

Bridging the Gap

Helping raise student learning levels

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)¹ 2014 shows that only 48% of students in class 5 could read text suitable for class 2. This means that every second class 5 (aged 11) student in rural India is unable to read the text every 8 year old should be able to read. The report also highlights that in 2009, 60% of children in class 8 could read simple English sentences but in 2014 this figure had fallen to 47%.

The report shows that although student enrolment in elementary schools is near universal at 97%, students are progressing to secondary education without the required learning levels. This has increased enrolment and retention rates of students but many are not equipped to deal with the secondary curriculum resulting in a high risk of dropout or failure. This problem is magnified in class 10 when students are set to take external State Board examinations.

As many students are below the appropriate learning levels, it makes the task of teachers more difficult. Kusuma is delivering a Secondary School Readiness Programme (SSRP)² aimed at addressing the learning gaps that exist between the actual level and the required level for secondary classes.

SSRP delivers individualised teaching to students based on their performance in pre-programme assessments. Content is tailored to the learning requirements of students.



Students participating in a SSRP foundation camp in Hardoi
Photo: Kusuma Foundation

SSRP consists of two phases: an induction phase to improve the foundational skills of students through study camps and self-learning, and a consolidation phase where students receive continued support to help them catch up with the curriculum. The programme covers five subjects: Maths, English, Science, Hindi/Odia³ and Social Sciences. As well as bridging the learning gaps, SSRP creates a support system for teachers to help identify student needs, teach at the correct level, assist teachers to complete the syllabus and on time, and train them on using effective materials to structure lessons.

The programme has received support from the government's District Education Officer (DEO) in both of Kusuma's focus districts of Sambalpur and Hardoi. The DEOs issued official instructions to school Principals to support SSRP and have committed to continue providing bridging support to students. Mr J.P.Mishra, District Inspector of Schools in Hardoi visited several of the schools involved to observe SSRP classes and meet with teachers. He said:

“The development and roll out of this programme by Kusuma has been a brilliant effort. I personally visited schools and interacted with teachers & students while observing sessions and got the sense that it has gone a long way to help students, particularly those from rural and economically weaker sections of society. It's amazing to see students attending these sessions during summer vacation in hot weather conditions. I would ideally want to see this programme cover all the schools in the district”.

SSRP commenced at the end of May in Hardoi and Sambalpur with 3,200 students enrolling in the first phase. In 2015/2016 SSRP aims to deliver sessions for 8,518 students.

1. www.asercentre.org
2. <http://kusumafoundation.in/kusuma-schools-partnership-initiative>
3. Odia is the official language of the State of Odisha

Learning assessments important for students

1,260 students from Hardoi and 1,941 students from Sambalpur participated in assessments to determine their learning levels so that SSRP teaching is tailored appropriately. The Kusuma facilitated assessment covers the five SSRP subjects at three class levels (class 3, 5 and 8).

Many of the students were looking forward to participating and were not afraid of sitting the exams. One student from the Government Higher Secondary School in Manikapur whose learning level in English is below Level 2 said:

“I still wanted to attempt all the questions in the paper even though I may not have been able to complete it. I was told it didn't matter if I couldn't manage it all and that helped me to not feel scared of the tests. This was different from other half yearly and annual examinations I have taken before and I actually enjoyed these tests.”

Initial results of the English assessment from Hardoi showed that 58% are at Level 1 (class 3), 29% are at Level 2 (class 5) and 12% are at Level 3 (class 8 and above). Arvind Bajpai, a District Resource Group⁴ member for English, highlighted the importance of the tests:

“The tests help identify the levels of the students in particular subjects. They are a very effective way of identifying students' ability in reading and writing. It will go a long way in supporting teachers to improve the learning of students over time.”



Students sitting their learning assessment tests in Hardoi
Photo: Kusuma Foundation

Parents encourage participation

The 25 schools in Sambalpur that are part of the Kusuma Schools Partnership Initiative (KSPI) have average student numbers of between 120 and 140. Most of the students are from marginalised communities and have parents who are unable to read and write. Parents are worried that they are not able to give their children additional support at home. One parent said:

“Most students who are enrolled in class 9 don't understand what is going on and that puts us as parents under immense pressure to try and help them perform, sometimes we can't do this so it is easier for our children not to attend school at all.”

Kusuma supports schools to organise parent meetings to introduce the SSRP. Parents receive reassurance that although there may not be support available at home, this programme will help their children. In one meeting at the Upgraded High School Mahulapali, parents decided that they would play an active part in helping with the SSRP. They identified and selected a leader from each catchment area to be responsible for encouraging the participation of students and ensuring the safety of students attending classes. The parent leaders also visited each household in their communities to spread the word to other parents who were feeling unsure about helping their child at home.

Mr Brundaban Bhoi whose son is in class 10 said

“A lot of parents find it difficult to see why we should keep sending our children to school. I have now gained confidence that SSRP will help and support their learning. Although I am unable to help out at home with schoolwork, this course will benefit my son, and as a result he'll be able to catch up and continue in school. This has really inspired me to take on a role in helping other parents see that their child really does deserve to attain a good education whatever their background.”

SSRP helps keep student in school

Bidya Oram, a student from the Kainsir High School in Sambalpur, began class 9 even though her learning level was well below that required for the class. She was on the verge of dropping out earlier this year as she saw no benefit in continuing regular lessons that she could not understand.

With support from Kusuma, staff members from the school visited her parents to persuade them she should stay in school and participate in the SSRP. After the visit, Bidya participated in the assessments. For the first time in her school life she felt that she was able to take an exam where there were no marks for the exam. The invigilators created an environment where she felt free to express herself without fear of failure. After attempting the assessment, Bidya is now participating in SSRP sessions with renewed hope that she can learn and flourish. She said:

“I was bored of seeing papers and going to lessons I was never able to understand. This time there was a paper where I was able to read simple sentences and try to answer them. I am now part of SSRP and am really interested to try other tests and participate in more classes where I am not just a passive listener but am now one of the active learners in the class. I am now looking forward to continuing my education and plan to keep going to school.”



Bidya Oram outside the Kainsir High School
Photo: Kusuma Foundation

⁴ District Resource Groups are made up of senior teachers who observe teacher standards and provide mentoring through on site school visits