

# Early Grade Reading in Nepal: Challenges, Opportunities and the way forward

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## **Abstract :**

*This paper is an excerpt drawn from the National Early Grade Reading Program (NEGRP) document prepared by Ministry of Education with the technical support received from USAID. For this excerpt, a verbal consent was obtained from MOE (Planning Division) to use the NEGRP document as an exclusive source. This paper was also shared in one of the consultation sessions jointly organized by MOE and Room to Read but it has not been published before. The purpose is simply to disseminate the concept and intent of NEGRP to wider stakeholder's community.*

## **Background**

During the five years of School Sector Reform Program (SSRP) implementation, a series of initiatives were planned to bring comprehensive reform in school education in the country. Improving quality of education is the central to the SSRP in its development objectives. Some of the strategies taken to ensure quality education include defining and meeting the Minimum Enabling Conditions (MECs) in all public schools. MEC mostly explains physical infrastructure and learning environment in schools. While MECs are necessary preconditions to enable students learning, but these conditions itself do not trigger the learning. Therefore, the SRP has prioritized, along with the MECs, learning activities in early grades.

The SSRP has achieved an integrated and holistic approach to education by introducing Sector Wide Approach, there remain a few important milestones to be achieved in its quality drive. A recent review of the SSRP has raised concern over the quality of education, and in particular whether students are learning to read well-enough in the early grades of basic education. Some of the studies have clearly stated that learning level in early grade students in public schools in Nepal is lowest in the region.

The Global Monitoring Report (2012) for Education for All (EFA) estimates about 250 million children of primary school age are not in school, have dropped out by grade 4, or are in school and not learning basic skills like literacy and numeracy – that is almost 40% of the total primary school-aged children globally. The Brookings Institution's Africa Learning Barometer estimates that only half of Africa's nearly 128 million primary school-aged children will both attend school and learn basic skills.

A recently published position paper of Save the Children – “Ending the Hidden Exclusion (2013)” strongly states that, “When a child is out of school it is an obvious injustice and exclusion, but a million more in-school children suffer because they are not given the opportunity to learn. There are 130 million children in school who are not learning even the basics – a shocking figure masked by the focus in recent decades on getting more children into classrooms.”

The mid-term review (MTR) and the Joint Annual Review (JAR) Aide Memoire (AM) have categorically prioritized the need to strive for accelerated progress in student's learning achievement. Amidst all of these shocking realities, recommendations and recognitions,

there's a serious need to focus on students reading competency in early grades.

Significance of early grade reading program has been widely discussed and also implemented in many countries struggling with low level of student achievement in public schools. However, the program has also experienced unique challenges that are specific to the country. In the same token, Nepal's unique geography, social and cultural diversity presents challenges in and around areas of its diverse learning needs, cultural differences, peculiar economic base, and poor learning environment in school and at home.

Current paper therefore highlights on challenges in Nepali schools to implement early grade reading programs. Moreover, the paper also brings reflections on opportunities that can be utilized to pave the way for implementing early grade reading program effectively.

### Challenges

Poor educational infrastructure in schools with almost no libraries and with limited or no books to promote reading among students is a general characteristic of public schools in the country. More importantly, most teachers are not trained to teach reading skills and the instructional design including the curricula has not adequately focused on reading skills. Consequently, reading has been a low priority in the classrooms.

Some of the obvious challenges in promoting reading in schools can be broadly discussed under the following sub-titles:

**Instructional time and subject teaching:** The allocated instructional time for Nepali language subject is 8 periods a week. A total of 34 periods is taught per week in early grades (1-3). Altogether six different subjects<sup>1</sup> are taught – Nepali(8), Science (5), Math (6), English (5), Creative arts (3), Computer (4) Social Studies (3) in early grades (1-3). Introduction of different subjects in early grades has created competing demands from other curricular subjects, especially English and Mathematics, than Nepali. More critical is instructional practices in schools that treat Nepali language as one of the six subjects. Thus the importance of reading and language development and in improving learning achievement in primary grades is buried over the load of subject teaching.

**Language diversity and medium of instruction:** The Census report enlists over 123 different mother tongue in Nepal. Students once enroll in schools are required to follow the instructional medium used in the school. Across the country, Nepali or English is commonly used as Medium of Instruction (MoI) from grade one. In schools where children in majority are non-Nepali speaking, teachers use local language to explain the meaning. However, even in schools that have chose Mother Tongue (MT), the MoI is essentially Nepali or English. MT is often limited as subject teaching.

Recent trend in schools is such that the focus is shifting from MT or Nepali to English. Community schools where it is said that they have English as medium of instruction, they use Nepali or MT to explain it to the student. There's a conflict of interest among parent, school and the existing policy. The policy says, MoI in mother tongue in early grades; parents' interest is in English, teacher use Nepali or MT to explain. This situation has

- 1 Schools can choose different optional subject and can also adjust weightage to specific subject, therefore the list of subjects and its weightage given in this text may vary from school to school.

result because of serious lack of understanding and skills to use language as medium of instruction.

**Inadequate and inappropriate materials:** It would not be imprudent to say many community schools lack a proper library. Some forms of library exist but only in secondary schools. Primary schools usually do not have a library except in few schools supported by external agencies. The concept of supplementary reading materials, extracurricular reading, and fun-books are a distant reality in many cases. Teaching and learning in community schools is thus exclusively focused on textbook contents. In this curricular objectives are translated into textbooks, for which teachers are trained to teach the textbook contents, and even the examinations are focused heavily on assessing content knowledge. Thus, the teacher, students and even the parents never felt the need to use materials beyond textbooks. This is common across the country in almost all community schools.

Since students come from different social and economic background, their level of cognition is naturally different. Introduction of a single textbook in each subject for students is therefore inadequate as well as inappropriate as it does not address the needs of graded content/materials according to level of cognition of the student.

**Weak monitoring and instructional support:** Lack of school supervision and instructional support to teaching and learning process has long been raised in different research documents including MTR of the SSRP. While the RPs and SS are already overburdened in many different functions, lack of clarity in their roles and functions has buried the primary concepts and objectives of school supervision and the provision of Resource Center (RC) and Resource Person (RP).

The quality and capacity of school supervisors and resource persons is another aspect that has not been thoroughly assessed as there is no systematic and long term investment in capacity building of SS and RPs.

**Teacher Preparation:** The training packages including different modules developed under the Teacher Professional Development (TPD) focused more on meeting curricular objectives and requirements for a student to graduate in their final examination. Since the curricula didn't specifically include reading skills (language skills) as curricular objectives, teacher's are never trained to teach reading or for that matter in language teaching. Thus, there's a serious lack of key competency – language teaching – in current stock of teachers.

**Neglected early grades:** The whole system including school community, parents and even students look for SLC results as the indicator of success. This tendency has unfairly hyped SLC and thus both the resources and attention is skewed towards higher grades. Best classrooms and best teachers are assigned to teach in higher grades. Least conducive environments is thus common in lower grades. Even helper and ECD facilitators can be frequently seen managing classes in schools in early grades. As a result, the foundational skills and basic competencies among students in public schools are mostly lacking.

**Minimum learning conditions:** A commonly observed phenomena in community schools is that they do not have the basic prioritized minimum enabling conditons (PMECs) learning conditions. Availability of adequate and trained teachers is the most crucial one. Especially, in the Terai regions crowded classrooms are very common, which leaves teaching and

learning in schools just as ritual. Apart from physical environment, access to reading materials and extracurricular resources is almost nothing.

### **Opportunities**

Although many challenges are there to address for an effective implementation of Early Grade Reading Program, there are also a few areas that serves as the opportunity to build on it. For example:

Expansion of Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) and Continuous Assessment System (CAS) programs in schools has created some positive environment to foster reading and leaning achievement among students. Besides, extensive network of national and international non-government institutions have already tested reading focused programs at some level. These organizations, including a few UN agencies, have heavily supported in developed a strong foundation for early childhood programs in the country. This experience and expertise is well recognized and can be cost-effectively up-scaled to cover early grades of primary level.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) has recently draft a two year extension of the SSRP to match it with the EFA/MDG timeline. The two year extension of the SSRP has focused on a limited priority activities that should pave the way for a broader and concrete intervention in education beyond 2015. In this respect, the EGRP is a most viable intervention as it has gained considerable momentum in Nepal as well as globally.

The NEGRP prepared by Thematic Working Group (TWG) and the Technical Assistance (Education Sector Advisor) has convinced both the MOE and the Development Partners (DPs) that improving early grade reading should indeed be the next movement for education sector in Nepal. Early grade reading program has been included as one of the priority programs of the SSRP. The MOE/DOE has already acquired a separate budget line for early grade reading program.

EFA and MDG goals focused in achieving access, equity, and quality in education. Many developing countries have made significant progress in areas of access to education. However, when it comes to quality and learning, many countries are still very much behind. Improving reading level among students therefore has been globally recognized as priority areas in education for now and beyond 2015.

Practice of early grade reading focused program in other countries with similar condition in Nepal has proved successful in improving learning level among students. A variety of tools, strategies, and expertise are available which makes implementation of early grade reading program less expensive, feasible and also provides options to choose to meet country specific needs.

### **The Way Forward**

**Language.** The very first consideration in a reading focused programs is about choosing most effective language to build reading skills. As discussed above, multi-language, multi-level and multi-cultural environment in schools present a major challenge to implement as early grade reading program in Nepal. *Therefore, an early grades reading strategy needs to explore the best (or the next best, if the best is not feasible) option from the child's perspective; from an educational perspective of learning (NEGRP, 2013).*

There's a need to critically assess emerging trends in the delivery of education, especially in the use of language as subject vs. medium of instruction. In most cases, language is taught as a subject and the medium of instruction is either Nepali or English. In practice, even in schools with predominant language, instruction is given using Nepali as second language. *There are some universally recognized principles for use of languages in primary education that are based on extensive research and understanding of language learning processes (NEGRP, 2013):*

- a. *It is most appropriate to teach literacy to a child in her first language; a language the child understands well and speaks fluently.*
- b. *A language that is unfamiliar to children should not be used as a medium of instruction till they acquire basic proficiency in it.*
- c. *Literacy skills learnt in one language are easily transferable to another language at an appropriate time.*
- d. *One or two years of pre-primary education can help greatly in supporting oral language development of the child's MT and introduction of oral second language to help prepare the child for learning to read from grade 1.*
- e. *A focus on reading (as a subject) in early grades will give the child a head-start for the rest of the curriculum in later grades.*

With all these deliberations and also in view of the constitutional provisions, there's a need to promote MT in early grades. In practice, even in schools with a predominant language have followed a bi-lingual instruction where contents in textbooks are explained using both MT and Nepali. Although the choice of language and medium of instruction has been delegated to school management, it would be effective to promote using MT as a subject and using MT and Nepali as medium of instruction in early grades.

**Curricula and instructional design:** Current curriculum is heavily loaded with content knowledge. It has introduced six subjects that include Nepali, English, Math, Science and other two subjects in early grades (1-3). Subjects like English, Math and Science are usually considered most difficult subjects and therefore they draw more resources (teacher and students' time) than Nepali.

Curricular focus on subject specific content has buried knowledge of foundational skills such as reading, writing and comprehension. Therefore, there's a need to revisit curricular focus highlighting on foundational skills. Subject specific knowledge can be introduced at later grades, for example, from grade four onwards. The objective of early grades should be clearly delineated as reading, writing and comprehension with increased level of competencies in higher grades. For this purpose, an integrated curriculum for grades 1-3 should be introduced by maximizing reading focus in early grade and eliminating subject specific knowledge as separate teaching and learning requirement. Pre-knowledge of subject specific contents can be included in different reading materials.

Current design does not support any specific hours for teaching reading skills in the classroom. Altogether, 34 period and six subjects are too heavy for early grade students. Instead of different subjects, more play and activity based instructional design needs to be developed and enforced in early grades.

More focus is needed in peer to peer interaction, participatory classroom, group work, observation, making reflections on observed events, and so forth.

**Assessment and supervision:** Regular assessment is crucial to monitoring students' progress. Significant improvement is necessary in current practices of CAS. Similarly, there's a need to strengthening the capacity of school teachers in student assessment.

Role of school supervisors and resource persons in classroom supervision and instructional support is minimal and almost ineffective. Improving reading skills in early grade students requires regular supervision and support in classroom. Thus; the roles and capacity of school supervisors and resource persons has to be reviewed restructured so that regular support can be made available to needy schools.

**Teacher development:** Current teachers are almost un-trained in teaching reading skills in early grades. Since reading is required in all grades and as there's no provision of language teacher, training on reading skills is a must to all teachers in primary schools. A whole (primary) school teacher training modality appears to be the best approach to teacher training and development.

**Materials development and support:** Lack of materials in schools have been strongly felt in almost all community schools. Reading materials in TM and other language is at its critical stage in many schools. Most of the materials available in the market and schools are not properly graded as a result students at different levels of cognitions are forced to read the same materials. Thus, there's effectively no learning as the materials are inappropriate. A huge area of investment is, therefore, development of materials – both curricular as well as extracurricular reading materials.

**Parental support:** Role of parents is very much crucial in developing foundational skills especially in listening and reading skills. Since parents in rural communities are either illiterate or are not fully aware about early reading skills, there's a need to include parent education programs to foster reading at home.

Our system has never realized parents, either literate or illiterate, can also be good resource persons to support reading skills in the classroom. Even an illiterate parent can be used as a story teller in the classroom who can tell stories commonly heard in the community. This can help improve students listening and comprehension skills. Moreover, children also feel more comfortable with their parents in the classroom. Thus, there's need to close the distance between parents and schools by making best use of parents' time in the classroom.

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