THE PROMISE FOUNDATION

For Mental Health, Education and Potential Realisation

231. Cozy Home Layout, B Hosahalli Road, Sarjapura, Bangalore 562125
Websites: www.thepromisefoundation.org and www.jivacareer.org
Phone: 9632767657
Email: promise@thepromisefoundation.org

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INTRODUCTION

The Promise Foundation (TPF) is a charitable trust dedicated to breaking the cycle of poverty through the behavioural sciences in a culturally grounded manner. We research how social and economic disadvantage affects children, particularly in the areas of literacy, education, and career development. Our mission is to transform the life trajectory of young people in underserved communities by creating evidence-backed interventions that foster literacy, skill-building, and self-sufficiency. Our work focuses on early childhood stimulation, literacy acquisition, and career guidance, ensuring children, young people and their families have the tools to build a prosperous and sustainable future.

Over 2022-23 our activities continued to focus on two broad themes, namely, **Oral Language Development** amongst young children through the **TalkTogether** project and the provision of **Career and Livelihood Planning** services for high school students through the **Jiva Programme**.

THE TALKTOGETHER PROJECT

An Overview of the TalkTogether Project

TalkTogether is an international research initiative funded by UKRI GCRF, led by the Department of Education at the University of Oxford, in collaboration with The Promise Foundation (Bangalore, India). The project focuses on oral language development in young children aged 3-6 living in urban low-income areas. From 2019 to 2022, the study concentrated on Kannada in India. Since 2022, the work has expanded to include a new Hindi-focused stream in partnership with the **Language and Learning Foundation** (New Delhi, India), while continuing to develop the Kannada programme in addition to partnering with **Dost Education**.

The project is based on the understanding that strong oral language skills lay the foundations for improved literacy and academic success. Using a mixed-methods approach, we aim to map young children's language experiences in multilingual environments. Additionally, the project seeks to develop new assessment tools for children's oral language, contributing to a toolkit for teachers and large-scale learning assessments.

Given below is a summary of the TalkTogether activities over 2023-24 and a brief description regarding each of them.

The Sirsa Study

One of the main activities the TalkTogether project embarked on was to create linguistically and culturally sensitive language assessments for multilingual children in Hindi. This initiative, based in Sirsa, Haryana, mirrors a similar study previously

conducted in Karnataka for Kannada-speaking children. The study targets 5- to 6-year-olds in government schools, with the goal of developing a comprehensive Teacher Toolkit for classroom language assessments and understanding the effects of pandemic-related school closures on language development.

The project emphasizes the importance of strong **oral language skills** as a foundation for reading and writing and uses a mixed-methods approach to explore children's language experiences in **multilingual** contexts. The assessments, designed as game/play activities evaluate linguistic and literacy skills such as vocabulary, reading comprehension, working memory, and fluency. These engaging methods aim to provide insights into **early literacy development**.

Assessments were conducted in three phases over the course of the year, allowing researchers to track improvements in language development and implement classroom interventions. Despite challenges like school resistance, constant changes in school schedules and timing, weather disruptions, and connectivity issues, research assistants conducted assessments effectively, aided by extensive training, feedback and retraining. Sessions were audio recorded, reviewed for feedback and transcribed for detailed analysis. The transcriptions from these assessment sessions, spanning three phases, have undergone three rounds of verification each and are now in the analysis/ scoring stage.

This project not only enhances the understanding of language development in multilingual contexts but also contributes to innovative assessment methods, providing a valuable resource for large-scale learning assessments and classroom-based language support.

Glimpses into the Sirsa Study in Progress

Micro Intervention Study

TalkTogether developed a five-day language programme to build children's comprehension, narrative skills, and vocabulary. The programme adapted or translated 7 stories for which questions to test language skills were formulated. An extensive teacher training was provided, and teachers were asked to use one story a week.

- Each session was for a duration of 30 minutes and included a 5-minute start activity (focusing) and a 5-minute wrap-up (action poem), with 20 minutes dedicated to story reading, questioning, and language activities.
- On Day 1, teachers introduced pre-story questions to engage students before reading the story, pausing at key points to ask predictive questions.
- On Day 2, the story was reread, with teachers asking targeted questions, either modelling correct responses or accepting and extending open-ended ones.
- Day 3 focused on synthesis questions, encouraging children to discuss story elements like character, setting, and resolution, with teachers guiding and extending answers.
- Days 4 and 5 involve retelling the story, ensuring children narrate complete stories while engaging in vocabulary and language-building activities.

Based on time availability, teachers had the option to include or skip the start and wrap-up activities based on time and classroom dynamics. As teachers conducted the sessions, continuous monitoring was also carried out as per a robust list of criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of these sessions.

Rating Classroom Observations in the Micro Intervention Study

- Classroom observations were guided by criteria assessing teaching practices and student engagement. These included fostering a positive climate where children asked questions, shared opinions, and participated in discussions, with teachers modelling correct responses. Comprehension strategies like voice modulation, illustrations, vocabulary explanations, and paraphrasing were also evaluated.

- Vocabulary and syntax learning were assessed through modelling correct usage and integrating new words. Multilingual support was observed by acknowledging language diversity. Teachers were rated on following scheduled activities, maintaining focused reading, and conducting effective question and answer sessions.

- Child engagement was measured through participation in discussions, story retelling, and peer assistance, while noting passive behaviours like distractions. These criteria structured the evaluation of children's responses after story-based lessons.

Teacher Training Workshop

The TalkTogether project, implemented in the Sirsa block of Haryana during the 2023-24 academic year, involved 40 schools. A one-day teacher training was conducted to orient teachers on the programme's objectives, specifically focusing on oral language development and the use of the **TalkTogether - Sanjhe Bol kit**. The training included sessions on the programme's structure, storytelling techniques, and engagement strategies, led by experienced intervention school teachers. Participants engaged in hands-on demonstrations, exploring materials like story books and story-strips, and discussing effective practices for story-reading and retelling.

The training emphasized the importance of reading fluently, guiding children to use full sentences, and facilitating group discussions. The session fostered a positive atmosphere, with teachers actively engaging and sharing their classroom experiences. Overall, the training highlighted the potential of the TalkTogether programme to enhance children's oral language skills and foster a collaborative learning environment, concluding with a sense of optimism for its future impact.

Glimpses into Teacher Training Workshop

Sirsa Block Officer's Training

An orientation to key objectives of the TalkTogether project was conducted in Sirsa, focusing on Block Resource Persons (BRPs) and Assistant Block Resource Coordinators (ABRCs). This initiative, designed to enhance oral language skills for BalVatika and Grade 1 children, has been operational in 40 schools in the current academic year in the Sirsa region. The primary objectives of the session included sharing insights from the previous year's intervention, orienting participants on the learning objectives for oral language development and establishing effective monitoring practices for the use of the Sanjhe Bol kit.

During the session, participants engaged in discussions about existing observation criteria during language sessions, particularly during story-reading, group discussions, and retelling activities. Challenges identified included limited opportunities for students to engage fully and utilize rich vocabulary, as well as the need for teachers to provide better scaffolding during discussions. Participants shared their experiences, noting common practices such as picture-reading, storytelling, and role-play, while also expressing the necessity of fostering an environment where all children can participate and practice full sentence construction.

The session included a comprehensive introduction to the materials within the Sanjhe Bol kit, which consists of storybooks and accompanying activities designed to encourage interactive learning. Participants learned how to effectively utilize the kit to facilitate richer language experiences for children. The key strategies and insights for monitoring and implementation of these sessions were prioritized and shared during the meet.

In summary, the orientation successfully equipped the participants with essential knowledge and tools, emphasizing the importance of structured observation and engagement strategies. This collaborative effort aims to significantly enhance the impact of the TalkTogether project on children's language development in the region.

> **Glimpses into Block Officer's Training**

Analysis of Data

Data collected through the TalkTogether project is complex and includes qualitative and quantitative information. All interviews are audio recorded and are transcribed for analysis. The data is then coded and analysed for trends and patterns. This requires high level statistical analysis as well as qualitative, thematic extractions. The details of this intensive process are provided in Appendix 1.

Outputs

Keeping to The Promise Foundation's commitment to the action research objective, our overarching aim is to ensure that all our research is made accessible to stakeholders in the academic sphere as well as to practitioners, students and the general public. Given below is an overview of the outputs of the TalkTogether Project over this year.

- Key learnings on how the project adapted narrative assessment tools were collated by research assistant Deeksha Prabhu and published on the TalkTogether website: Successful capturing of young children's narratives: Reflections on modifying a popular tool (talktogetherproject.blogspot.com)

- Effects of shared reading on vocabulary growth, presenting preliminary results from one school involved in TalkTogether's 'A Story a Day' intervention were collated by research assistant Adhvika Shetty and published on the TalkTogether website: https://talktogetherproject.blogspot.com/2024/08/vocabulary-growth-and-rich-language.html

- How traditional tales can enhance children's language development was written by research assistant Pooja Pandith and published in a new blog that was published in GPforEducation: globalpartnership.org/blog/once-upon-time-how-traditional-tales-can-support-childrens-language-development

- A beginner's guide to the book levelling tool, featuring a step-by-step approach for teachers, librarians, and researchers to select children's books was collated by Sanjana Nagendra and published on the TalkTogether website: talktogether.web.ox.ac.uk/sitefiles/a-beginners-guide-to-the-book-levelling-tool.pdf

"Bol Saathi" in collaboration with Dost Education

Bol Saathi is a home-based intervention implemented in collaboration with Dost Education, aimed at developing oral communication skills in children aged 3-6 years from low-income households. The programme combines **WhatsApp messages, videos**, and **home visits** to support caregivers in improving their family facilitator practices, such as using full sentences and offering clear praise. The goal is to enhance children's receptive language and listening comprehension.

Using a quasi-experimental design, the research evaluated whether caregivers in the intervention group improve more in their language-supporting practices compared to a control group, and whether children in the programme show greater progress in their oral language skills. The study also examines how caregiver engagement—both online with video content and offline through home visits—affects these outcomes.

This research has the potential to offer a scalable, cost-effective models tailored to under-resourced households in India and other low- and middle-income countries, fostering school readiness and addressing developmental gaps in young children.

Blog Writing Course

In keeping with The Promise Foundation's commitment to dissemination of data and research findings, another highlight of this year was an online blog writing course that was written and executed by the Department of Education, University of Oxford.

The Blog Writing Series aimed at enhancing participants' academic blog writing skills using the CARS model (Create a Research Space). Led by Dr. Ernesto Roque Gutierrez, Department of Education, University of Oxford, it included six sessions, starting with introductions and idea development, where participants shared their interests and explored preliminary blog topics related to education and literacy based on their engagement with the project. The second session focused on effective science communication strategies for conveying complex concepts to non-specialist audiences. In the third session, participants reviewed high-quality academic blogs to understand exemplary writing.

The fourth and fifth sessions taught essential and advanced writing techniques, guiding participants in developing their drafts. The final session focused on refining these drafts through constructive peer review. By applying the CARS model, participants learnt how to effectively engage their audience, making their academic blogs impactful and relevant.

CAREER AND LIVELIHOOD PLANNING FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Career guidance helps students to realise their potentials and connect to careers that realise their potentials. TPF believes that every child is gifted with specific talents and capabilities. Our Jiva career guidance programme helps students and their families discover these potentials and connect them with suitable careers.

An Overview of Jiva Content and Impact

Here are the key points regarding the impact of the Jiva career guidance programme based on our monitoring and evaluation of the intervention:

Improved Career Preparation Status

The programme, which uses the Career Discovery Path (understanding self, understanding the world of work, developing alternatives, and career preparation), significantly improves students' readiness to make informed career decisions. We have consistently seen improvements of 40 to 50 percentage points in students' career preparation status when assessed before and after the Jiva intervention.

"Multiple Potentials" Framework

Unlike traditional systems that focus only on academic marks, Jiva's impact lies in identifying a student's "Multiple Potentials"—a blend of interests and aptitudes, helping to identify career paths where a student is likely to succeed. Jiva is designed in such a way that **all** students realise that they have special talents and capabilities. This in turn improves their self-confidence and motivates them to pursue career development activities more vigorously.

Shift from "One-time" to "Lifelong" Skills

The programme impacts students by teaching them how to evaluate and "interrogate" a career path, providing them with the tools for lifelong self-mediation of the labour market rather than just choosing a single job.

Activity-Based Learning

Impact is achieved through a student-led, activity workshop format, which promotes high engagement, self-introspection, and peer learning rather than passive testing. The Jiva workshops use interesting, culturally grounded teaching-learning materials as shown below:

The Jiva Career Guidance Kit

Filp Charts · Learning Cards · Careers Dictionary

Careers Cards Bag · Careers Cards · Worksheets

Addressing Career Beliefs

Jiva works to identify and correct limiting, culturally embedded "career beliefs" (e.g., "arts is for weak students"), helping students make choices based on potential rather than societal pressure.

Tangible Outcomes (Individualized Report)

Participants receive a 10–15-page personalized career report that provides the student's potential profile, recommended subject streams, and specific, actionable career paths with institutional information.

Bridging Family and Student Expectations

Through special parent sessions, the Jiva programme helps bridge the gap between student aspirations and parental expectations, encouraging collaborative career planning.

Career Guidance Workshops

Over the 2023-24 career guidance workshops were conducted in the following government schools and low fee paying private aided schools. Over 300 students were guided systematically by taking them through the career discovery path and helping them to choose careers that are best suited to them and prepare for the next level of education.

Details of the workshops:

Date of the workshop	School Name	Place	Number of Students attended
28.11.2023	Karnataka Public School	Adugodi	60
09.02.2024	Sai Shankar Vidya Shala English Medium	Rajanukunte	50
09.02.2024	Sai Shankar Vidya Shala Kannada Medium	Rajanukunte	23
13.02.2024	Government High School	Marasuru	25
16.02.2024	Government High School	Huskur	60
20.02.2024	Government High School	Sarjapura	64
23.02.2024	Government High School	Koogur	21

Glimpses into Jiva Workshops

The pictures show the process of the Jiva career guidance workshop in the classroom. Most importantly, the workshops are student-led. The role of the career counsellor is more of a facilitator than a teacher. At the end of the career guidance workshop, students learn how to link their potentials to the careers to plan for their further education.

CONCLUSION

Over the past year, The Promise Foundation continued to fulfil its commitment to implementing evidence based interventions to lay early learning foundations for young children and contributing to the career readiness of high school students. Moving forward, we remain focused on breaking the cycle of poverty by providing essential tools that could influence the life trajectories of children and youth from underserved backgrounds.

Gideon Arulmani,
Director and Managing Trustee
The Promise Foundation.
31st March 2024,
Bangalore, India.

APPENDIX 1

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The data from the assessment study went through a phase of analysis. Since all games were audio recorded, the audios had to be transcribed, and the responses were to be scored. The games or assessment activities included naming a list of fruits, animals and many such, in a minute. The number of items the child mentioned in each category was taken into count and the responses were recorded.

Another game employs story strips as a stimuli, to explore and assess narrative skills in children in many different languages. Here the child was told a story using picture strips and a set of questions that that touched upon the child's comprehension of the story were asked. The next step was to narrate a similar story and the child was asked to narrate the story back to the assessor. The data was again in the form of audio recordings and were all transcribed based on a new protocol.

The current transcription and utterance segmentation protocol is designed to help transcribers working with Kannada spoken language from children. It provides guidelines to ensure that transcriptions can be easily analysed manually, using the utterance as the main unit of study, which is commonly used in child language research. Another point that could help is to have open access and for the use of the research community.

Coding of Responses

The story game that captured children's narrations in the form of audios were transcribed. The next step was to code the samples for each individual child's output. A scoring scheme was employed, and we looked at the children's narrations in terms of elements of the story in addition to setting and character. The story had three episodes and each episode called for the initiating event goal, attempt and outcome. A highest score of two was given if the child mentioned the target response completely. The score of 0 was given when the child did not mention the element or gave an irrelevant response.

Language use in children's narrations

The microstructure coding approach classifies children's utterances based on their structure and grammatical accuracy. Utterances are categorized as simple (containing a single independent clause- "The Cat sat on a mat."), complex (including both dependent and independent clauses- "The Cat sat on a mat and drank the milk."), or NA (non-clausal utterances such as one-word responses or nouns- "How much?", or "Okay"). Clausal counts and subordinate clauses *("I went to the market because I had*

to buy vegetables"- here 'because I had to buy vegetables' is the subordinate clause) are also noted for each utterance. Accurate utterances are coded as "1," while those with grammatical issues are marked "0," with specific error types documented, including morphological, semantic, mispronunciation, word order, and combination errors. Decisions on coding reflect various considerations, such as treating non-word clauses as potential verb clauses based on context, segmenting repeated independent clauses, and seeking assistance with unfamiliar language samples. Reported speech is coded by distinguishing between independent and dependent clauses, and semantic errors, such as word omissions or mispronunciations, are identified where they affect the meaning. For NA utterances, the clausal count, accuracy, and error type are recorded as zero or NA. The coding guidelines ensure consistency and accuracy in assessing children's language development across diverse utterances.

Teacher Interview Transcriptions and Independent Checks

Interviews were conducted with over 70 teachers across Kannada and Hindi, using eight vignettes that depicted real-life classroom scenarios. These vignettes served as case studies, and teachers were asked to share their opinions and practices in response to the follow-up questions. Each interview lasted 90 minutes, and consent from each participating teacher was obtained well in advance. The interviews were audio recorded, and a research assistants transcribed them verbatim. To ensure the accuracy of the data, four rounds of independent checks were conducted, verifying that the transcripts aligned precisely with the audio recordings.