

## Home and the school

Excerpts from interviews with parents reached through eight public-funded pre- and primary schools

[Note: The identity of the pre- and primary schools, the administrative body and the grant agency has been masked throughout these excerpts to preserve confidentiality.]

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*“Sariyaagi shaaleyalli kalisutthilla. Shisthu illa. MakkaLige sariyaagi attention kodalla...”*

*(In the school the teaching is not in the right way. There is no discipline.*

*There is no proper attention to the children...)*

Parents who decided to enrol their youngest, a son, in a private school. Their three older children are girls, and the parents are unhappy with the public-funded school they attend.

We met parents and family members of 162 children across four pre-schools and four primary schools through home visits. We also met parents through a series of in-school parent meetings. In this paper we excerpt the following from the larger report: a) an introduction to the construct of social-cognitive environments, b) a profile of families who access the public-school system we surveyed, c) the nature of support in the home for school tasks d) what do parents want from the school system and d) the uneasy relationship between home and school.

### Social-cognitive environments

This is a construct that has emerged from The Promise Foundation’s studies of poverty and disadvantage, and has been applied in our analyses across socio-economic contexts. We have found that life conditions can create *mindsets and attitudes*, which in turn influence behaviour. This influence of the mind on behaviour is particularly significant when entire societies begin to think in a particular manner, internalise belief structures, and demonstrate certain mindsets. Psychologists use the term *social cognitions* to describe patterns of thinking that have become habitual across social groups.

Social cognitions can play a significant role in beliefs and attitudes toward education. Prevailing life conditions can create social-cognitive environments. Within these environments, positive or negative values begin to be attributed to learning, education, and schooling. For example, a certain social-cognitive environment may foster in the teacher the belief that every one of his or her students must become an independent learner and hence the teacher would focus on improving his or her teaching skills. Another social-cognitive environment might foster the belief that a senior teacher’s status is such that he or she need not come to school on time, need not prepare adequately for a class, and performing the duties of a teacher “as and when possible” is sufficient. Similarly, on the side of the learner,

the student may come from a social-cognitive environment that places a high value on education and learning. In another social-cognitive environment such a value may not be placed on education and the student's family might believe that education, "if possible", is sufficient.

In taking the social-cognitive approach, we have kept in mind two possible dynamics often stated in discussions about public school education. Firstly, that the home/family environment may not be conducive to the process of education and secondly, that the school environment may not be sensitive to the learning needs and cultural-linguistic background of its constituents.

## A profile of the home

Parents of children in the pre- and primary schools (henceforth schools) typically have low incomes. They have chosen these particular schools for the material support available through free uniforms, shoes, and books.

About 29% of mothers are housewives, who work at home and look after their family. Most of the rest are also in paid employment with 7% in a permanent position, 60% in temporary jobs and 5% in irregular employment. Occupations include housemaids (*mane kelasa*), daily wage/casual labourers (*coolli kelasa*), support staff (*cleaners, ayah*), and laundry work (*dhobi kelasa*).

About 4% of fathers are unemployed, and among those employed, 11% are in permanent positions, 82% are in regular but temporary positions, and 3% have uncertain employment. Occupations include labourers (*coolli kelasa, gaare kelasa*), farmer (*raitha*), security staff (*piyoon*), carpenter, auto/bus/van driver, and housekeepers in the hospitality industry.

Amongst mothers, 40.63% have not attended school, 38.28% have dropped out in primary school, 19.53% have completed High School, and 1.5% have either a diploma or a degree.

Amongst fathers, 19.2% have never been enrolled in a school, 55.2% have dropped out before end of primary school, 23.1% are high school passed, and 2.5% hold a diploma or a degree.

The children in the early grades may not have attended a pre-school or received the health and nutrition services of the government-provided free ICDS and anganwadi. Children who enrol in the later grades may not have studied in Kannada, the medium of instruction in the survey schools. These children typically belong to families who have migrated to the city in search of better livelihood opportunities.

Homes of approximately 30% of the children are in hutments (*jopadDi mane*) and 10% in conditions that are hazardous and/or temporary (e.g., make-shift tarpaulin tents in a demolition zone of a field where their homes once stood). These spaces do not have running water or sanitation facilities.

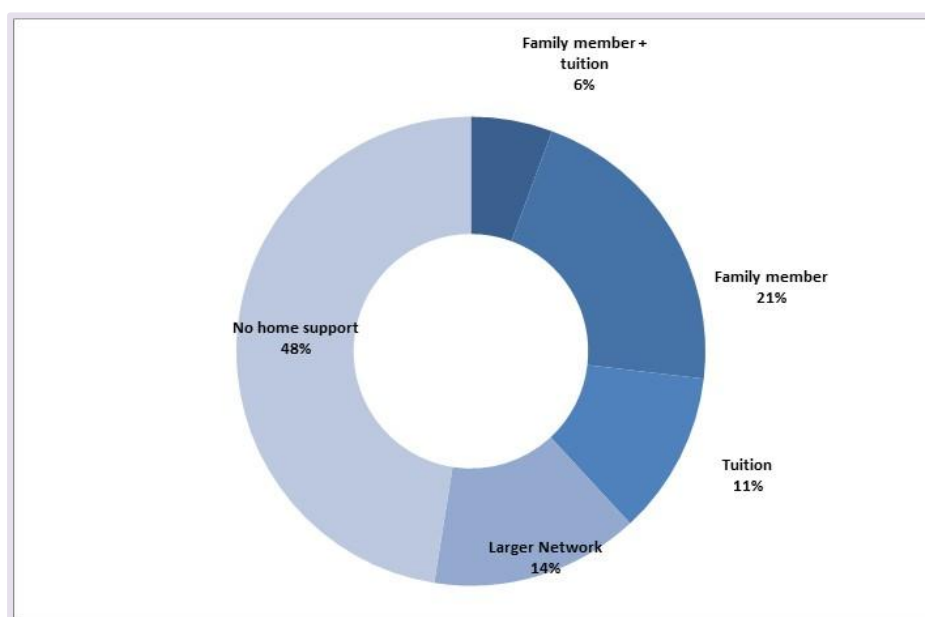
Close to half of the rest of the children live in rented homes (*bhaara ka ghar, baadige mane*) and the typical configuration of the house is a bedroom, a hall and a kitchen. These homes usually come with running water (collected within the home or in a close-by water supply point). These homes usually have access to electricity.

In one school, children come from two hostels for low-income families. One hostel has children from other districts like Raichur, Bidar, Chikkaballapur and Kolar, and another from low-income pockets in localities around Bangalore (e.g., slum pockets within the up-market Koramangala and Rajarajeshwari Nagar). Enrolment in hostels appears to be because of a family's desire to ensure their children's education.

### Is there home support for school tasks?

Children in the survey schools come from families who show a variety of assets to support school tasks at home. Examples of assets at home include (a) one family member who is literate and available to help with home tutoring, (b) access to a literate member in the community or extended family who can home tutor the child, and (c) availability of funds to invest in paid tutorials (fees range from Rs. 200 to Rs. 600 per month).

**Figure:** Home support for school tasks for children in Std. 5 to 7, pooled across all schools



The Figure above shows the source of support from home for school tasks. Close to half the children do not have the possibility of support at home from a family member or another person. Families also differ in their confidence to support school work, and their alertness to how children cope with school demands such as completing assignments. The following verbatim statements from parent interviews capture these variations to the query, “*who helps your child with homework (assignments sent home from school)*”:

- *naavyaaru shaalege hogilla. Yaaru haielikodalla* (None of us have gone to school. Nobody teaches (the children).)
- *mera bada bhai* (My elder brother (tutors me))
- *kelavu sala sahoodari sahaaya maadthaale* (Sometimes classmates help)
- *Mother teach Kannada, Father English, others (by) tuition teacher.*

Taken together, the findings point to the crucial role that the public-funded schools are required to play to comprehensively ensure children are learning and showing advancing skills year after year in school. While parents are keen to support, many feel unable, and many others feel that the school system can be trusted to take the education responsibility for their child.

## Do parents get what they want from the school system?

### “They must teach English”

The expectations of parents from the school system are complex, and the educational needs of children who come from a variety of difficult circumstances are also complex. For example, interviews with children, their parents and siblings showed that a large proportion of them aspired to learn to read, write, and speak in English and they looked to the school to make the child English-fluent.

“*ii shaaleyalli english kalisabeku*”

(In this school they must teach English.)

Stated by: 18 year old, PUC pass, elder sister and home tutor of child in Std. 1.

“*humko chata ki bacche log english me bhi padhe. Wahan sab kannada hai. aage english hai ta, isliye yahan bhi zaruri hai*”

(We wish that children also read in English. There everything is in Kannada. Going ahead there will be English, now also it is essential.)

Stated by: Mother of three children, two of whom are in Std. 5 and 6.

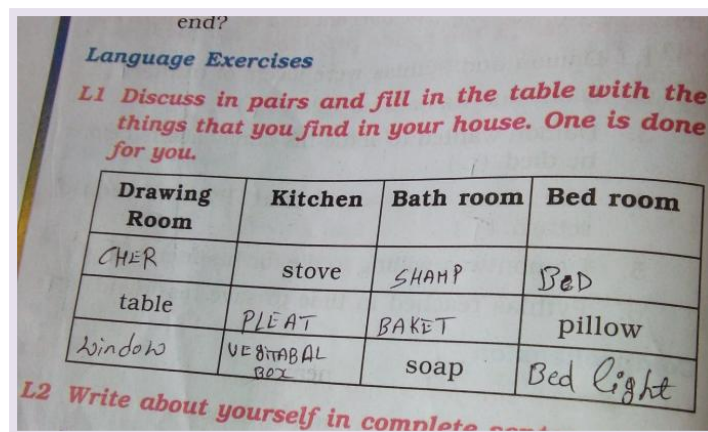
Our observations however show that children’s use of English is limited to classroom settings, delivered in a stilted, self-conscious manner and with extreme unease. Children neither use nor speak to each other in English outside of an English lesson or on the playground. There are a few exceptions, but these are students who appear to have gained from home and neighbourhood inputs rather than school-based lessons.

Close to 80% of children from nursery to Std. 7 have a small English vocabulary. Some surprises in English vocabulary were knowledge of the abstract word ‘half’ (*ardhaa*, *aadha*) and the superlative, ‘very’ (*bahuth*, *thumba*). Among the below four years olds, close to 70% knew between one and six animals names in English. For all children, including those living in temporary hutments and tarpaulin tents, English is an ambient language

spoken in the neighbourhood. The learning patterns suggest that vocabulary has been gained from this exposure, rather than any specific English inputs in school.

The teacher's English proficiency is an important issue in multi-lingual settings. A particular crisis is with one primary school which has announced a wish to become an English medium school in the community. The school has two English-fluent teachers, one of who manages the younger classes and the other is the Head teacher (HM) who never takes a class. For the older classes, English is taught by teachers with low English proficiency. Simple materials become difficult to transact.

**Image:** Teacher notes for Std. 5 English



The image above is from the Std. 5 textbook. The spontaneously developed handwritten entries were made by the teacher before she went to class to teach this lesson. The lesson was transacted by writing the words on the board and children copying these down. There was some choral recitation but for the most part this was a copywriting session. These teacher-notes however have spelling mistakes and reveal a struggle with English object names. Such errors, unsurprisingly, are carried through into the children's own struggle with English language learning.

### *“Doesn't understand the child's need”*

*“XXX teacher's teaching is not good, doesn't understand the child's need. She tells students to copy from board and does not teach.”*

Comment on a teacher by a mother with a Teacher Education background.

The above comment by an alert parent mirrors notes made over six months (July to December) by our observers. The following section will attempt to capture the concern of this parent with data on children's attainments in mathematics (numeracy), what parents are doing at home and how the language of mathematics remain outside the teaching-learning process.

Children's numeracy knowledge was assessed using different tasks for each developmental level. The tests given and our approach to assessment are summarised in the Appendix.

Among primary school children, the findings are mixed. In two primary schools, children in both Std. 2 and 3, responded to the teach-practice-test routine. In the other two primary schools, there was a stark difference between Std. 2 and 3. The younger Std. 2 children were able to use the teach-practice sessions to go on to take the test with a high degree of accuracy. Older Std. 3 children appeared to not be able to learn from the demonstrations. When asked to explain how they approached the task, they often said, *'I don't know'*, *'Miss has not taught this.'*

An important finding in Std. 2 and 3 is the high level of attainment shown by so many children in basic number knowledge and quantitative reasoning. Among those who have performed close to the expected level for their grade (an accuracy score of 75%), are children with no print or stationery at home and therefore must have very low exposure to a calendar or a ruler. The children however quickly mastered the logic of a day and date matrix and demonstrated measurement with the newly introduced scale for measurement (in centimetres and inches). *One important message from these test findings is the obvious confirmation that the children in the four public-schools are quick to learn.* The lag that is seen in their performance across academic subjects then must be a reflection of the nature of opportunity for new learning – or more importantly – the lack of opportunity.

Different cultures teach counting to their children in different ways. Some for example, promote finger counting using each digit, others every fold line on each finger. School-based routines can also be quite different from home-based counting routines. An interview with the children about their counting routines revealed two facets of child learning:

- Parents are active teachers of number knowledge. About equal number of children mentioned a family member or a school teacher as the person who taught them the routines for addition and for subtraction. Examples of responses related to a family member are *'My mother told me'*, *'My father knows'*, *'My brother told'* (*nammamma heLikoTru; nanna appange gootthu; nanna anna heeLida*). Responses about a teacher are *'I studied in my school'*, *'My miss taught this'*, *'That my miss has taught'*, *'Near my house there is one English school. This I learnt there'* (*namma schoolnalli oodiddini; humare miss sikaye so; wo manje miss sika ko hai; nanna mane hattira English ondu school ide. alli oodidde*).
- The language of numbers is as yet not available to most children. Children's awareness about number routines was varied. This is not unusual and is similar to information that has been reported in a variety of schools in India and other countries. Some children showed little or no insight into how they derived a solution. Their responses ranged from *'I don't know'*, and *'just like that'* to *'you just know'*, *'if you look you get to know'*, *'when you think, you know'* and *'it's all in the mind'* (*gottilla; ange; gottaagutte miss; noodidre gootthaagutte; manassinalli yoochane maadide; mindnalli ide*). Children who could narrate the steps taken to calculate were rare. Their responses included *'I calculate with my fingers, I counted the 3 + 4'* (*beralinda lekka maadide, 3 + 4 seerisi maadide; beralalli enisi maadide*).

Moving from the early grades to the older grades, we found a strong plateauing of attainments from Std 5 to 7 in two schools. There was no discernible difference in group averages on the numerical and quantitative reasoning tests of the Grade 5, Grade 6 and Grade 7 children in these children. In the other two schools there is a substantial improvement in scores by Grade 7, suggesting an increase in teaching with an eye on learning outcomes as children come closer to high school.

### “Private kaashthli.”

“Private kaashthli. kaasiddavarige adu vaasi  
nammantha badavarige XXX school vaasi.”

(Private (school) is costly. For the moneyed that is the place to be. For people like us in  
poverty, the XXX school is our place).

Stated by: Daily wage earner and mother of 8 year old girl, and 11 year old boy.

A private school is coveted but out of reach. We heard these sentiments expressed across neighbourhoods. A school was clearly seen as a place where the promise of education for their children would be kept. But all parents seemed acutely alert to a distance between ‘free’ public-funded schools and fee-paying ‘private’ schools. The distance was often in terms of the former being poorly-functioning schools and the latter being well-functioning schools. These perceptions are only partly accurate. There is good evidence from across India that admission into a ‘private’ school, including low fee-paying enterprises, neither assures quality education nor a nurturing of the child’s potential.

We further examined the dynamics of perception focussing on families in the neighbourhood of the public-funded schools. The ‘private’ schools that children migrated to were perceived as (a) regular, (b) focused on home-work and discipline, and (c) showing learning outcomes that were visible to the parents.

Meanwhile, there were five main reasons for transfer from a ‘private’ school back to a public-funded school, especially between Std. 4 and 7: (a) family displaced by migration, (b) a sudden drop in family income, (c) academic underachievement and threat of class repetition, (d) long absenteeism leading to threat of expulsion, and (e) increase in fees in the private school.

Taken together, the frustrated comment of the parent cited at the start of this section: “... *teacher’s teaching is not good...*” appears to echo across many other homes. Children are not getting what the parents want from the school system.

## Home and School: An uneasy relationship

All schools clearly have a potential for positive and vibrant home-school relations. An indication of this potential comes from a series of parent meeting initiated by Promise teams in all the pre-schools. The teachers were able to spread the word about the proposed parent meeting efficiently and quickly. Their call for attendance was reciprocated with parents sometimes taking leave from work or sending a representative from the extended family (grandfather, cousin) or neighbourhood (housewife next door). The parent turn-out was exceptional (e.g., if number of parents expected by teachers was 5, the turnout was 25). Parents were keen to know what happens in school and how they can help at home. It was also clear that the teacher in a pre-school is spontaneously assigned a leadership role within the communities served by the pre-school. However the possibility of a strong parent-teacher association based on trust has to negotiate several road blocks. Some of these are:

- A lack of confidence among teachers to conduct a parent meeting, hence interactions are kept brief and distant.
- A belief that parents do not need to know what teachers do in daily classes, hence interactions are never about teaching targets.
- A belief that sending homework is a line of communication with parents, hence homework is a topic of discussion that is allowed in parent-teacher meetings.

Teachers are also anxious that parents may turn belligerent and ask for more from the teacher. This turns teacher vigilant about undercurrents in parents' queries about their children's time in school. Of particular note is that the last months of 2014 saw a series of child sexual abuse cases within school settings in Bangalore. Parents have become anxious and this is reflected in their interactions in schools. None of the teachers have a concrete plan on how they can communicate to parents that their schools are a safe place. Many teachers have instead maintained an ostrich like attitude, not looking at the issue at all. One school has asked older girls to stop participating in sport and activities that need 'excessive movement'.

### *Safety and the School*

Parents assume schools are safe spaces but this was one area that we struggled to evaluate. We recorded several uneasy situations, mostly to do with outsiders having access to the school premises. Two examples are given below:

- i. After school had just gotten over for the day, a drunken man entered the campus and wandered around. All the students had not left the premises at that time. He wandered out after a while with nobody to ask him any questions.
- ii. Some non-school people seem to have free access to school facilities. Four adults served the ISKON food and settled down on the ground for lunch. Some others came and took the school water. I also saw children play with the outsiders on the school ground. One episode I saw was: an old man holding cutting pliers in his hand was trying to touch the girls. The old man seemed familiar to the girls. Then the girls came inside the campus and the old man went to the other side of the ground.



Our incidental observations of some teacher-student interactions also ask for student safety to be flagged as an area requiring in-depth observation. Our overall impression is that child safety is low to moderate, especially the safety of the girl child. Two categories of girls are particularly vulnerable:

- Primary school girls from migrant families, especially when they have low Kannada fluency (ie. low fluency in the dominant language in school)
- Pre-adolescent and adolescent girls when there is poor school infrastructure (toilets, open access campuses)

We also recorded two instances of teachers feeling unsafe in school because of abusive parents.

- A belligerent parent in one pre-school angry about a bruise his child had sustained when playing in the pre-school,
- A parent with a history of angry outbursts in another primary school. An excerpt from this episode: The father of a student who came to pick up his children in the auto, also caused agitated feelings. The teachers seemed quite wary of him and anxiously hurried the girl to finish her (exam) paper on time. The school seemed to have little control of his behaviour on their premises.

An occasion when we noted rough language, amounting to bullying in public, was by the corporator (elected government representative) and his assistants, against the Head Mistress (HM, head teacher) about lack of cleanliness on the school premises. It is important to note in this particular instance, the situation was complex and could not have been sorted out by a simple disciplinary talk to the HM. Here, the school premises are managed by the High School HM, and the primary school has been on borrowed space for eight years waiting for a dispute to be settled and to be reinstated to their own, new building. The episode however appears to mirror other episodes that were reported to us. All HMs (typically women) confirm that they are often at the mercy of corporators and government officials (typically men) who show little respect to them, speak in rough language, are insulting and, occasionally, may be insinuating of loose morality. Teachers told us that several parents take such behaviour as acceptable and may follow with similarly abrasive language.

Clearly, there is a need for a child and teacher safety document in school. There is also a need for improved home-school relationship in the public-funded schools in our survey.

## Endnote

Two key points emerge from our interviews and observations: many homes are unable to offer support for school work and many teachers seem cynical about how such children can improve. There are notable exceptions, and these give an indication of the potential of a healthy and mutually respectful home-school relationship. Based on this survey (and our review of other similar work), the recommendations are made to the schools:

### *Recommendation A: Inclusion of parents, siblings and community into the learning process.*

It is clear from the needs analysis that family members spontaneously try their best and are looking for guidance on how they can support their child in school. An important issue to be addressed when an intervention is planned around the home is that home cultures are valued, and programmes do not negatively highlight family's vulnerabilities such as limited purchasing power, few literacy artefacts at home and low assets for home tutoring. Some ways to start a home based programme are:

- A book lending programme for children
- Self-access learning material, such as word cards, for children
- A study skills programme at home that focuses on study schedule and study space at home
- An academic monitoring programme that a parent can use to understand their children's learning in school

### *Recommendation B: Improve home-school linkages.*

Some specific ways to strengthen the home-school relationship are:

- Regular parent-teacher meetings.
- Skills training for teachers on how to conduct a meeting that is sensitive to the parent body the school serves.
- Skills training for teachers on what are the home-based supports they can realistically ask for.
- Parent orientation days and open house where parents can see their children's work in school.

It may be noted that almost all these recommendations have been trial tested in various ways by The Promise Foundation during the course of this project as a parallel activity to the Needs Analysis. Based on this experience, it can be stated that these recommendations have a high potential to succeed and make specific and substantial contributions to the child's all round development.

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## Appendix: The Numeracy Tasks

### *The test batteries*

#### *Two to Four Activities*



In this test, the child was given three tasks related to sorting, seriation, and number recognition. This test was for children below the age of four.

#### *Number Knowledge, Quantitative Reasoning*

In this test, the child was given tasks to assess knowledge of numbers through number naming and addition, using real life materials such as a calendar, currency, and a measurement scale. One test assessed the concept of inverse relations.

#### *Mental Math*

This test assesses fluency with the mathematical functions of addition, subtraction, multiplication, division and estimation skills.

Tests marked with a red flag () have an inferential component. Tests marked with a blue rangoli () have a design component.

### *Approach to assessment:*

Several tasks in the test were structured to capture spontaneous quantitative reasoning using real world materials like a calendar, ruler, and currency. Our home visits had shown that a calendar was available in only about 40% of homes. In school, the calendar was not easily visible to the Std. 2 and 3 child (typically kept in the HM's room), and the child may or may not have had exposure to the calendar in the neighbourhood. Moreover, close to 50% of the children looked upon the plastic or wooden scale (ruler) as a tool to draw straight lines. They were not clear about its role in measurement. Given the variable exposure to the materials upon which the testing items were structured, the approach to assessment was to teach, practice, and then test.