

DRAFT REPORT FOR DISCUSSION ON ESSENTIAL LEVELS OF LEARNING FOR THE PRIMARY CLASSES BY
TEACHERS' WORKING GROUP

25 February 1995

BANYAN CENTRE FOR EDUCATORS

Olcott Education Society, The Theosophical Society, Adyar, Madras 600020

THE ESSENTIAL LEVELS OF LEARNING

For the last few years, there has been a growing, informal movement against unnecessarily loading a young child at school. The first voice that created an impact was that of Mr. R.K. Narayan, the writer, who gave the image of the 'burdened child' to the country, by speaking about it in Parliament. The response to his speech was tremendous. The Press was flooded with articles and letters. The issue was debated in various gatherings. Taking cognisance of this wide ranging response, the Department of Education, Government of India, set up a National Advisory Committee with Professor Yash Pal as its chairman "to suggest ways and means to reduce the academic burden on school students". The report 'Learning Without Burden' was the outcome. It was ready in July 1993, and was distributed in late '93 and thereafter.

Banyan, Centre for Educators, on looking into the Report, realised that critical core issues pertaining to the present school system had been taken up by the Advisory Committee. Banyan felt that the Report should be widely disseminated, so that some changes can start to happen within individual schools. Where changes were already taking place, the report could substantiate, support and give direction.

Most reports, Banyan felt, come and go without educators, teachers or heads of institutions having a free or easy access to them; much less do the educators have an opportunity to act on them within their individual, particular context. The Yash Pal Report, as it is widely known today, definitely deserved better reception. It need attention from the education community, as it offered scope for educators to change things within their own specific force field-- be it the classroom, the textbook, a section of the school or a cluster of schools.

Towards this end, Banyan organised, in September 1994, an Invitation Seminar for Principals, Heads of Primary Sections and leading educators in Madras to explore the extent of their agreement with the issues raised in the Report and seek their commitment to the recommendations it made. In this Seminar, there was not only general appreciation of the issues raised, but also, in specific terms, action points both for individual schools and for the group were discussed.

The first initiative was the setting up of a Working Group of teachers from the participating schools to look at the document, Minimum Levels of Learning (MLL), brought out by NCERT and to explore whether this document could be used to arrive at essential levels of learning in the Primary School. The Invitation Seminar had been informed by Professor Lalitha of DTERT, Tamil Nadu, of the work already started by the Government of Tamil Nadu and UNICEF in Government schools.

Banyan invited Mr. G. Ananthapadmanabhan, teacher at The School- KFI, to be the resource person to head the Working Group on MLL. The Group worked enthusiastically at exploring MLL and has arrived at the essential learning outcomes within a life context for a student leaving class 5. Within the short time they had, about five meetings from November 1994 to February 1995, the Group has done some marvellous work. The teachers, after each meeting, have tried out the ideas in their own classes with the children and reset tasks for themselves at every meeting.

The short document, which the Working Group has come out with, seems to be path breaking in some ways. There is here no plethora of concepts, skills, attitudes and so on; there is only an outlining of fundamental learnings, which can be tested by the teacher and the parent alike. What is unique about this document is that it has captured the principle of minimalism (as in Japanese art). There is no 'noise' to disturb it; it simply outlines the bare essentials of learning. However, if need arises, further work can be done on it after its presentation to a wider group.

Banyan would like to thank each member teacher and the participating schools for their contribution. A special thanks has to be given to Mr. G. Ananthapadmanabhan, who led the group to move towards arriving at the essential expectations from a primary school student. Banyan would like to acknowledge the help given by UNICEF Madras Field Office and Mrs. Khin Sandi Lwin for making available copies of the report 'Learning Without Burden' and also copies of the MLL books. Banyan would like to thank The School (Krishnamurti Foundation India) for making available their premises for the working group meetings.

The MLL exercise by the Working Group has been one of the group initiatives of Banyan which has really worked. It is now upto the individual schools and other educators to discuss what the Group has prepared and see it as a beginning for reducing the burden of the child in school.

AMUKTA MAHAPATRA February 25, 1995

Member, Executive Committee

BANYAN, Centre for Educators

INTRODUCTION

In our country, educational objectives are almost never set by that group of people who are in intimate contact with the recipients of education: the teachers. In a rather welcome departure from this tradition, a group of primary school teachers from more than a dozen schools spent over 30 hours meeting and formulating a curriculum for primary schools that will simultaneously set clear, attainable, measurable, student centred standards and greatly reduce the burden on the young child.

During these meetings, the group found a few 'sutras' which guided its work and gave it great clarity and direction. Whenever there was a temporary ebb in the flow of thoughts, these 'sutras' bailed the group out and gave the work new directions. So my introduction to the group's work revolves around these

Even greater than the gravitational burden of the school bag is the burden of incomprehension (Yash Pal Committee report)

Sad as the sight of little children walking to school, backs bent under the load of books may be, it is far sadder to see them in their classrooms with tired faces, bored expressions and a fear of being themselves. For many children and in my (personal, unsubstantiated) opinion, for most, what they do at school in the name of learning is an incomprehensible, strange and oppressive ritual. Children cope with it sensibly by learning the rules of survival: to do as they are told, to nod their heads appropriately, not to bother to make 'sense' of anything and to try hard to do well in tests by 'hearting' as much as they can.

By the time children reach middle school, they are ready and well trained for 'schooling' and very poorly equipped for learning.

The Foundation looks and is very different from the building. To use the same parameters to assess the two is absurd.

In our examinations and marks obsessed society, it is not surprising that primary school resembles the high school in its structure and processes. We find the same emphasis on written examinations, the same criterion for moving from one class to the other, the same modality of largely lecture based classes, drill etc. The malady is so deep that even creches and play schools resemble the senior school!

Primary school has its own purposes independent of preparing students for college and its own special needs to be able to work with little children. The good objective of primary school may be stated as follows:

At the end of 5 years in school, all children must possess the skills that adults are called upon to use in the non professional areas of their daily life.

Adults in the course of their non professional lives are called upon to be both literate and numerate. While the tasks that life expects of us may be simple and concrete, it requires a certain mastery of these basic skills at such a level as to be able to use these skills consistently and without hesitation, whenever they are called for. For example, to decide quickly and correctly between 3 apples for 5 rupees and 4 apples for 6 rupees, is neither worthless nor trivial.

The curriculum at the primary level must be such that its outcome in terms of student behaviour must be definable in terms of a set of tasks that children must be able to perform consistently and without hesitation, using the appropriate tools. The tasks must be so chosen that in performing them, children demonstrate (as adults do when they bargain!) both an understanding of an algorithm structure and an ability to think and vary it as the situation calls for.

All children irrespective of economic background, sex, caste, creed or IQ can attain these levels.

All schooled adults, not just the academic successes, master the literacy and numeracy skills that ordinary life calls for, though they did not do so in their 10th or 11th year. It seems to me that all children, if taught with a focus on the above objectives, can meet these in 5 years' time.

Having defined (in III) above the objective for primary education and having made a brief argument for why all children can achieve it, here is another 'sutra' that has a great deal to offer us.

A few things learnt well is much better than a lot of things learnt superficially.

In primary education today, there is an enormous confusion between means and ends. With the growing focus on teaching methodologies and the innovations in the area, schools have become very busy. Counting used to be a simple affair; the teacher made the students count! Period. Today, teachers have realised (rightly so) that counting includes among other things the ability to recall numbers before, after, in between given numbers. Books and therefore, teachers (in their effort to cover the syllabus) do separate exercises in each of these skills. So far so good. The rub is that they test these fragments rather than an overall familiarity with numbers. Their assumption is that if all these fragments are 'learnt', the whole is learnt. Apart from being false, this approach becomes a big burden on the child, who, like his teachers and parents, believes that there are many unconnected bits of knowledge that he has to acquire.

Another dimension to the burden is an all pervading belief that the earlier something is introduced, the better it is learnt. If an idea is difficult then the strategy seems to be to give the children the idea

repeatedly over many years. No attention is being paid to the fact that what is called for is preparatory work, not the idea itself.

Unburdening the student, teacher and parents hinges crucially on the ability to identify those few things that children need to learn, so that they acquire the ability to deal with the world and are ready for middle school.

It is certainly possible to define simply and briefly what all children must be able to do at the end of Class V.

One of the greatest challenges that the teachers in this working group faced was to remain focussed on what capabilities children need to develop. There was a mindset of thinking only about what teachers would do to with their classes. It was a good, interesting challenge that the group faced: to define what it means to be literate and numerate in a simple, brief yet comprehensive manner. To begin with, it was clear that children needed to learn to read, write, speak, listen and do some mathematics. The task for the group was to define these things in a way that gave the teachers clear goals for what to look for in children and to articulate these in easy, clear, ordinary language.

The group realised that caught as they were in the fragments of the syllabi and busy classroom schedules, teachers had no goals other than the completion of the syllabi. While it was clear that the syllabus was only the means to an end (everybody would agree that mastering a lesson in the English reader on Rip Van Winkle was not an end in itself) it wasn't at all clear what was the end.

To set goals for learning without parameters for measuring accurately what has been learnt, is futile.

The group discovered that testing as we have it today is too fragmentary and is based only on recall of what has been taught in the same context. So the question arises -if a child answers this question/problem, what can I as the teacher infer?

Very often, the answer to the above question is that the child has studied and has a good memory! The task of the group then was to develop parameters to evaluate appropriately the progress of the child against clear, well defined task oriented objectives. The group has attempted a definition of what children need to learn in terms of what capabilities they need to acquire.

It is necessary that children are called upon to demonstrate that they possess particular specified skills which they use appropriately when the situation calls for.

The analogy of a driver's test is appropriate. In order to get a driver's licence, it is not enough to master 40% of the skills (compare this with 40% pass mark). It is also not enough to be the best driver around. And finally, no amount of looking at the rear-view mirror correctly or being able to start is enough. You have to do all the required things together and in appropriate sequence in a real situation. For the foundation to be strong, children need to be measured against 'driver's tests'.

The group realised that to write about how to drive is different from driving, and that it is possible to do so without being able to drive.

To take the analogy further, if someone takes a driver's test, it is possible for the examiner to find out what are the lacunae in the examinee's abilities and perhaps arrive at what he/she should do next.

The attempt here has been to state in terms of 'driver's tests' what children need to learn in primary school. These statements are wonderful, not only because they can be used to evaluate both

diagnostically and summatively, but also because they suggest methodology and can be used as guides for the selection of appropriate work material.

G.ANANTHAPADMANABHAN February 25, 1995

Teacher

The School (Krishnamurti Foundation India)

Madras 600020

ESSENTIAL LEVELS OF LEARNING - LANGUAGE

What all children must be able to do at the end of Class V.

Reading :

Reading Aloud : (i) Must read words, not read syllable by syllable.

(ii) End sentences appropriately when encountering full stop, exclamation mark, question mark.

(iii) Pause for comma.

(iv) Poetry - read with a sense of the rhyme.

Reading silently :

(i) Story of 1500 words from children's literature. Must be able to give an oral gist in proper sequence without missing significant details of either events or feelings.

(ii) Description of an event :A newspaper report of an event must be read. The child must be asked to draw the picture of the event. (Picture will be evaluated not for its realism, but on (1) details of relative location of people/objects/feelings shown etc.

(iii) Fact : A page from a children's encyclopedia Children must be able to underline what in that page they would remember as important.

(iv) Following instructions : Given a recipe (eg. for making tea) children must be able to do as directed (make a cup of tea) .

(v) Reading signposts.

Listening and Speaking :

It was felt that in many ways listening being a very subjective process, it cannot be tested in isolation and had to be dealt with speaking, reading and writing.

i) Story : must listen to stories of 5 pages from children's literature -- Must be able to ask relevant questions; must be able to dramatise a few scenes; must be able to narrate the story in simple language with attention paid to sequence, details and feelings, must be able to pictorially depict the story (here again the picture will be evaluated not for its realism but for the sequence).

ii) Songs and Poems : Must listen to songs and poems of at least 4 stanzas -- must be able to recall the main idea or theme; must be able to see the rhythm in it; must be able to recall the poem after a few days of repetition (oral drill); must be able to recite or sing with attention to the right tone, clear and audible speech.

Talks/Discussions : The children must listen to 10 minutes of a talk or dialogue on a particular topic -- then they must be able to recall the main points, recall answers to the questions; they must be able to note down a message after a telephonic conversation; must be able to see the relationship between the different bits of information and characters when listening to an audio play and a dialogue.

ii) Instructions : The children should be able to listen to a set of six instructions and should be able to do as directed: follow a recipe ; conduct a simple experiment; locate information in a book; locate a place in the atlas; play a game according to the rules.

iii) Dictation : The children should be able to listen to and write down five sentences as they are read out. (The work should be evaluated for the correct words, structure and punctuation marks.)

iv) Note making : children should be able to listen to a talk on a topic for 15 minutes. while simultaneously jotting down the key points.

Speaking :

Narration : The children must be able to narrate a story, incident or a set of connected facts in about 300 words . while speaking they must adhere to the correct sequence in events, must be cogent and brief. Must speak in full sentences that maintain tense. The voice must be clear and audible and reflect at a simple level the mood of the narration.

Description : This would include describing a happening, person or scene in 300 words. While speaking the children must attend to sequence (in a happening), details and feelings and speak clearly and audibly.

Giving Messages/Instructions/Commands :The children must be able to give a set of six instructions or commands. While speaking attention to be paid to emphasis on the key words, brevity and sequence.

Singing and Recitation : The children must be able to recite or sing four stanzas of 4 lines each. While reciting, the children must keep to the correct tone, rhythm, be clear and audible and recall the words correctly.

Response : Responding may be in a dialogue or conversation or to a situation. The children must be able to participate in a dialogue of 1/2 an hour duration. Make a comment on watching a play or a real situation. The focus here is on relevance (connection between what is said/seen and what they are saying), brevity and the ability to communicate what the child intends to.

Writing

i) Stories : must be able to write a story in 250 words -- the writing must have sequence, correct tense form, punctuation marks (.?! Capitals), legibility.

ii) Descriptive pieces : the children must be able to write a descriptive piece from a picture or an outline -- 150 words. The writing should be evaluated for details, mood and feelings, apart from the normal parameters of punctuation (.?! Capitals), tense and legibility.

iii) Rhymes and poems : given a theme or some rhyming words, the children must be able to write a short poem or rhyme of 6 lines. The rhyming words must be appropriate to the theme.

iv) Answers, facts, recipes, procedures :Must be able to write an answer or convey information containing 3 or 4 main ideas. Be able to write a recipe or procedure of 5 to 6 steps. The writing should have all the relevant details or information, appropriate technical vocabulary, proper format, sequence, punctuation (.!?, and capitals), brevity and correct tense.

iii) Letter writing and invitation :Must be able to write a short letter to a friend or parent with a view of communicating a piece of information. Write out an invitation of 3 - 4 sentences. The letter and the invitation must have the proper format (addressing, date, signing off) and the message should be clear (precise language and details), legible and brief.

ESSENTIAL LEVELS OF LEARNING - MATHEMATICS

What all children must be able to do at the end of Class V.

(1) shopping: Go to a shop, buy items specified, pay the shopkeeper and get back the correct change.

NOTE: (i) items should be chosen in such a way that they are sold by number, length, weight and capacity. (ii) the specification should involve multiplication and division.(iii) the child must roughly calculate how much money would be needed with approximate prices given.

(2) Rough calculation/Estimation: (i) estimate the size of any room in three different ways. (ii) estimate the number of given objects (like oranges) that would fit into a given bag.(iii) Be able to extend this result for other objects (like gooseberries).(iv) Be able to estimate the number of people that a particular room can hold.

(3) Proportion :i) Convert a given recipe which is meant for 'x' people to one for 'y' people.(ii) Create 3 other realistic situations which can be dealt with using the same mathematical operations and the answer would be the same. (iii) Bargaining: teachers could act as fruit vendors and students must be able to correctly decide between 3 apples for Rs.5 and 4 for Rs.6 etc.(iii) Interpret data collected about auto fares from the children's everyday life to arrive at the pattern of the meter.(iv) Given a map to a particular scale the children must be able to draw the same map to a different scale.

(4) Interpretation of data : (i) Represent the given data, drawn from familiar sources, in any three different and suitable ways and use it to come to simple conclusions.(ii) Given the school timings, duration of periods, children must be able to work out the school bell timings.(iii) Given a map ,a starting point and instructions, the child must be able to reach the destination.

(5) Familiarity with numbers : (i) Children must be able to play the following game in pairs:One of them thinks of a number less than 100 and the other child finds out what this number is by asking the first child questions for which the answers are either yes or no. A child of 10 must do so within 10 questions. (ii) Construct a magic square (3 x 3), given the magic sum and the numbers to be used.

(6) Mathematical language:(i) Given a set of objects, use verbal definitions and statements of conditions to classify them. NOTE: The statements must use and/or, neither/nor, either/or, if...then, 'A' but not 'B'.(ii) Be able to describe simple mathematical relationships in words in three different ways and the descriptions must involve multiplication and division. Eg. Relationship between my age and my father's age. Relationship between the price of sugar and the price of jaggery.

(7) Geometry : (i) Show five angles in an unfamiliar room at least one of each kind. (acute, obtuse and right) (ii) Draw a plan of the child's house/classroom with furniture to scale (iii) Given the front view and side view of an object, be able to match it with the object. (iv) Constructing a square or a circle in three different ways.

(8) Measurement : (i) Choose the right tool for the given task. (ii) Measure the weight, height of a friend using standard tools. (iii) Must be able to weigh vegetables or other suitable things with a pan balance and standard weights. (iv) Must measure volume of a liquid using standard measures. (v) Must be able to measure the dimensions of a room and use this data to answer questions like How many desks would fit into the room.

(9) Pre-algebra : Children must be able to play the following game in pairs. One child thinks of a number, the other asks this child to perform a series of 3 operations (at least one of which must be multiplication or division), and from the result the second child must be able to arrive at the original number.

COMPREHENSIVE TESTS

SAMPLES OF DRIVER'S TESTS :

(1) Listen to a piece of information e.g. insects, read instruction (specific - requiring observation, reference etc.) discuss in a group and write 5 - 10 points about it.

(2) Skeleton (subject specific) shows a specimen, listen to the teacher's explanation, read written information, answer questions orally or written, discuss what would happen if ribs were missing etc.

(3) Poem : Listen and speak of it as a story, write and read it, memorise and recite (3 verses)

(4) Dramatisation : Whole process of listening, reading, script writing and presenting.

(5) Listen to a recipe, note down the requirements, go out and shop for the ingredients.

(6) Taking down a telephonic message.

WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

Mr. G. Ananthapadmanabhan Resource Person

The School- KFI

Ms. Chithra Mani

Ms. Thilothama Ravi Abacus Montessori School

Ms. Malathi Menon

Ms. Swathanthra Sakthivel Bhavan's Rajaji Vidyashram

Ms. Padma Balasubramaniam

Ms. Raji Suresh

Ms. Shanthi Prabhu

Ms. Vasumathi Chinmaya Vidyalaya Primary School

Ms. Dolly Menon

Ms. R. Meenakshi Jawahar Vidyalaya

Ms. Lakshmi Subramanyam
Ms. P. Preetha J.G.V.V. Junior College
Ms Rama Rajagopalan
Ms. Suba Mariappan National English School
Ms. Haseena Nasser
Ms. Rosebel Savitri Olcott Memorial High School
Ms. Hema Sridharan
Ms. R.Padmavathy
Ms. Vasumathy Ram Sir Sivaswamy Kalalaya
Ms. Dhamayanthi Velupandian
Ms. Sunetra Poddar S.R.F. Vidyalaya
Ms. Geetha Rajan
Ms. Radha Ganesh T.I.Matriculation Hr. Sec. School
Ms. Annapoorani
Ms. S. Usha Vidya Mandir, Adyar
Ms. Hema Natarajan
Ms. Nandini Nagarkatti
Ms. Sita Parameswaran Vidya Mandir, Mylapore
Ms. Bina Shivram
Ms. Chitra Ramanathan
Ms. Kamala Anilkumar
Ms. Kanthi Pathak The School- KFI