

Comment on the Class 5 M.P. State Textbook for the English subject

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The present system of education even in the primary classes is driven by a book-based examination system, and a defined rigour in the chapters to be 'completed' in prescribed time-periods. There is no scope for the teacher to work independently, and use books and stories other than that prescribed from the school management (in private schools) or the state (in the government schools). This makes it more important for us to have quality textbooks, textbooks that are conducive for learning. However, the M.P. state class 5 textbook has failed on different counts of what kinds of text and exercises should be done for teaching English to children who come from adivasi, dalit and marginalized backgrounds.

The specific book under discussion has the first two pages describing the objectives and features of the book. These are fairly soundly put - learning a language in a familiar and contextual manner, exposing the learners to a new language in a simple and communicative way, listening, speaking, reading and writing in a sequential manner. It is also specifically mentioned that the book is designed for the first generation learners. It also, in the introduction, recognizes that the teachers are also unfamiliar to the language.

The article discusses how the sixteen chapters of this book are not really appropriate for children.

Content

The first chapter is a thanksgiving prayer to God. In addition to the things provided by nature, the second paragraph delves into the home, food, clothes, books that God has given the child. On one hand, it is fair enough to expect everyone to be thankful, but it needs to be considered why one inculcates a faith in a God

as a giver. Religion is deeply ingrained in every part of society, but should not be reinforced through the education system. Moreover, majority of children coming to government schools are working themselves to support their families; they live in houses that are continuously under threat of eviction, and have been displaced. Their houses leak with the rain water, and do not have books to read at home or in schools. They often stay hungry or only have a maize gruel to eat. More than half are malnourished. A thanksgiving prayer is a middle class idea.

The third chapter is about a visit to the headstart centre where children are taken to a jan shiksha Kendra and children learn language on a computer; It is foolish for the Rajya Shiksha Kendra to assume that just because this chapter is introduced in the book, it would actually imply that it is being implemented. The chapter goes into a discussion into which subjects they learnt on the computer and what would they be learning the next week. If the purpose of introducing this chapter is to tell children that there are multimedia lessons in a computer, one needs to question why is it being done through a book. Otherwise, in the end, it only becomes a complicated answer to learn. Or if the purpose is to discuss things that are happening in a child's life through the school, then we need to be more realistic and draw from simpler incidents of school-life. It could have been a chapter on what all one saw on the way to school, about a teacher getting angry with a child in school, about the children sitting quietly or wanting to play.

The seventh chapter discusses what entrance examinations one needs to pass to become an engineer or a doctor and what do engineers do. This chapter appears to convey a message that all the children in the system should know that they have to prepare for a PET and a PMT. With less than an average of four years of schooling for the children in the country, what would be the use

of this information? Children do not come to school for a futuristic purpose, and vague ideas that 'education will help you in life' or 'becoming a doctor or an engineer' is very alien for young children. The present experience in school needs to be energizing and encouraging for the child to want to come; if schools are able to provide a sense of achievement driven from a feeling of having learnt something new, children would want to come. It is not a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, but the everyday experiences in school that determine if 'education' is useful or useless.

The twelfth chapter is a poem on spring and how lilies, pansies and daffodils are blooming. The chapter only brings with it a workload of remembering the names and spellings of flowers which one has not seen, and unlikely that the teacher can describe what they look like.

The thirteenth chapter titled 'We all make mistakes' is a lesson on what are the months called, and the number of days in a month, quarter past ten, quarter to ten, half past ten etc. The chapter carries its name from one small part of the story where the child refers to a 'watch' as a 'clock'. The chapter ends suddenly with the narrator needing to finish his lecture on seconds in a minute, minutes in an hour, day, etc. and which months have how many days, by saying that he needs to catch a train at half past ten and should hurry. Another chapter is a discussion on what common nouns and proper nouns are.

Learning how to say the time in English and to know which months have how many days, understanding about nouns is definitely relevant, but the methodology of introducing this is problematic. The chapter is a theoretical discussion on the issue. The problems with such chapters are obvious; the grammar needs to be derived from use and also introduced as a concept.

Also, in teaching a new language, one needs to refrain from testing general knowledge and situations that need to be mugged up. It is simply about comprehension and expression. Comprehending becomes easier when it is associated with what happens in a usual situation. 'Familiarity' or 'daily life situations' are the experiences of everyday and these are related to feelings and people one knows or could associate with.

The meaning of a story can be stretched to accommodate three lessons (out of the 16) to qualify as a 'story'. These are the lessons of a girl saving the trees from being cut, Swami Vivekananda '*facing the problem*' of a monkey menace, and Prince Siddhartha being the '*saviour*' of a wounded swan.

Another notable feature across the book is that it appears that the book-writers feel that if any concept is introduced through a dialogue method, and the children are made the participants in the discussion, it would be acceptable. It needs to be understood that for teaching a language, concepts should not be planted as a conversation between children, but the real conversations of children need to be incorporated into the textbook.

It is natural that because of the differences of living conditions, family traditions, social fabric, geographic places, there cannot be a single book which will incorporate all of these, or would be contextual for all the children studying in the government schools. However a book can overcome these challenges to a large extent through introducing interesting stories in the book and drawing on the similarities of the lives of children using these books. The characters and locations may be different but feelings and desires would be common. The book could be enriched by including stories of lives of children of different communities.

The lessons are filled with many complicated sentences (e.g. *'Lal Bahadur Shastri, commonly called 'Babuji' within his family, was known for his simplicity, honesty, determination and patriotism', This is in response to your recent letter, in which you wanted to get a detailed account of Diwali and Eid celebrations'*... These require one to re-work on the content and also present it in a more understandable manner. If this effort is not being seen at the state level with qualified experts, it is far from possible at the school level.

Teaching children cannot be taken lightly because we are influencing what the children think. Putting together a prescribed textbook becomes much more of a responsibility because it is influencing a much larger group of people (i.e. the teachers as well as the children). State textbooks are largely used in government schools, and the children coming to these schools are typically from families who cannot afford even the fees of Rs. 80 per month to go to small private schools. But the society through the education system, continues to reinforce certain ways of life that are considered acceptable. These are reflective of the middle class and the higher income groups.

The book also needs to be evaluated in reference to the messages being transmitted through the content. *'He gave a befitting reply to Pakistan's invasion of India in 1965'; 'We got our houses whitewashed on diwali. Everyone put on new clothes. We ate sweets and let off fireworks' and 'My dear students, besides these (engineer, doctor, teacher) professions there are so many other good and challenging services as well. We'll discuss about them sometime later'*.

What does a country's independence mean for the children reading these books, are they really free, how one understands freedom, and is it equated to being allowed to vote once in five years. Is having others do our work by getting someone to whitewash for us or being able to buy clothes the only way one lives. Does the book provide space for the children to feel okay that they were not able to buy clothes this diwali because a sibling had fallen ill and all the saved money had been spent in the treatment? The fact is that the entire atmosphere of schools as well as the textbook is alienating for the children.

Even if the children are not from impoverished backgrounds, the assumptions of patriotism implying adherence to a specific geographic boundary and intolerance for the others, violence over resources, women's roles in society, the sanctity of a 'family' and role models of people being either engineers or doctors need to be broken.

Exercises in the book

The question-answer sessions are not conducive for the child to express oneself. They are sometimes irrelevant also – *'Into how many groups were the children divided? Who was the fourth boy in the second row? Who accompanied them?'* Other question-answers are complicated and is not needed for the level of a class 5 child. It is unlikely that even the teachers are able to answer the questions in the correct English without referring to the book – *'What training is necessary for a teacher, What is a multimedia lesson, How did the monkeys on the ghats feed, etc.'*. The questions expect the child to write out a full grammatically sound sentence – *'One must have a diploma in education or a degree in education to become a teacher.'* *'A multimedia lesson is a lesson on the computer with audio-visual effects' is the smallest correct answer.'* *'The monkeys fed on the fruits and cereals brought by the devotees'*.

It is not that the answers are particularly long, but they require an understanding of grammatical concepts and also a vocabulary which has not been built through the previous classes. Understanding the question and then answering in a few words or making a simple sentence is the most a child should be expected at this level.

There is a question on 'what do you learn from this story/poem' at the end of several chapters. Different papers by progressive educationists have put forth the view that children do not need to be asked what they have learnt; this is an artificial way of transmitting values, and never goes far. Stories are a method of enhancing one's imagination, connecting to another world, another place, associating with the emotions of the different characters and their lives.

In the section on matching words and meanings, the meanings are more complicated than the words themselves and then one wonders what the real purpose of this exercise is.

Worried – to keep thinking about unpleasant things

Sharpen – to make something sharpen

Equally – to the same degree

Remember – to keep an important fact in your mind

'Let's Read' is another section within each lesson. This has been introduced to provide additional reading materials for children, but it is also bogged with similar problems as in the main chapters.

Conclusion

The experiences of children in government schools of Bhopal, show that more than three-fourths children (in class five) only know the alphabet in a sequential manner (in English subject). Even though the children are able to write down answers copying from the board, they are actually not equipped enough to make small words on their own. There is no doubt that by and large, the situation of teachers and children in the schools of rural and tribal blocks is much worse.

Class 5 is also a benchmark for children, and provides entry to middle school education. Many children who are out of the mainstream system also appear for class 5 examination as a private candidate. Even if children do not fail (through some tactic used to negotiate through the complexities of the book or as is often the case, the teachers helping out the children during the examination), it definitely does not leave the children with additional language skills.

It is therefore important to ensure that the teaching learning process is made interesting and relevant for the children, and does not end in becoming a method of excluding children. The specific class 5 book needs to be reviewed and designed with a spirit of innovation with an effort towards understanding the children these books are meant for. But the methodology of learning an unfamiliar language needs to be reflected in the textbooks from class one, with a focus on appropriateness in content, exercises for listening and speaking, and building the language as a tool of expression.