

Early Grade Reading Program

PHOTO STORY

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Together We Can

***Active involvement of teachers and
parents contributes to promising
improvements in children's learning***





Sajan Chaudhary rushes to wash his face from the hand pump installed right outside his home so that he won't be late to school. It is a beautiful day and the Tharu community in Kanchanpur is hustling and bustling to start their daily chores.







After rushing through his morning activities, Sajan, who studies in grade three, finally rides his way to school where colorful books and interesting activities await him. School is a fun place for him and his friends.

Sajan has come a long way from the child whose reading was a long, stop-start ordeal. Although he enjoyed reading, he stumbled across words and sentences. “He used to read very slowly,” says his mother, Pashupati Chaudhary. “He knew letters, but he had a difficult time arranging them into words.”



Many children like Sajan—who comes from a Tharu community and speaks in his mother tongue at home—have a hard time speaking and reading in Nepali, which is the medium of instruction in school.

Already a shy child, Sajan found his learning further hindered by the traditional teaching method, which mostly involved using a single course book and one-way communication by teachers.



The introduction of the National Early Grade Reading Program (NEGRP) beginning in 2014, which aims to improve the reading skills of children in grade one to three in all the community schools of Nepal, came as a panacea for children like Sajan.

The program, which was implemented in 2016, led Sajan's school to practice a new model of teaching that focused on different reading components, colorfully illustrated books, and interactive activities.

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Sajan's school is among more than 5,000 schools where NEGRP—the national program implemented by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) and supported by USAID—has been implemented. USAID's Early Grade Reading Program (EGRP) is technically supporting the government of Nepal to implement NEGRP in the initial 16 districts of Nepal.





“I have included many activities to make the classes more interesting and interactive for the children, so even 90 minutes of class time does not seem to be enough these days. These activities are helping my students to understand the content better and to retain their learning,” says Kaushila Oli, Sajan’s Nepali teacher, who received a 10-day training from NEGRP along with a set of teaching and learning materials.

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Kaushila is among approximately 15,000 teachers who received training provided by NEGRP. She also received grade-appropriate teaching and learning materials to make her classes interesting. EGRP has assisted the government of Nepal to design, print and distribute more than 10 million teaching and learning materials and supplementary reading materials.

Meanwhile, Sajan's mother, Pashupati, who had always been concerned about her son's reading ability, received support and motivation from NEGRP's peer educator to visit her son's school and share her concerns. Since her husband is a police officer and is mostly away on duty, Pashupati takes full responsibility for her two sons' studies.



Pashupati and teacher Kaushila discussed at length to identify ways to help Sajan learn better. While Pashupati would often visit school, teacher Kaushila occasionally dropped by Sajan's house on her way home.





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Through peer education training and other social mobilization activities, NEGRP is working with parents and communities to increase their involvement in children's learning. The program motivates parents to listen to their children read to them, visit their school to inquire about their children's studies, and create reading corners for their children at home, among other activities.

At school, Kaushila encouraged Sajan to speak up more during class activities. She focused on exercises to build his confidence. “Sajan is a thoughtful child,” says Kaushila. “He doesn’t just answer abruptly. He thinks it through and tries to answer correctly.”







At home, Pashupati set up a reading corner where Sajan could read and complete his homework comfortably.

Pashupati also started to allot more of her own time to support his studies. She asked him to read to her, and she herself read out loud to him and his younger brother. “When he sensed that I was interested in his reading, he also became more interested in it,” says Pashupati.





After the continued efforts of his teacher, along with support from his parent, Sajan now speeds his way through his work book and speaks confidently in Nepali.

“At the beginning of the year, he could barely read 40 words per minute, and now he can read up to 80 words. His progress has also led him do better in other subjects,” says teacher Kaushila. She is delighted with his improvement and notes that Sajan’s mother played a huge role.

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The early grade students have come a long way since the nationally-representative early grade reading assessment, which was conducted with USAID's support in 2014, showed that nearly one-fifth of grade 3 students could not read a single word of connected text.

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.



“In our community, parents often feel that they’re too busy to follow up with schools,” says Pashupati, “but your child is your treasure, and even a five-minute conversation with their teachers can make a huge difference in their studies.”

Teacher Kaushila also explains that Pashupati sharing her concerns pushed her to become a better teacher. “If parents and teachers can work together, students get attention from both sides, and we can see holistic growth in them,” says Kaushila.





Although Sajan has a long way to go before he can make life decisions on his own, he is already showing his prowess in drawing. “He says he wants to become an artist,” says Pashupati. “As long as he is willing to work hard, I will always be there to make sure he achieves his dreams.”

The school's head teacher, who received a five-day training from NEGRP to support and coach teachers, observes the classes periodically and is happy to see the changes in all the early grade students.



“Children do not stress about tests these days. NEGRP has really increased the reading fluency and comprehension of students in my school. Children in grade two or three can read books that children in grade five found difficult to read before the introduction of the program,” shares head teacher Sarita Chaudhary.

Since strong reading skills in the early grades lay the foundation for higher achievement in the future, NEGRP is paving the way for success for children like Sajan, who are not just struggling to read but also struggling to keep up with children whose mother tongue is Nepali.

Teacher Kaushila and Pashupati's efforts were reinforced by the support from the wider education system consisting of local government representatives and local leaders who have now become advocates for the program after seeing the positive effects of NEGRP.

Sajan, knowing that he has the support of his parent and his teacher, plays happily with his friends, dreaming to become a successful artist someday.



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To date, NEGRP has benefitted over 550,000 students, of which more than 50 percent are female, in the initial 16 target districts. With the program slated to scale up to all 77 districts of the country, many more children like Sajan will benefit from the program for years to come.



“After the introduction of the program, I have noticed that classrooms have been managed better; teachers have been trained and parents have slowly realized the importance of engaging in their child’s education. As a result, the reading skills of children have shown great improvement.”

Siddha Raj Joshi,
Head of Local Education Unit (LEU), Laljhadi
Rural Municipality



“After the program started, enough teaching materials have reached schools. Now if we can just make proper use of them, it will definitely improve children’s reading skills. To give continuity to this model of teaching, we have talked to the local officials, and they’ve shown commitment to allocate budget for it.”

Bharat Babu Subedi
Chief, Education Development and Coordination
Unit (EDCU), Kanchanpur



“Due to the extra teaching and learning materials promoted by NEGRP, more children are finding school fun to attend. We’ve already started discussions with the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology to focus more on education than on physical infrastructure. After discussions with all the head teachers, we plan to allocate our budget accordingly for next year.”

Madansen Badayek,
Mayor, Laljhadi Rural Municipality

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EGRP-supported orientations for local government representatives across all 16 districts were instrumental in helping officials understand the goals of the government’s National Early Grade Reading Program (NEGRP) and create buy-in in their communities.

USAID's Early Grade Reading Program (EGRP), Kathmandu, Nepal , Tel: +977-01-4001013

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