

Early Grade Reading Program

PHOTO STORY

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A World of Opportunities

Dipika's love of reading is ignited by her exposure to new ways of learning



In the serene hills of Dhankuta, lives nine-year old Dipika Limbu, who enjoys playing with her baby goats as much as she enjoys playing with her friends. As the eldest child in the family, she also looks after her two sisters when her mother is busy at the farm.





The rest of the time, this second-grader has her nose buried in books. In a space lit from the sunlight coming in from a little window, she sits at her reading corner, going through the storybooks she brings back from school. She comes from a modest family background, so she does not have a spacious reading corner or fancy stationary, but what she does have is her love of reading and motivation to do better in her studies.





Fortunately, the National Early Grade Reading Program (NEGRP) was implemented in her school two years back in 2018. Through the program, plenty of colorful and well-illustrated, grade-suitable storybooks were provided. Decodable books were also supplied to aid reading. Similarly, the teachers were trained to teach in an interactive manner using plenty of teaching materials provided by the program.

Only two years back, her predecessors could not even have dreamt of such engaging materials as they only saw their course book in black and white. Many private schools had colorful storybooks and interactive classes but not community schools like Dipika's where free education also meant minimal service.





With the support of the program, her classroom has been decorated with colorful posters and engaging materials. A variety of storybooks, neatly hung in plastic cases on either side of the whiteboard, lets her explore a world outside the syllabus of her course book.

Dipika is an active student who eagerly participates in all her class activities. One of her favorites is to form sentences by aligning words in a pinwheel chart. Her classmates are equally interested in the activity and eagerly wait for their turn to make another sentence.







Deepkala Iwahang Limbu, her grade teacher, admits that the students have become quick learners who remember better since she started implementing the learning from the training she received from NEGRP.

In 2018, the 10-day teacher professional development training introduced Deepkala to the 'gradual release model' of teaching, popularly called the 'I do, we do, you do' method.





Now while teaching new words she reinforces them with gestures and the students follow her lead. She divides her hands into segments to explain the different syllables in a word, and Dipika eagerly imitates her teacher. “Children love to participate in the process,” admits Deepkala.



Dipika is also engrossed when her teacher stands in front of the classroom and reads to the whole class from a 'big book,' a folio-sized book with large pictures designed for whole-class instruction. "With big fonts and elaborate pictures in the big book, it is easier for the students to understand what I am teaching," claims Deepkala.





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More than ten million teaching and learning materials and supplementary reading materials have been designed, printed and distributed to more than 5000 community schools of initial 16 districts of Nepal where the program is implemented.



However, as much as Dipika loves books and enjoys reading, she is even more fascinated by the other types of learning materials that her teacher makes for them. She cannot contain her enthusiasm when she holds the paper airplane her teacher hands her.

“The happiness and interest of my students keep me motivated,” says Deepkala, who learnt to make and use locally produced materials to teach her students in the NEGRP training.



The best time for Dipika, however, is the carpet time when she can choose any storybook of her liking from the book hanger. She can relax on the carpet and lose herself in an imaginary world.



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Although all the community schools in 16 districts were provided with teaching and learning materials and teacher training, Dipika's school was one of the 1,500 schools that were chosen for a one-time School Management Committee (SMC) grant. The grant allowed schools to make their early grade classes print rich, add carpets and furniture, and organize various activities that promote the culture of reading.

Every day, she is allowed to take home a storybook of her choice, which Dipika reads to her father in the evenings. Dil Bahadur Limbu is delighted by the fact that contemporary teaching techniques contrast the rote learning method of his days. “Children now have a wider exposure [to more concepts] from a young age,” he says, brimming with satisfaction. “During our school days, we received a very narrow education.”





Dil Bahadur dedicates at least 30 minutes every day to help his daughter with her studies, in particular her pronunciation and spelling. “As parents, we might not be able to give our entire day to our children, but we need to give them enough time to encourage their reading habits,” opines Dil Bahadur, who also makes time to visit and talk to Dipika’s teachers, at regular intervals, to inquire about her studies.

Dil Bahadur's dedication to his child's education came from his exposure to the motivating words of a peer educator—a person much like him who was trained to advocate to parents to get involved.

“In the past, parents were not actively involved in their children's education,” says Shreekrishna Kattel, an NEGRP trained peer educator. “Through activities like reading festivals and reading competitions, parents saw the level of their children's ability compared to others. This bred a sense of responsibility and competitiveness in parents and inspired them to take a more active role in their children's education.”





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Dil Bahadur is one of the 120,000 parents who have received peer education training through the program, out of whom 64% were women.



आजुनबार	बैशाख
सोमबार	जेठ
मंगलबार	आषाढ
बुधबार	भाद्रपद
बिसेबार	भाद्र
गुरुबार	आश्विन
शनिबार	

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रतिय

Such holistic support provided by the program has transformed young Dipika's life. The exposure that she received in a small community school in a village of Dhankuta has built a good foundation for her future.

Although Deepkala does not have the record of her reading fluency and comprehension from the earlier years, she admits that Dipika has shown a good improvement in reading and comprehension skill. **In under a year's time, Dipika's reading speed has reached about 70 words per minute with high comprehension.**



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The national benchmark set for a 'good' reader is 45 correct words per minute in Nepali language with 80 percent understanding of what they read.

The benchmark, which was also put into place by NEGRP, has made it easy to measure the fluency and comprehension of students. In the presence of parents, the NEGRP-trained class teachers also carry out Classroom Based Early Grade Reading Assessment (CB-EGRA) to measure children's achievement every year.

Dipika's love for reading, along with the support she is getting from her teacher in her school and her father at home, has also landed her first position in a reading competition conducted by her school.

Reading competitions are another activity made possible in Dipika's school by the SMC grant provided by the program. Although the school management committee was in operation before the program, it became more actively involved in the school's teaching and learning process after it received the grant. To continue the good practices introduced by NEGRP, the SMC now holds regular meetings and reviews its work frequently.





Dipika is one of the approximately 550,000 early grade students who have benefitted from NEGRP, a program led by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology with support from USAID's Early Grade Reading Program (EGRP), which aims to improve the reading fluency and comprehension of primary-level students in all community schools in 16 districts of Nepal.

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The 'NEGRP minimum package' has been developed to gradually replicate aspects of the program that add the most value to children's learning, in other districts of Nepal. To date, the government of Nepal has scaled up the NEGRP minimum package to four more districts in the academic year 2019-2020 and 10 in 2020-2021. The anticipated addition of eight districts in 2021-2022 will bring the total to 38, with the expectation that full national coverage will be achieved in subsequent years.

Local bodies have also realized the improvement brought about by NEGRP in the reading fluency and comprehension in children of grade 1-3 in the community schools of Chhathar Jorpati Rural Municipality of Dhankuta district. They are planning to replicate some aspects of the program on their own, in schools that did not receive the SMC grant, so that more children like Dipika can have access to a better learning environment.



“Schools in our municipality are regularly monitored, in addition to the joint monitoring conducted by EGRP, provincial and federal government. We have collected grade-wise reading achievements in our municipality, which shows that the reading fluency of children has considerably increased.”

Nirmala Subedi
Head of the Local Education Unit,
Chhathar Jorpati Rural Municipality



“We’ve seen the positive impact of the NEGRP model in our schools, and we want to continue following the same model. NEGRP supported nine community schools with SMC grants. The municipality is now providing grants to six more schools with plans of extending this to the remaining 13 schools so that all our community schools will have a very good learning environment in their primary grades.”

Sher Bahadur Limbu
Mayor, Chhathar Jorpati Rural Municipality



“After the implementation of NEGRP in our school, teachers have become very active. Attendance rate has also increased in grade 1-3. With NEGRP’s SMC grant, our school was able to create a better learning environment in the classrooms and organize reading festivals as well as reading competitions to encourage community engagement.”

Hari Prasad Kafle
Headmaster, Saraswati Basic School

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