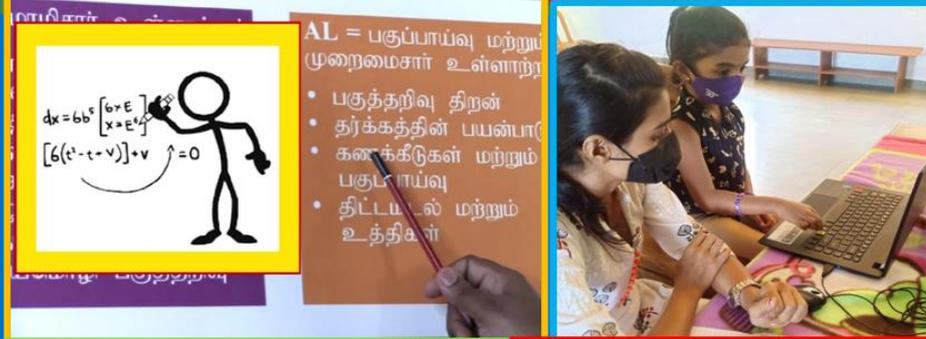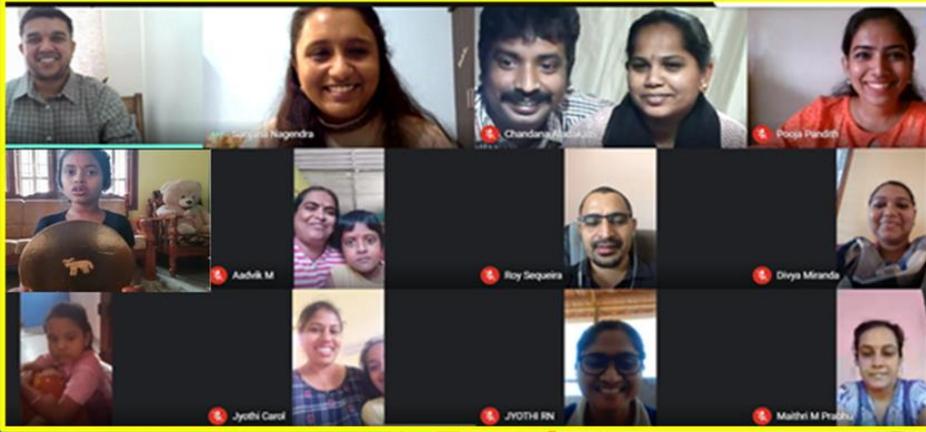# ANNUAL REPORT

2020-21

THE PROMISE FOUNDATION
For Mental Health, Education and Potential Realization

231. Cozy Home Layout, B. Hosahalli Road, Sompur Gate, Sarjapura, Bangalore, 562125, India.

Phone: 080-27823524; 9632767657

email: promise@ thepromisefoundation.org

Our Partners Over 2020-21

- UNICEF office for Tamilnadu and Kerala.
- Aga Khan Education Services, India.
- Samagra Shikshana Karnataka
- Samagra Shiksha, Government of Tamil Nadu.
- Vision Lab, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore.
- Department of Education, University of Oxford.
- UKRI-GCRF Collective Programme.

INTRODUCTION

The Promise Foundation is a Charitable Trust with its headquarters in Bangalore in the southern Indian state of Karnataka. The Foundation is engaged in local, regional, national and international initiatives to support the development of positive mental health, educational attainments, effective career choices and potential realisation of children and young people disadvantaged by poverty and adversity.

In order to focus on specific vulnerabilities, the Foundation's activities focus on three broad themes:

- Stimulation Intervention Programme (SIP) for the early education years.
- Programmes for Assisted Learning (PAL) for primary and middle school years.
- Career and Livelihood Planning for high schoolers and their peers.

Given below is a report of the Foundation's activities undertaken over 2020 – 2021.

The sudden and unexpected institutional closures resulting from the public health crisis of the pandemic restricted our field based work. We were unable to meet our client groups face to face in schools, communities or homes. However, during this period, we were able to achieve the following through the online, work from home modality:

- Conducting surveys and research through the online mode.
- Using the findings of these surveys to create new workbooks and activities for pre-school, primary school and high school students.
- Conducting of our interventions through the virtual, online mode.
- Distribution of home learning material directly to students and their families.

During the windows of opportunity between lockdowns, we continued our face to face work.

Further details of these activities are given in the sections below:

TALKTOGETHER PROJECT

Project Objectives

TalkTogether is a multi-country project that aims to promote oral language development of children in the 3-10 age group belonging to urban poor regions in the developing country context. This project was made possible by an award from the UKRI-GCRF Collective Fund.

Oral language is often a child's first encounter with the rich world of stories of their culture. It is the medium through which children come to understand and define not only their outer world (physical and cultural) but also their innermost thoughts and feelings. Oral language is also the foundation upon which reading, writing and listening skills are built. Despite the importance of oral language inputs for language and literacy development, research has shown that quite often, pre-school teachers in multilingual classrooms in low and middle income countries do not know how to provide structured oral language support to their students. Supporting the oral language development of pre-school children boosts their literacy learning trajectories. It is for these reasons that TalkTogether focuses on oral language development.

A more immediate aim of the project is to develop the infrastructure needed to support rapid growth in local evidence building activities that can meaningfully inform intervention development.

The project is structured around three key research strands:

To understand the existing language learning environments of children. One mechanism through which the project aims to deepen this understanding is through the creation of print corpora and an analysis of the projected print exposure of the target child.

To gauge the existing learning levels of children through the creation of culturally grounded and contextually embedded assessment methods that provide a holistic and accurate evaluation of the target child's linguistic abilities.

To develop interventions to build capacity in the various actors that interact with the child and to further evaluate the impact of these interventions in boosting the literacy and language learning trajectories of the target child.

TalkTogether is envisioned as a project in which the researcher and the researched engage in mutual exchange of ideas and dialogue to create the evidence base for the benefit of all stake-holders involved in the process. TalkTogether aims to honour and amplify the voices of children, parents, teachers, researchers, and everyone connected with the project.

Project Achievements

- **Creation of Print Corpus:**

    Children's exposure to written language at an early age, significantly improves their language learning capability. Therefore, children's books become a very important part of their language development foundations. The first step in developing language learning material for young children is to scan the books available in their age group and develop a "print corpus". This is a collection of all the words and other language related material printed in the books. A print corpus is compiled in such way that it can be analysed for all the different parts of speech (e.g., nouns, pronoun, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions).

    During the period of this report, the TalkTogether project developed a comprehensive Kannada print corpus. This is a digital collection of a range of written materials (such as picture books, stories, poems) for children between 3 to 10 years of age. The details are shown below:

Age group	Books scanned	Number of Sentences	Numbers of Words
3 to 5 year olds	109	3,498	17,850
6 to 8 year olds	199	11,431	67,580
9 to 10 year olds	94	9,353	65,397
Total	**402**	**24,282**	**1,50,827**

This print corpus is perhaps one of the world's largest for the Kannada language.

It can now be used by researchers to further study children's oral language developed by creating tests and survey tools and by interventionists to create activities, workbooks and dictionaries for children in these age groups.

This print corpus has already been used for the following activities:
o an analysis of the forms of words in Kannada children's books.
o a study to understand the age at which children learn these words.

We are continuing to build the Kannada print corpus and plans are being made to:
o develop a similar corpus in Hindi and other languages.
o An audio corpus of oral heritage materials in Kannada and other Indic languages,

- **Virtual Roundtable Conference:**

The TalkTogether project held a virtual conference entitled Child Directed Print Corpora: Understanding the Resource, to showcase the Kannada Print Corpus developed over 2020-21 to a wide group of researchers and experts in the field. This was a 3-day virtual round table event which aimed to understand how the child-directed print corpora developed by the project could be used for child language assessment, experimental research, and the development of children's language learning materials. It also aimed to understand how corpora such as this, can support theorizing on child language acquisition. The roundtable catered to a broad audience and aimed to consider the usefulness of corpora for researchers, practitioners and their trainers, and curriculum developers.

- **Book levelling protocol:**

The suitability of books according to children's age is often not known. TalkTogether developed an expert rating tool that can be used to determine the suitability of children's books for ages 3 to 10. The tool is informed by text complexity frameworks and relies on qualitative indicators for the book's content, organization of ideas, language, and illustrations and design to arrive at an overall rating. This tool will meet a practical need for a common metric to describe book levels across multiple publishing houses. This work is ongoing, and the aim is to publish the tool by September 2021. The tool will be published as an open-source tool that researchers and teachers in low- and middle-income contexts can use to match texts to readers based on holistic criteria.

- **Maathu Maathu: TalkTogether with Children Online**

Although the lockdowns prevented direct interactions with children, we used the data emerging from the TalkTogether research to create on online Kannada and English intervention for children. Maathu Maathu means "talk…talk" in Kannada. This is a folk-Inspired, culturally embedded oral language programme for 5-6 year old children from the Southern Indian State of Karnataka. The programme takes a three-pronged approach for intervention at the level of curriculum, classroom organization and teacher training.


To enable participation in more mindful and self-regulated ways for children in the lesson, a model character named *Maathu Maathu* is introduced as an exemplar of the ideal. The character models desirable behaviors and serves as a friendly reminder of the classroom rules:

- to raise hands and wait to be called upon to speak
- to facilitate turn-taking,
- to keep on-topic
- to mute mike when not speaking (in online classes)
- to encourage active listening.

Another character called *Bama* is introduced as an elderly lady who enjoys sharing interesting facts related to concepts that feature in the lessons. The rationale behind introducing this character is to increase the salience of certain concepts to encourage reception and retention of the same.

Given below are glimpses into the programme during implementation.
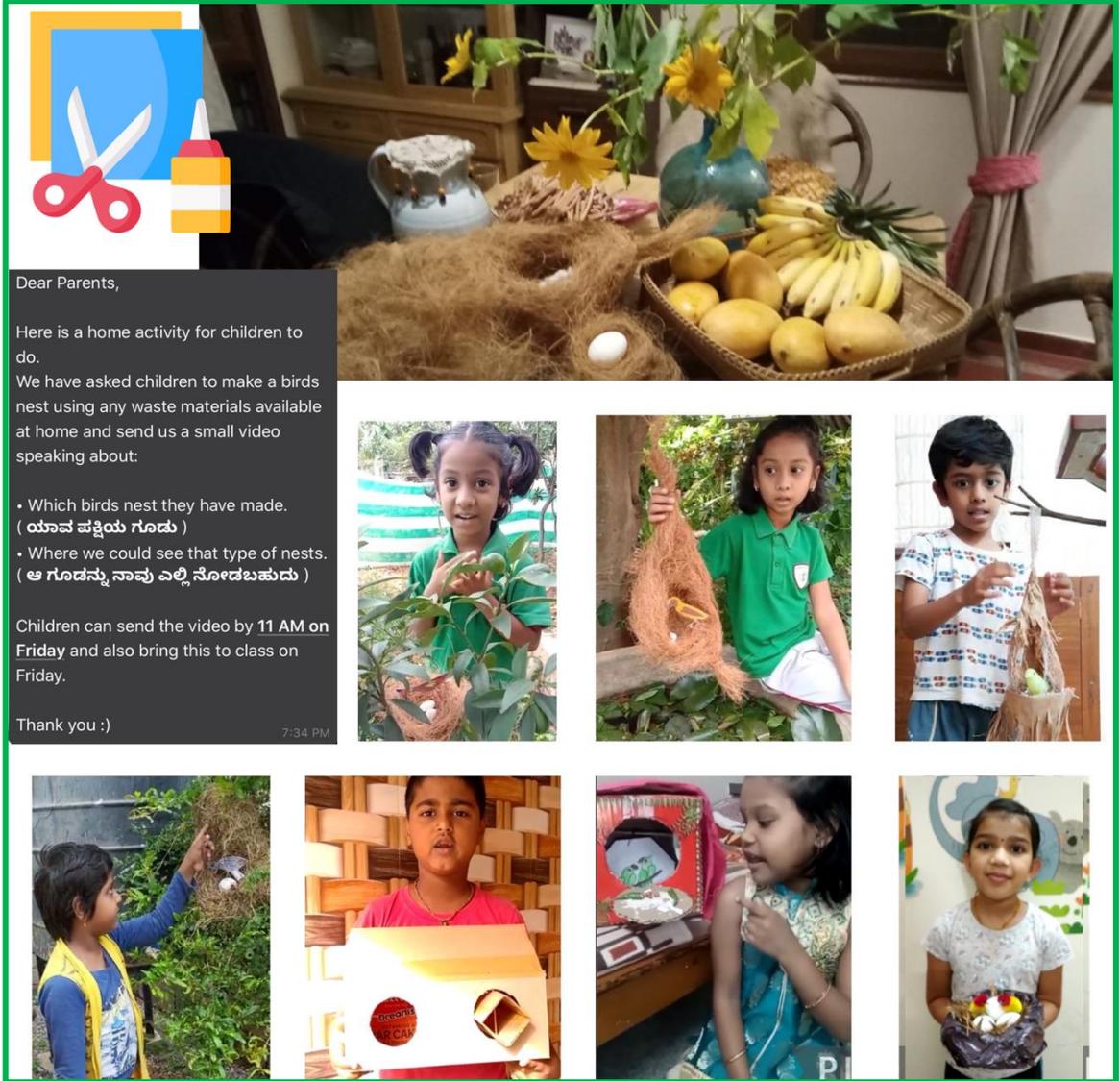
To refine the lesson plans developed and before offering the program to children, facilitators practiced teaching during trial sessions to identify and learn the skills needed for the program. Based on their learnings, a facilitator training toolkit was developed. Ensuring clear enunciation and articulation of the words at a slow pace, following the etiquettes of social interaction and modelling desirable behaviors were considered necessary.

Since bilingual education aims to celebrate the narrative expression of individuals with the joint aim of learning a particular language, use of all the home languages of children to convey meaning was identified as essential.

- **A summer programme!**

Promise usually conducts a number of summer camps in our project areas during school vacation. This year, face to face camps could not be conducted because of the pandemic lockdowns. However, we are able to conduct some of our workshops online. Twelve students aged 5-7 from Bangalore and Mangalore enrolled for the summer programme. All children already had exposure to Kannada at home and their parents had a wish to further improve the children's spoken Kannada.

To capture what children learnt from the programme, student assessments were framed as "gameplay" (rather than tests) to mitigate performance pressure. These assessments were conducted before and after the set of lessons taught. Picture naming tasks were included to measure expressive vocabulary and story completion tasks were used to assess narrative expression. Child-wise comparisons before and after the program showed an increase in expressive vocabulary and an increase in children's use of sentences in the story completion tasks. These gains were seen for all children who participated in the programme.

The positive impact of the program appears to have extended beyond the Maathu Maathu sessions as highlighted in the parental feedback and classroom observations noted below:
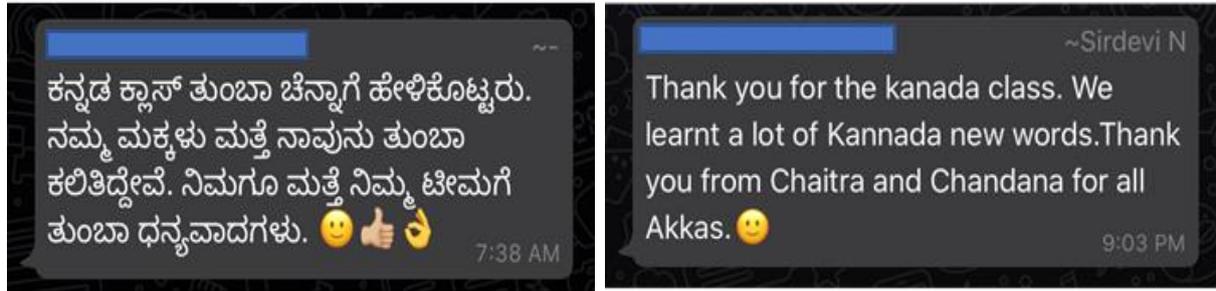
Our sessions reduced the discomfort and reticence among students to use Kannada and showed marked improvement in comprehension of the language for the students. The use of whatsapp enabled the creation of a classroom community and allowed space for informal interactions among parents. There were noted instances of bonding experiences between the student and the guardian (parents, siblings, etc.) which enhanced parental satisfaction and student desire to engage with our lessons.

- **"Game-play activities" for multilingual children**

TalkTogether partnered with the Department of Education, University of Oxford to develop linguistically and culturally sensitive language assessments framed as "game-play activities" for multilingual children in Karnataka. This study seeks to assess the learning levels of 5-6 year old children with the following immediate aims:

- o develop an open-source Kannada Teacher toolkit of language assessments for classroom use.
- o evaluate the impact of school closure to plan balanced bridge programs for school return.
- o contribute to an understanding of language development in multilingual settings

Twenty Three word games or assessments to elicit different linguistic and literacy skills of 5-6 year old children are being developed. The constructs targeted include: vocabulary, grammar, phonological processing, narrative expression, listening comprehension, emergent literacy, early literacy, reading comprehension and general abilities (working memory and fluency). Some of these are administered individually while others are administered in a group. All efforts are made to ensure that the items were embedded in lived experiences of the children being tested.

Given below is a sample of the story cards being developed for this project.

- **Learning Corner**

As a result of the shutting down of schools and educational institutions during the pandemic, the home has become the child's primary learning environment. Classes are conducted online and students often attend the class using a phone. They are also required to submit their homework by photographing their worksheets. A pilot test showed us that a media / phone stand would be a useful support to help the child engage with the virtual classroom, from home, more effectively. Hence we designed a learning corner comprising activity worksheets, stationary, a media stand. This stand is designed support a mobile phone when attending classes and taking pictures.

Given below are pictures of the stand in use.

- **TalkTogether with Teachers: Self-learning course on Multilingualism for teachers**

Multilingualism is a common feature in our country. It is quite common that the child's home language and school language are different. A disconnect between a child's home and school language can disrupt successful learning. Tumhari meri batein – Our conversations, is a teacher professional development programme being created by TalkTogether that attempts to fill this gap. This is a self-learning package for primary school teachers, teacher trainers, school leaders and education officials to understand the phenomenon of multilingualism, the processes of language learning and the layers in a school system within which intervention can take place to optimize learning for a multilingual child. Shown below are stills from the videos being produced for this course.

The course has been developed for primary school teachers in the Indian context and is available in English and Hindi. When the course is completed, learners have the option to engage with the course at different levels depending on interest and availability of time. While the core message of each module is captured through the delivery of bite-sized videos (15-20 minutes), learners may deepen their understanding by engaging with suggested readings (including children's storybooks), suggested reflection activities (e.g., did it help to switch languages when teaching?) and field research (e.g., may the languages in your class). Teachers have the flexibility to engage with the material in their own time and at their own pace. A template to adapt this course to different countries has also been developed.

- **Developing Research Infrastructure: ALFA**

In most Indian languages, Akshara are combined to form words, which are further combined to form sentences, paragraphs, and so on. To investigate the orthographic (representation of the sounds of a language by written or printed symbols, letters and spelling of a language) characteristics, of any print corpus, we need a parser to extract the sub units of language i.e., Akshara, Akshara combinations, words, etc. By counting these sub units, we can then identify the Akshara/words which are more frequent than others, length of each word and number of phonemes (sounds) in a given word. However, a manual approach towards estimating these statistics is not only tedious and time-consuming, but also prone to human errors. Thus, we need algorithmic based tools to overcome this challenge.

Existing tools are primarily designed for the Latin script and are not suitable for the study of Akshara languages. Hence, we developed our own parser called the Automatic Linguistic Frequency Analyser – ALFA. This is a software that can extract the Akshara Units from the print corpus. A Graphical User Interface (GUI) enables everyone to use ALFA even if they are unfamiliar the underlying programming language and algorithm (see figure below).

An example snapshot for the word length statistics for ALFA shown below

This has proven to be a highly useful tool for language research. It will be made open access shortly.

CAREER AND LIVELIHOOD PLANNING FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

At the end of high school, the student has to make one the most important decisions of his/her life, namely what career he/she is going to pursue. Career success comes from linking one's interests and abilities to one's career. Promise has been a pioneer in the field of career guidance and based on extensive research has developed various interventions for Indian high school students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Our services in the field of career guidance have focused on 3 main areas:

- Providing career guidance to Grade 10, 11 and 12 students directly in their schools and communities.
- Training those who work with high school students (e.g., teachers) in the skills of providing career guidance.
- Conducting research and developing new, culturally grounded resources for career guidance.

As a result of the pandemic induced lockdowns, our direct, face to face delivery of career guidance services was restricted. However, our work in the field of career guidance continued. Our achievements are described in the sections that follow.

- **Development of teacher training material for Tamilnadu**

During 2019-20, in partnership with UNICEF, we adapted our career guidance material for use with government school students in Tamilnadu. A career guidance kit was developed in Tamil. This was trial tested in 3 districts of Tamilnadu with about 1200 Grade 10 students. The outcomes were highly successful and these findings were presented at various meetings to the Government of Tamilnadu. Plans were made to bring the programme to scale for the entire state of Tamilnadu. This could be

achieved because of the pandemic restrictions. This time was used to develop a self-learning course on career guidance for teachers. The course covers the following topics:

- o   Introduction: Overview of career guidance in Tamilnadu.
- o   What is career and what the key elements of career guidance?
- o   Promoting self-understanding.
- o   Understanding the world of work.
- o   Developing career alternatives.
- o   Skills for career preparation.
- o   Understanding Adolescence.

This material is available online for all teachers interested in learning about career guidance. Given below is a screen shot of the contents page of the material.
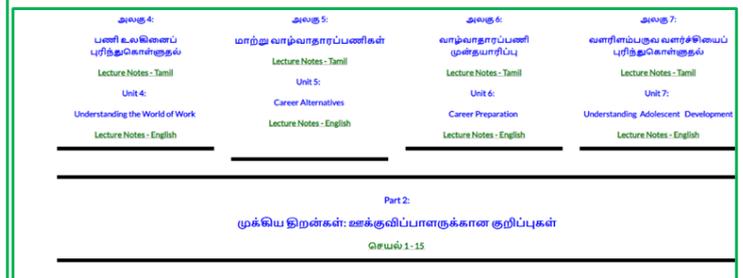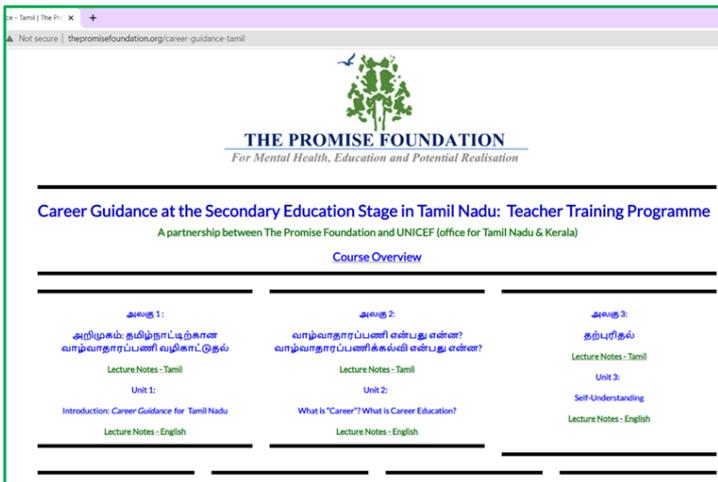
This material is also supported with comprehensive videos on each topic. The videos are available on YouTube and the teacher can view the videos online along with the self-learning material. A total of 20 videos have been made. Given below are snapshots from the videos:
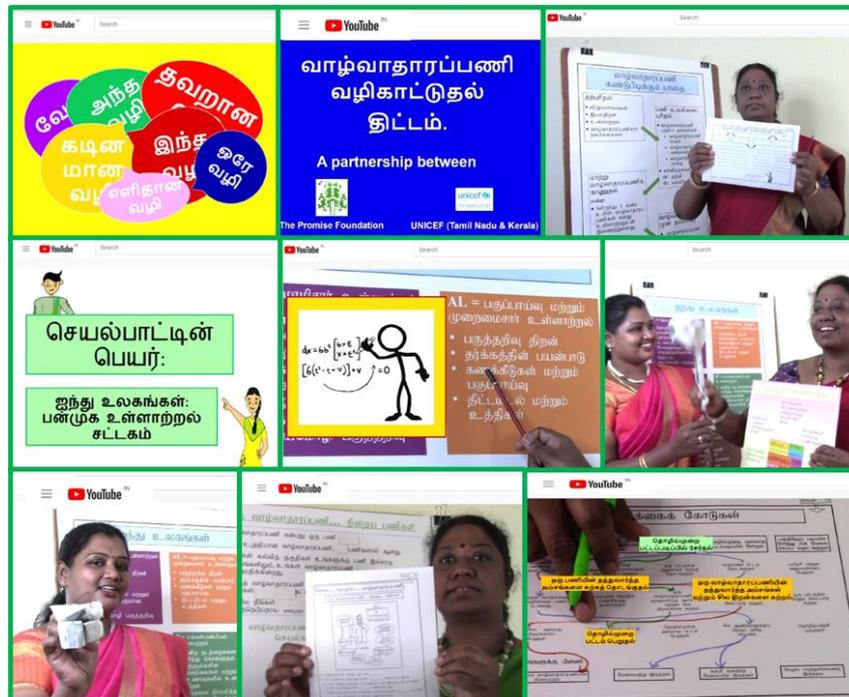
This teacher training material has been trial tested with a small group of teachers and is ready for wide scale use.

- **Going Online**

Providing career guidance services online has become a necessity. Even after the pandemic recedes it is likely that this mode of service provision will remain in demand. Therefore, significant efforts were made to bring all our career guidance material online. The following were accomplished:

  o Online career guidance intervention: Our complete career guidance intervention has been adapted to the online format. The programme can now be delivered over a period of one day to high school students online. Approximately 3000 students have used the online format over the period of this report.
  o Online counsellor training: We have to date been offering a certificate course in the face-to-face mode. This course has now been brought online. Over 2020-21, the course has been conducted successfully for 10 counsellors.

PROMISE COURSE DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

The Promise Foundation has been in existence for the last 3 decades. Over these years we have developed a substantial repository of knowledge, data, theoretical models and applications in the fields of Literacy Development and Career and Livelihood Planning. We are acknowledged as pioneers and world leaders in these fields and our models have been adapted for implementation in over 30 countries. Our assessment of service provision in the fields of Literacy Learning and Career Development shows that there are a number of service providers in the market today. However, many of them are not culturally grounded and commonly adopt systems and methods that may not be entirely suitable for the Indian context. At the same time, well-structured, learner centred, courses in these fields are not available.

With this in mind we have been working towards turning our experience and know-how, into courses that people can take up in the form of Certificates, Diplomas, Master's degrees or even at the PhD level. Some of the courses developed have been described in the sections above.

Over 2020-21, a team of resource persons was formed to begin course writing specifically on the career development and livelihood topic. To date the following have been developed:

- **Syllabus development**

A comprehensive syllabus has been developed at the certificate, diploma and master's degree levels for studies in career development and livelihood planning.

- **Course material**

Comprehensive course material is being developed for each of the topics in the syllabus by experts in the field. It is anticipated that the entire course work would be completed toward the end of 2021.

STAFF TRAINING

- **Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA)**

In keeping with international standards, all Civil Society Organisations (CSO) are required to undergo training in the prevention of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (PSEA) and child safeguarding protocols. Accordingly, The Promise Foundation enrolled for UNCEF's PSEA Assessment. The required documentation has been submitted and it is anticipated that PSEA certification will be issued during over the coming months.

CONCLUSION

This year has brough unprecedented and unexpected disruptions to established ways of functioning for almost all organisations around the world. However, as indicated in this report we can cay that Promise has adapted to these changes and continued to work toward its objectives following new and different modalities for service delivery. In many ways the modalities we have developed, incorporating virtual methods of engaging our target groups could expand our reach to wider audiences. We look forward over the coming year to further develop and crystallise these ideas and methods.

Gideon Arulmani,
Director and Managing Trustee
The Promise Foundation.
31st March 2021,
Bangalore, India.