biggest NGOs in India continue to labour away as they have done for years and decades.

We need widespread change today by the acceleration of disruptive approaches to education’s transformation and measure 10x impact at the system-wide level, not 10%.

⁸World Bank. 2022. *The State of Learning Poverty: 2022 Update*. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/e52f55322528903b27f1b7e61238e416-0200022022/original/Learning-poverty-report-2022-06-21-final-V7-0-conferenceEdition.pdf>

The ALfA Program is

- **Swift and Effective**—2 periods a day for 45 school days (<9% of a year’s academic time)
- **Zero to Low cost**—Online version is free, printed version is low-cost (see Special Features below)
- **Quickly replicable in a new language**—takes just a month (currently available in 14 Indian and 15 International languages)
- **Expanding quickly**—from 20 schools to 290 schools in 1 district, to 3000 schools in 15 districts within 5 months of starting the program in UP

It took 8 years of trial and error to come with ALfA’s disruptive pedagogy by working in the slums and villages of Lucknow, leading to its first implementation in government schools by governments own teachers in 2022.

ALfA addresses:

- Gender equality
- Climate Change

ALfA’s Special Features are:

- a) Three very thin booklets 28-12-28 pages for FLN—reduces impact on climate
- b) Two children share the same set—halves the number of booklets required
- c) Schools keep the booklets—used for two or more years if maintained
- d) Workbooks are not required—saves tons of paper year after year
- e) Hands-on learning materials use recycled materials like newspaper, fallen leaves, beans, ice cream sticks—no plastic materials



Children learning FLN the ALfA Way in the Low Performing District of Sambalpur in Odisha.



These three thin booklets have the potential to make India literate and numerate in months, not years.



Two children share one book between them. Once they have understood their task is, they set aside the book and carry on with the learning with each other, taking turns to learn-by-doing.

Calls to Action

It is time to shift the focus towards outcomes – ensuring that all children learn the foundational skills – and help teachers adopt innovative approaches that accelerate learning for all. The program is available in 14 Indian and another 15 International languages including Swahili, French, Arabic and Spanish. The ALfA Toolkits can be replicated into any language within a month. We invite governments at all levels to implement:

Call to Action 1:
“Beyond-FLN-in-45-Days” Challenge
Using the 45*45 approach to ALfA’s implementation below, government schools have been going beyond NIPUN goals in 45-school-days for Kindergarten (Balvatika) to Grade 5. In another 45-school-days, the children have completed their textbooks.

- **45 minutes per day:** Spend just one period a day on either of literacy and numeracy, or two periods a day for both literacy and numeracy
- **45 instructional days:** Implement for 45 instructional days (with training and pre-test prior to implementation and a post-test after 45 days)

This may be implemented in a smaller or larger geography, at district levels, or as system-wide systemic reform at the State level. In UP, for

example, we grew in less than 5 months from 10 implementation + 10 control schools in mid-August to 290 (210+80) schools by 10 October, and from 290 schools in 1 district to an MOU with UP to work in 3000 schools in 15 districts by 20 November. DEVI already began with its 45-Day Challenge in three of the 15 districts of UP allocated to it, starting with training on 23 and 24 January 2023 near the end of the school year. The stakes in implementing ALfA are low. Two periods per day for 45 days represents just 9% of a year’s academic time (2 periods per day out of 6, 45 days out of 180). This minimal time investment can leverage the remaining 90% plus of learning at any level of implementation. In another 45 days, and often in less time, the children complete with greater understanding their own textbooks. They work in pairs and make questions for each other. They learn the 6C skills of the 21st Century: Collaboration, Communication, Creativity, Critical Thinking, Character and Citizenship.

In another 45 days after ALfA’s implementation in Shamli, for example, not only did attendance improve, but many teachers also completed their entire year’s coursework over the next 45 days—in 90-school-days, or half the time they would have taken over a year (*Watch video ‘Beyond NIPUN Goals in 45 Days’ and other evidence and testimonies on www.YouTube.com/links*).

Call to Action 2: Massive Open Online Training— MOOT



3957 government teachers of Balvatika to Grade 5 being trained by DEVI Sansthan to carry out one-of-its-kind door-to-door literacy survey of 396,000 households covering 1.5 million 6–60-year-olds in 2015. This led to mainstreaming of 10,000 children, publishing of two policy reports and a research article in Illiteracy Inequalities in Economic and Political Weekly of India

Tom Delaney, DEVI Volunteer and Trainer, fielding questions from the trainees at the two-day teacher empowerment of teachers from three districts of UP 23-24 January, 2023.





It's literacy hands-on learning-by-doing. Teachers were engaged and empowered by the recent most training in January 2023. Immediately following the training, most of them have started to work with ALfA in their classes from the next day onwards.

Transforming teacher belief and practice are both important. DEVI Sansthan has developed a one-day free online training program for the training of the nation's teachers on a massive scale, and also teachers from across the world.

DEVI Sansthan has launched Massive Open

Online Training in 2023. An open online course was provided to 1500 school heads, MOE staff and teachers of the Maldives at the end of September 2022 as a pre-cursor to the MOOT launch in 2023. We also trained 1200 teachers of three districts in UP on 23 and 24 January, 2023, to develop a large-scale model of teaching. Our

First MOOT will be launched in February 2023.

Besides MOOT, a MOOC—Massive Open Online Course for teachers is underway for learning in asynchronous mode in their own time. We are seeking partners for this development.



Honouring of Shri Ravindra Kumar Baliyan, Headmaster, PS Kairi, Shamli, and Shri Arvind Kumar Baliyan, Teacher, Grade 2, also from PS Kairi by Shri Alok Ranjan, Former Chief Secretary, Uttar Pradesh, 24 January 2023.



A 78-member delegation of school heads and MOE staff from the Republic of Maldives in India studying the ALfA pedagogy hands-on, September 2022.

Training methodology includes empowerment in new and advanced processes of ALfA FLN implementation that the teachers can put to use immediately. It will empower teachers with a free online dashboard along with resources and processes they can use right-away to improve FLN levels.

DEVI Sansthan invites all governments to sign up for the free MOOT:

- a) All teachers of Balvatika to Grade 5 at government and budget private schools
- b) Principals and School Heads
- c) Government Middle-Level Managers like BSAs, SRGs, DCs, ARPs, BEOs, BRCCs, and others

India can reach NIPUN goals within 2023. Reach out today to work together for a fully literate India within months, not years. We look forward to our partnership.

Dr Sunita Gandhi
Founder-CEO, DEVI Sansthan, India
Former Economist, The World Bank, USA
PhD (Physics), Cambridge University, UK
Chief Academic Advisor, City Montessori School
(world's largest school)

sunitag@dignityeducation.org

About DEVI Sansthan

DEVI Sansthan, based in Lucknow, UP, works on FLN both nationally and internationally. DEVI started its work on literacy in 2014 by creating its first Global Dream Toolkit which allowed a volunteer student as young as ten, to adopt a learner of any age and teach them to read within a month. Over 500,000 student volunteers from across India used the toolkits to teach someone (in 13 Indian languages before the Covid). During the Covid years, DEVI developed two important Ed-Tech solutions—the Pragati and the Literacy Now Apps.

In India, since 2022 DEVI Sansthan has been working with government schools in UP, Odisha, and Mizoram, and on women and adult literacy with foundations in West Bengal and UP.

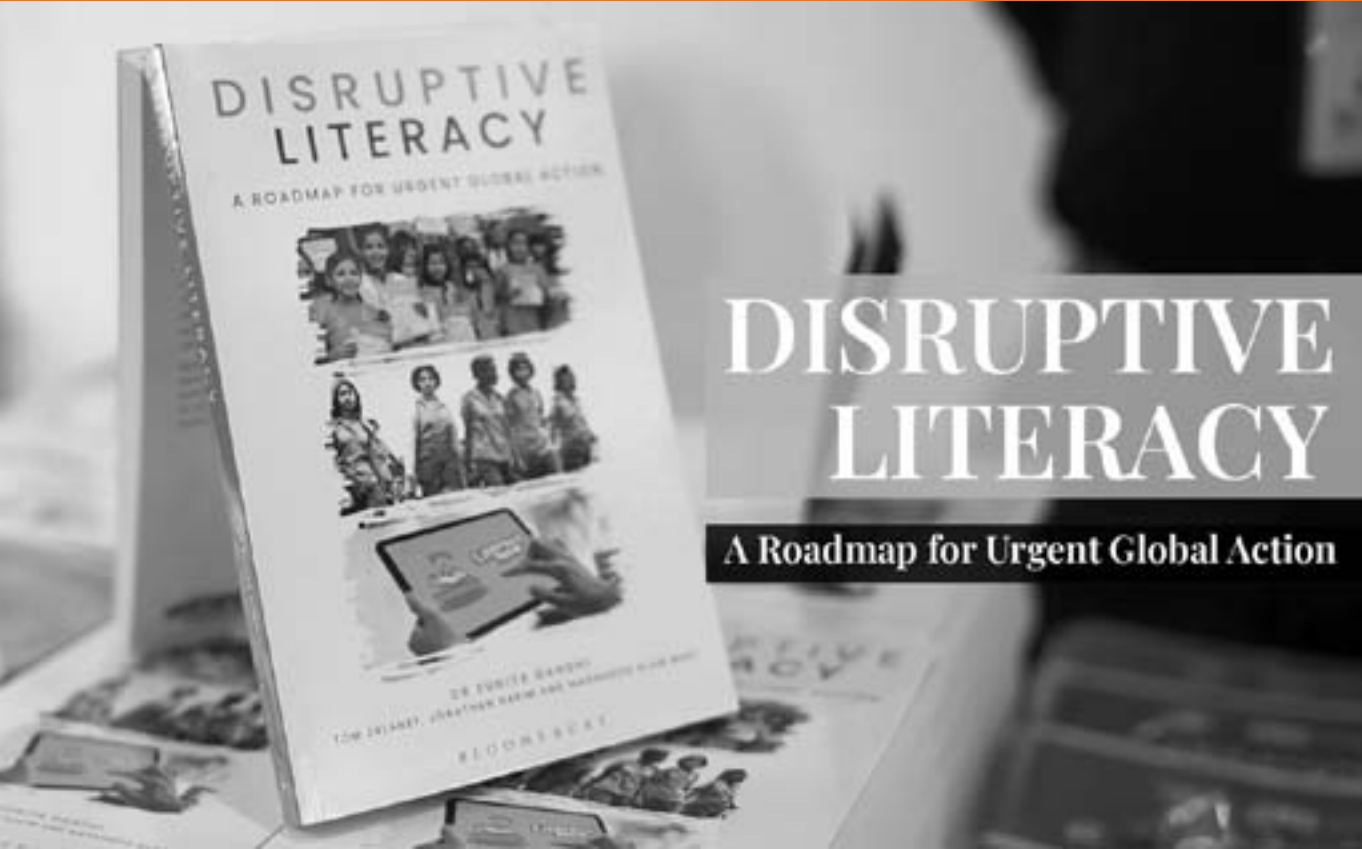
Internationally, DEVI has been working since 2022 at FLN implementation system-wide national level in the Maldives, and at pilot levels in several countries.

In July 2022, DEVI Sansthan held a Synergy Summit in Delhi for Stakeholders in FLN.

www.dignityeducation.org/links
+91 740 840 6000
info@dignityeducation.org



A private school student volunteer (on the right) teaching a child from a nearby slum. Children have been provided uniforms and lunch. They are learning literacy skills using the mobile app supported by SBI Foundation.



DEVI Founder and members also launched: Disruptive Literacy: A Roadmap for Urgent Global Action, published by Bloomsbury, India, July 2022.

The Good Sight

C #83 Aliganj, Lucknow - 226024, India

asit@thegoodsight.org, contact@thegoodsight.org
522-2974696, 9631014408