



Nali Kali: Enabling for learning: Can more be done?

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We all have an image of what a classroom looks like. It could be based on how we were taught, the classrooms our children may be in, or classrooms that we may be teaching in ourselves. In most cases, this classroom has a teacher talking with a group of children, who may be 25 to 50 in number. There is a blackboard, books and worksheets, and colourful charts and material on the walls, if the children are 'lucky'. The government school version of this is expected to be similar, and in most cases, drabber. But lower primary classrooms in Karnataka government schools, and in fact, many other states, such as Tamil Nadu, Chattisgarh etc. no longer look like this. They follow a multi-grade, multi-level activity based learning program, which is similar to a Montessori approach in many ways. In Karnataka, this program is called Nali Kali. This article is based on a four year evaluation of Nali Kali, carried out jointly by Prof Anjini Kochar, Stanford University, Catalyst Management Services, and Azim Premji Foundation. It was funded by Hewlett Foundation and Azim Premji Foundation.

Government schools across the country face multiple challenges. One of them is the teacher-pupil ratio. There is now a norm of 30 students to one teacher for all lower primary schools in the country. There is also a norm of a primary school within 1 km of every habitation, and an effort to do away with single teacher schools. These norms, while largely implemented, create peculiar situations. Many rural primary schools

are small, with not enough students to warrant one teacher for each grade. Therefore, teachers have to teach multiple classes or grades at the same time. There may also be cases of sanctioned posts being empty, or teachers being absent, which makes multi-grade teaching necessary. Students too are at different levels of learning. This is not a challenge limited to rural or primary government schools. It is an inherent feature of teaching and learning. However, this problem may be worse for certain communities where children are not regular for socio-economic, cultural and religious reasons. They may be absent for long periods of time, and when they come back, they may be lost if the class has progressed too far ahead. Many children, and schools, neither have the resources to get extra help and 'catch up' or to ensure regular attendance. Therefore, teachers need to also teach to many different levels in a class, in addition to teaching different grades. Finally, schools often are alienating to students. Students, especially first generation school goers who have not completely 'bought in' to the idea of schooling, may not be that keen to participate if the school is unknown, irrelevant, difficult, or boring. Both research and theory also suggests that children learn better if they are interested, engaged and do activities as a way to consolidate their understanding.

The Nali Kali programme of the Government of Karnataka, aims to tackle these multiple challenges. The programme first started on a pilot

basis over 15 years ago, and was based on the RIVER method developed by Rishi Valley. In 2009-10 it was expanded to cover first and second grades of all Kannada medium primary government school. Next year, it moved to third grade as well. The Nali Kali programme has a few key features. First, students are no longer divided into grade. Students of the first, second and third grades sit together in one classroom with one teacher. Second, students have the flexibility to learn at their own pace. The entire curriculum of a grade is broken up into steps. There are specific activities associated with each step. Students learn the content through these activities, and complete the step, progressing up the ladder. Third, the students are organised into groups. At any given point of time, there can be up to five groups in a classroom, which are created to facilitate peer learning. The teacher works with one or two groups. The students in the other groups either collaborate to learn from each other, or work independently to assess their current level. Students in a peer learning group may be at different steps in the ladder, as well as from different grades. They are, however, working on a common theme or content area. The activities that each child does are different and,

tailored to the specific level and grade. Fourth, the pedagogical focus is on learning by doing. Textbooks have a minimal role in Nali Kali classes and are used primarily for revision and reading practice. The activities are described on cards, which are associated with each step of the ladder. The students are largely expected to be self-driven in carrying out the activities.

We conducted a four-year study on the Nali Kali programme, to assess its effectiveness in improving children's learning. We also looked at non-cognitive outcomes such as social skills, communication, leadership skills etc. We studied the classroom processes which give rise to these outcomes, and assessed teachers' understanding of the programme. The results show that Nali Kali has a significant impact on increasing test scores, especially in language. The impact is greater for the lower grades, when they are still in the Nali Kali classes. It is driven by the acquisition of lower level competencies, that is, children when in a higher grade, end up learning more of the previous grades. There is also a significant positive impact on leadership skills.

This is a positive result, especially in the context of the low levels of learning of children in these



schools. The classroom observations and conversations with the teachers show that the basic mechanics are in place in most schools. That means that teachers and children have adapted to the new way of organising the classroom, and the change in the teacher-student relationship that comes with it. Students are fairly comfortable with locating their current level, identifying the activity that they need to do in class, and getting into their group. This indicates a certain ownership of the process of learning, and their involvement in it. Teachers too, demonstrate a fairly high level of knowledge, in general about the programme, how it works, and what its key aspects are. However, teachers have a somewhat limited role in the Nali Kali programme. They are required to work closely with only one or two groups, while overseeing the work done by other groups. They no longer need to mediate the content in the text-books, as the activities are expected to be student driven. This means that, amongst other things, the teacher face-time that each student gets is very little. This 'loss' is expected to be substituted by peer and self-learning. However, our research shows that in 20% of the 'peer-learning' groups there is very little to no interaction of any kind between the students in the group. If students don't even talk, can they learn from each other? Nor is it clear how the material and teacher training has been re-devised to be facilitative, which is a higher

order skill. The idea of self-paced learning and peer-learning, which is central to Nali Kali, seems to be undertheorised. There are also some inherent contradictions in the programme, which allows for students to learn at their own pace, provided that they all reach the end point together, at the same time.

This brings us to the crucial question-what is Nali Kali enabling the children for? A more open environment in school, which does not penalise noise and promotes working with friends, is important in itself. Students are acquiring more of the basic competencies in language and maths in the first three years. But Nali Kali does not enable students enough to learn in traditional classrooms in the fourth and fifth grades. We need to think more deeply about the teacher's role in a Nali Kali classroom, and the material she needs to effectively transact that role, before the potential of Nali Kali can be fully tapped.

Summary:

The Nali Kali Programme in Karnataka is activity-based, multi-grade multi-level. Students have ownership over their learning and work at their own pace. Though there are gains in achievement, these are limited. Peer learning is not happening adequately, nor is it clear how it is supposed to work.

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