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Home Literacy Environment: A Factor in the Educational Disadvantage of Learners

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Abstract:

The children bring their academic disadvantage with them to school from home, has been a source of debate among educators and policy makers for several years. Educational disadvantage is rooted in the social and economic factors that characterize the communities and families in which children reside. In multilingual societies which are the norm in most regions of India, linguistic and cultural differences of minority groups are translated into a low level of power influencing academic achievement of minority children. And the school reflects this position when the minority children's language is viewed as a restricted code. Preliterate children are often seen as a group that has learning problems at school and thus has less chance of school success. The relationship between "home language" and "school language" is far more complex than a simple deficit in language level and the sociocultural background of a learner. Therefore, this paper attempts to list the various factors that can contribute to the disadvantage of preliterate learners. This is done by conducting interviews with a class of high school learners from one particular preliterate community in India.

To address this disadvantage it is necessary for teachers to understand the factors contributing to educational disadvantage. They need to understand the importance of the community in children's lives and be aware of the cultural and value differences which children bring into the classroom. If not specialized programs at least support is required for such learners to succeed. Finally, this paper argues for the need for teachers to practice an extended teacher role.

Key words: Home literacy environment, Preliterate learners, Disadvantage

1. Introduction

A majority of the schools in India, mostly government and some private schools have been facing a silent epidemic-year after year, one third to half or more of the primarily low-income and minority students who study there fail to complete high schooling. Of the more than 27 million children in India, who joined in Class I in 1993, only 10 million of them reached Class X, which is only about 37% of those who entered the school system.

Twenty years ago, this would not have been a crisis. It was possible for young people to secure some type of employment even if they were school dropouts. There were avenues where young adults managed to get employed even without a high school diploma. But today it is next to impossible for someone who is a school drop out to get employment.

If effective learning is to occur, it is imperative for the education system to ensure that there are no barriers that will lead to learning breakdown. The education system must be able to prevent or overcome barriers that may occur so as to promote an effective teaching and learning environment.

Though the main task of education and therefore of schools is to provide children with the skills required to be able to function as members of society; knowledge, skills and attitudes to allow children to function fully in society are also developed in the home. More knowledge, skills and attitudes can be developed in certain social environments than in others. Compensating for this inequality is a specific task of schools and of education. Thus, it is for education to try to ensure that the position that someone achieves in society does not depend only on the opportunities offered by the home context.

The children bring their academic disadvantage with them to school from home, has been a source of debate among educators and policy makers for several years. The role teachers should play in reducing academic disadvantage has also been written about many times over. In regards to minority and preliterate learners in particular, it is understood that family socioeconomic status and community conditions impact classroom performance much more than do other factors like race and gender. (Drazen, 1992; Levine & Havighurst, 1992; Thompson, 1996).

In multilingual societies which are the norm in most regions of India, linguistic and cultural differences of minority groups are translated into a low level of power influencing academic achievement of minority children. And the school reflects this position when

the minority children's language is viewed as a restricted code. Preliterate children are often seen as a group that has learning problems at school and thus has less chance of school success. Children attending government schools that have the state or regional dominant language as the medium of instruction appear to be especially vulnerable. The relationship between "home language" and "school language" is far more complex than a simple deficit in language level and the sociocultural background of a learner.

This paper attempts to list the various factors that can contribute to the disadvantage of preliterate learners belonging to one particular preliterate community in India. In conclusion it attempts to suggest measures to overcome them. However, each community is different and I can only report on what I have read and learned, so this knowledge and experience must be integrated with local facts and the characteristics of each community. Additionally I acknowledge that the academic performance of children is also related to their innate ability. The degree of individual variance in academic performance accounted for by variation in genetic factors, however, is the subject of intense debate (Sparkes, 1999). More recent research suggests that the traditional 'nature versus nurture' debate is somewhat misleading and that both a child's inherited characteristics and their environment are related and co-exist in complex and significant ways.

2. Educational Disadvantage

Disadvantage can occur due to several factors that can be located

- within the learner,
- within the centre of learning,
- within the education system and
- within the broader social, economic and political context.

Other contributing and related factors could be poverty, health unsupportive home backgrounds leading to non-attendance, family's social and demographic circumstances or socioeconomic status. In the literature, there are a number of definitions of the term educational disadvantage:

Educational disadvantage is leaving school early, without any qualifications or having failed the junior cycle examinations, or facing disabling educational problems and minimal chances of employment. According to Mortimore and Blackstone (Disadvantage and Education, 1982):

"Educational disadvantage means the denial of equal access to educational opportunities, the tendency to leave education at the first opportunity, and the hindrance of achievement by social and environmental factors".

This definition seems the most inclusive of all. It implies that students in all educational settings may experience educational disadvantage. Disadvantage may arise from a number of issues and there are a number of contributing and interrelated factors in dealing with it. Barriers can be located within the learner, within the center of learning, within the education system and within the broader social, economic and political context. These barriers manifest themselves in different ways and only become obvious when learning breakdown occurs or when learners 'drop out' of the system.

Research and experience indicates that there are four broad classes of dropouts.

- Life events- students who dropout because of something that happens outside of school – in the case of girls, they attain menarche, or boys might have to shoulder the responsibility of running the family business for example due to the ill health or death of their fathers, or may have to go to work to support the family.
- Fade Outstudents who have generally been promoted on time from grade to grade and may even have above grade level skills, but at some point become frustrated or bored and stop seeing the reason for coming to school.
- Push Outs-students who are or are perceived to be difficult, or lack attendance and are detrimental to the success of the school and are subtly or not so subtly encouraged to withdraw from the school.
- Failing to Succeed- students who fail to succeed in school as they do not seem to be getting any support from school. Initial failure could be the result of poor academic preparation; others may persist for years, only dropping out after they fall so far behind that success seems impossible.

3. Literacy

Brooks et al (2008) indicates that improved educational outcomes do not necessarily depend on the "formal" literacy levels of the parents, but the climate in which children are encouraged, given opportunities to read, provided with recognition of their attainments and subject to interaction and modeling of language and daily problem solving activities.

Literacy is an important asset required by all members of all families for everyday living. Taylor puts the proposition clearly when she says, "the seeds of school failure are planted in the home, and we cannot hope to uproot the problem by working only with schools" (Taylor, 1997, p.2).

Huntley (1992) describes four types of literacy in the first language (L1) that affect English literacy development and should be considered in ESL literacy instruction: preliterate, nonliterate, semiliterate, and non-Roman alphabet literate. Birch (2002) adds to these types nonalphabet literate. Birch and others (Strucker, 2002) add Roman alphabet literate.

Preliterate learners come from cultures where literacy is uncommon in everyday life because the language is not written, has only recently been written, or is being developed. For example, most Lambada people of Andhra Pradesh in India, the Hmong and Patkars, are preliterate because these languages have not been codified. Preliterate learners generally progress slowly in literacy and other language instruction and require re-teaching of skills and concepts (Robson, 1982; Strucker, 2002).

Studies have demonstrated the importance of literacy in the first language for students' full development of proficiency in the language of instruction and subsequent academic success. (Collier, 1992; Hakuta, 1986; Snow, 1990). Furthermore, studies have consistently indicated that academic and linguistic skills transfer to the second language, even in the case of languages with dissimilar writing systems (Au, 1993; Cummins, 1991; Ovando & Collier, 1998). Learners who are preliterate can vary widely in their experience of literacy, and these different experiences may influence their approach to language and literacy learning. Those who are from literate cultures but who have not had opportunities for education themselves are often more aware of the powerful role of literacy in the community than those from cultures whose language does not have a written form. This translates into different beliefs about the importance of literacy skills, and their role in facilitating participation in community life.

4. Research Method

The participants of the current study comprised 70 students from the the Patkar community which is a preliterate community concentrated in the districts bordering Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra.

These students were enrolled in two different schools in Hubli in the state of Karnataka in India. These schools were chosen as a majority of students studying in these schools were from the Patkar community. In both the schools the students managed to reach class nine. But there was a large dropout rate in class ten or after.

To assess their proficiency, participants were made to write essays in English and in the state language Kannada. Personal interviews were used to measure home literacy practices and to verify the degree of association and prediction between literacy practices at home and writing competence in English and in the regional language, Kannada. These interviews were designed to gather more detailed information to illustrate the literacy practices in the participants' homes and illustrated in some detail the range of literacy practices and helped to build a greater understanding of the participants' home literacy practices.

Questions in the Interview included knowledge and use of their home language Patkar in their home and social networks, their parents' education and occupation and literacy material at home like books and newspapers. They were also asked if they got help if needed in their homework. A total of 22 questions were asked to the students. Each of the questions in the interview explores the linguistic profile and home literacy practices of the participants. Question Nos. 1 and 2 ask about students place of birth. Question Nos. 3-6 ask about the languages learnt first and their use of language at home, school and social life. Question Nos. 7-10 look at the education of parents and their occupation. Question Nos. 11-12 investigate literacy practices at home; question No. 14-16 examine TV watching habits, home study practices of students and their motivational levels participants; question Nos. 17-18 inquire about how students would like to be taught English and if they thought English was important. When the students were interviewed, they were encouraged to use Patkar, English or to code-switch between the two in order to promote as much verbalizing of thoughts as possible. There is a high level of linguistic diversity even within a village or a district which naturally leads to diversity in schools and classrooms. If the teacher is proficient in the home languages of at least large groups of children in a classroom and is allowed to freely use the language to explain certain concepts or difficult words the teaching process helps such students. But in most contexts the school system does not make any allowance for such facilitation by teachers. Therefore, minority children, especially those from preliterate communities' face severe learning disadvantage on account of their home language.

Both the home and the school early language and literacy measures predict children's development in literacy domains. Home factors contribute more strongly, on average, than school factors. One of the strongest predictors of children's literacy development is support for literacy in the home. When low- level learners also have a preliterate background and low socioeconomic status it has a critical effect on the ability to learn. A total lack of literacy environment at home leads to short attention span, anxiety and limited concentration in formal classroom situations besides having an impact on self-esteem and confidence levels.

5. Factors of Educational Disadvantage

Preliterate learners arrive at school less prepared for learning, come from households where there are fewer supports for learning or where the consequences of not learning are not as well appreciated as they are in other households. Often, such language deficit learners who come from preliterate communities do not have access to a formal register of language at home. However, this is the standard way of speaking at school, characterized by complete sentences and specific word choice. These students may only have access to a casual register of language, where word choice is general and sentences are often incomplete. This can lead to reduced opportunities to succeed in contexts that are highly dependent on proficiency with formal register, such as the classroom.

As the interviews revealed the lower rates of parental education has been shown to be directly related to children's educational outcomes. The lack of home literacy environment does not provide children with a variety of experiences with spoken and written language interaction that support school readiness.

Opportunities for intellectual development are a result of social interaction and language is an important tool in the process of learning to think. When learners from preliterate communities have limited opportunity to learn language, organize perceptions and develop higher order cognitive processes; their ability to think independently is negatively affected.

The importance of parental literacy practices and the complex milieu of environmental factors, including use of media, both print and visual that impact learner's language development was borne out in this study. 90% of the learners were living in homes where there was a total lack of literacy practices. It is proved that along with parental literacy both social and cultural practices are linked with positive educational or academic outcomes implying language knowledge and literacy development.

Though some kinds of literacy practices are engaged in by almost all communities other kinds of involvement in literacy activity are not nearly as widespread. For example, in the Patkar community that was interviewed about 90% of the learners indicated that their

parents never read books, and that there was no reading material available in their homes other than their own text books. Likewise when asked about their mathematical or numeracy skills, over 40% of the learners said that their skills were moderate to good. Therefore it was true that in the case of most of the Patkar community families studied, a lack of a literate environment resulted in the absence of one kind of literacy activity being associated with involvement in other kinds of literacy activities. However it has to be mentioned that though this was true of most Patkar families there were instances where a better socio-economic environment lead to better literacy practices.

Numeracy is very important in today's society, particularly when it comes to financial literacy. Especially for a community like the Patkars who are basically a business community numeracy skills seem to be at a more advanced stage than any other form of literacy like reading, writing or oral, visual literacy practices. To the question 'Do your parents know numbers and counting' most of the respondents replied that their father could count and most of the mothers also could. Dealing with family finances is the most frequent family literacy activity. Irrespective of economic status numeracy literacy skills seem better. As compared to numeracy literacy other reading and writing literacy skills seem lower. There was no practice of reading newspapers or magazines at home. 'Reading for pleasure' was unheard of in almost all the participant's homes. Both availability and usage of the internet at home was also rare.

Text messaging is a part of everyday life nowadays and as such an important literacy tool. Even though almost every learner reported mobile phone usage at home, sending text messages was very rare, emphasizing the fact that writing practices were very rare at home even when opportunities were available for the same.

While the current findings imply that students from some preliterate cultures fare poorly in academics at school, it does not confirm their positioning as educational failures. There are several examples to prove the success in business of boys who are drop outs in school.

For preliterate students whose home language is different from the school medium of instruction there is a lack of bridging mechanisms to enable a smooth transition. Such students attend school less regularly and there is a high dropout rate. Learning outcomes for such students are not equal with learners whose L1 (Home language) is taught in school even as a second language. These differences increase as they move to higher grades and they are unable to perform at board exams. This failure often leads to push out or drop out from school.

Another serious barrier to learning and development can be found within the curriculum itself and relates primarily to the inflexible nature of the curriculum which prevents it from meeting diverse needs among learners. When learners are unable to access the curriculum, learning breakdown occurs. If the learner perceives that what is taught is inappropriate to his/her life situation s/he is not likely to be intrinsically motivated contributing to learning breakdown. Materials used for teaching and learning which constantly reflect only one culture or life experience, may lead to learners from other cultures and life experiences feeling excluded

Educational performance has been strongly linked with language development. In preliterate homes where children barely hear the language of the school there is very less verbal interaction which can be linked to cognitive deficit. Slow language development can impair later comprehension and learning, even the acquisition of numeracy (Clegg and Ginsborg, 2006).

Students can be best supported in their learning if links are made between the learning environment of the home and school. The active involvement of parents and the broader community in the teaching and learning process is central to effective learning and development. However, preliterate students' home cultures differ significantly from the culture of their teachers and school.

6. Conclusion

Because dropping out is influenced by both individual and institutional factors, intervention strategies can focus on either or both sets of factors. That is, intervention strategies can focus on addressing the individual values, attitudes, and behaviors that are associated with dropping out without attempting to alter the characteristics of families, schools, and communities that may contribute to those individual factors.

In multilingual societies such as India it is also necessary to maintain cultural and linguistic profiles of learners. Programs that deepen teachers' understanding of the social, cultural and gender diversity of their learners will assist schools in better providing for their communities. Thus an understanding of the complex social, cultural and gender-based relationships within society that lead to academic underachievement will assist school communities to understand the learning needs of particular groups of students.

Teachers play a vital role in enabling students to become literate and so attain the potential to become a lifelong learner. Language awareness and reading can be taught effectively. Strategies to develop language awareness and reading skills should be built into the curriculum. This could be a strategy to encourage preliterate learners to complete high school, especially when the literacy percent is dismally low i.e 11% for females and 21% for males (Venkat Rao.M, 2000) in the context of the present study.

Effective learning for these students requires mediated learning, helping students to discover their learning needs and to develop cognitive skills for effective thinking and learning. The teacher acts as a mediator, helping students to learn more deeply. Teachers have to be aware of the cultural and value differences which children bring into the classroom. They need to understand the importance of the community in children's lives and be attentive to the conflicts which can arise between school and this community. These social and cultural differences also mean pedagogy and curricula should be reconsidered.

7. References

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