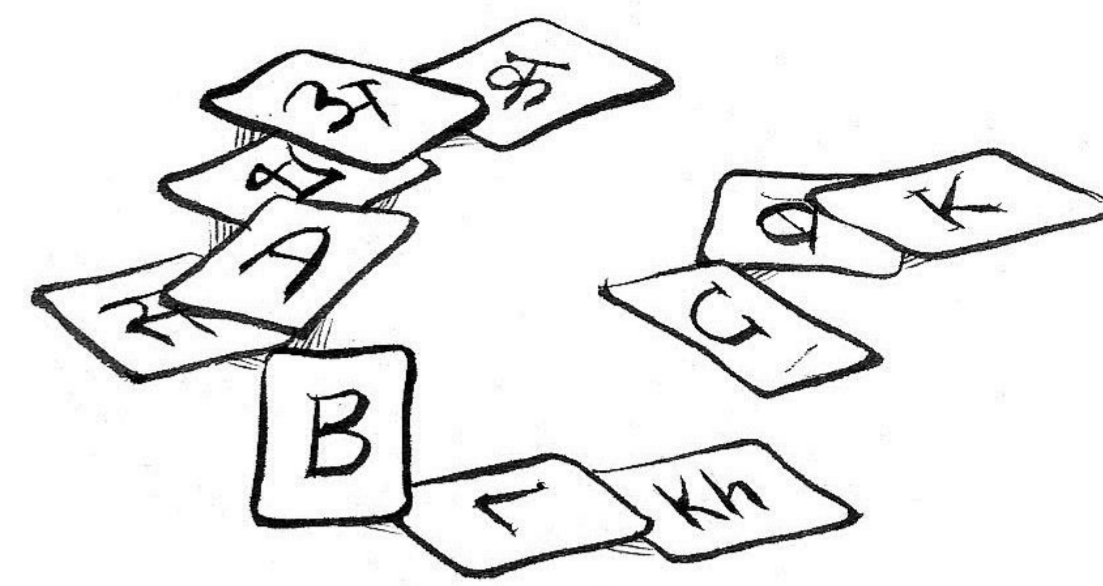




Teaching of Reading in Indian Schools A Culturally Embedded Practice

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1. The Indian Context

The majority of children in India attend state schools. The reading proficiency of children attending these schools has been a matter of much concern with studies attesting to poor proficiency levels in the primary grades (Grades 1-5; ages 6-11), year after year. The Annual Status of Education Report 2013 states that only 32% of Grade 3 children can read a Grade 1 text and the situation is similar in Grade 5 where only 41% of the children can read a Grade 3 text.

Researchers suggest that the problem may lie in the way reading is taught in school. They state that the teaching of reading in Grades 1 and 2 emphasise decoding of letters. Furthermore, children are not expected to engage with meaningful texts (e.g., stories) through this process. As a result, the task lacks meaning and remains unengaging for children.

2. The Research Focus

This study viewed the teacher as a part of a larger system of schooling and society. Consequently, it explored how a teacher's beliefs about the teaching of reading was shaped by both her beliefs about teaching methods and also the social and cultural context that she was a part of.

3. The Participants

Data was collected from two teachers teaching in an urban, Hindi-medium state school catering to children from a slum habitation. One of the teachers was teaching Grade 3 and the other Grade 5. Both teachers had been teaching for more than 10 years and had taught all primary grades over this period. Both also held post graduate degrees and had obtained degrees of teacher education while they were teaching at the school.

4. The Methods

The study used qualitative methods of data collection: semi-structured interviews and unstructured classroom observations. These methods allowed for open-ended data collection and aided in exploration of the teacher's beliefs. The data was analysed by generating, analysing and reporting patterns or themes within the data.

5. The Findings

Concurring with previous research, this study found that that teachers emphasised decoding of letters to the detriment of meaning while teaching reading. It further added that even in Grades 3 and 5, when children were expected to engage with texts, they were not encouraged to comprehend text meaning independently. The reasons for this were found to be not only in terms of teachers' belief in decoding based teaching methods but also in how they envisaged their role within a culture of schooling where:

- they are the knowledge-givers;
- they are expected to prepare children for examinations;
- the Hindi used in the textbook is very different from the Hindi spoken by them at home;
- children's inability to read is located within their impoverished background.

These findings have implications for not only teacher practice but also for the practice of teacher educators, textbook developers and policy makers in India, and are presented below through the teachers' own voices.

Children do not need to engage with the meaning of the text while reading because, we are the knowledge givers in the classroom and it is our job to explain the meaning of the text to children.



We have to bring the children to the examination standard. This means that we have to spend lots of class-time on helping children memorise the answers to the questions in the textbooks as these are what they will be required to reproduce in the exams. Library time where children read on their own is not quite as important as this.

The Hindi used in the textbook is more formal than the Hindi spoken by children at home. So we read these lessons to children and also explain their meaning to them.

This course is difficult for these children. Their parents are poor and uneducated and do not provide the children with a conducive environment for study. And so, many children are not able to comprehend the meaning of what they are reading.