

Language and Early Grades Literacy Acquisition in Nepal
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Save the Children (SC) works in almost all areas of Nepal. In 2008 it had been working in the far-western region with mixed Nepali and Tharu populations, particularly in Kailali district, for about five years when it conducted a school effectiveness study.

The findings were stark; three years into their basic education, 42% of students in SC assisted schools still could not read a single word within a minute. Moreover, there was a clear disparity between Nepali speakers and non-Nepali speakers, as well as between boys and girls.

This inspired SC to intervene to improve reading outcomes among school children, and to build in efforts to address the disparity between Nepali and Tharu-speaking children.

Literacy Boost (LB) is Save the Children's signature approach to support children's early grades reading development. It is based on the latest reading research, and aims to improve reading instruction, strengthen children's access to literacy and language experiences, and measurably improve children's reading and learning.

Literacy Boost in Kailali was implemented in April 2009 as a pilot project in 16 schools and approximately 52 communities in Bouniya and Kotatilsipur, with a local NGO, BASE, as the main implementing partner. Among the key elements of the program are:

Book Banks so that children have access to relevant, simple books and print materials in Tharu and Nepali for children to enjoy reading; books are kept by community volunteers so that children can borrow materials near their homes.

Reading Camps & Reading Buddy; Activities for children outside of school to promote reading practice and develop a love of reading, run by local community volunteers who speak the children's language.

Community Workshops; awareness raising sessions for parents on the importance of language and literacy development for children's learning.

Nepali to Tharu literacy classes; intended to train adults already literate in Nepali to read Tharu materials. Over time, these became an informal Tharu literacy class for non-literate women in the community.

Year 1 Results; SC analysed baseline and end of school year reading assessment scores among grade 2 children in Literacy Boost and control schools. The language of assessment was Nepali. The results showed that students from Literacy Boost schools showed significantly higher gains in key skills than comparison schools at the end of the year. The groups were equivalent at baseline.

At baseline there was also a high percentage of 0 scores for letter identification, reading fluency and reading accuracy. These percentages dropped for both LB and control schools at year end, but the drop was greater for the Literacy Boost children. This suggests that Literacy Boost may have had an especially strong impact on supporting the weakest students.

But the results also showed that there were still a lot of children who read 0 words per minute. More than half of LB students still cannot read a single word at the end of the year. Of the LB children who

are still at zero words per minute at the end of the year, 57% were female and 76.2% were non Nepali-speakers.

Nepali speakers vs. Non-Nepali; At baseline and at the end of the year, the Nepali-speaking students did significantly better than their non Nepali-speaking counterparts on letter identification, fluency, accuracy, and comprehension. On comprehension, however, when Tharu-speaking children who didn't reply to questions in Nepali were asked the questions in their own language, there were better results from children in LB schools than control schools.

This encourages SC to continue to implement Literacy Boost among minority language learners—as it indicates that, even if the progress for ethnic minority language speakers is not as high or as fast as it is for Nepali speakers, there are elements it can build on in this approach to improving all children's reading skills.