CHAPTER VI
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

6.1 BACKGROUND
This empirical study had the following major objectives:

(i) To study language teaching-learning processes and students’ achievements in reading skills in grades 1 and 2 in selected schools in Assam and Rajasthan

(ii) To compare these processes with good practices identified from research in teaching of reading in early grades and the experience of effective reading programmes

(iii) To identify and study the main academic factors that affect students’ reading achievements.

A multi-method research design, with a focus on qualitative analysis, was followed for the study. A major part of the study involved an in-depth research in 16 selected schools; 8 each in one district, in Assam and Rajasthan. In these schools, the scope of study included documenting and analyzing classroom processes for teaching language; assessment of students’ achievements in reading; analysis of teachers’ and students’ time-on-task, and understanding teachers’ perceptions on the teaching of language in early grades. For this purpose, the following research methods and tools were used:

- Classroom observation schedule (32 classrooms observed for 3 days each)
- Time-on-task record (480 snapshots of teacher and student activities recorded)
- Teachers’ interviews (19 teachers interviewed)
- Students’ assessment (373 students from grade 1 and 2 were tested on a 6-stage test)
In addition to the above mentioned data collection in the 16 selected schools, the following research tools were employed and analysis carried out for the study:

- **Teachers’ survey** (103 teachers in the 2 states filled up a questionnaire)
- **Focus Group Discussions** (2 discussions held with teachers from the selected schools)
- **Comparison with a ‘good school’ in each state** (practices observed in the 8 selected schools were compared with similar observations in one ‘good’ school with a learning/reading improvement programme)
- **Brief Case Studies from each state** (4 Case Studies of schools and teachers)
- **Curriculum & Textbook Analysis** (language curriculum and grade 1 and 2 textbooks in both states)
- **Analysis of in-service training** (analysis of training modules of last 2 years)

The analysis involved triangulation of findings from different data sources. Extensive qualitative field notes that were recorded during classroom observations and other school visits were used for the overall analysis and interpretation. The findings from data analysis are presented in Chapter IV and V. High level findings from the analysis are presented in Table 6.1. **Students’ reading achievements** in both states were low and much below grade expectations. Less than 3% students could read with reasonable fluency in these states. There is also a lot of variation in reading achievements within a class; creating a significant multilevel situation in most classrooms. **There is a lot of similarity in language teaching practices in the two states.** Choral repetition after the teacher, or another student who is reading, is a common practice in both states. Here, most students do not actually read, though teachers treat this as a reading activity. Most students repeat a text that they have memorized. Copying from the textbook or blackboard is another common activity. Students remain off-task for about 40% of the time allocated for language each day. This includes the time when the teacher is away from the
class as well as the time when students are not engaged in any activity, even though the teacher is in the class. Teachers’ perceptions about the reasons for low student learning and other issues were also quite similar across the two states. Teachers, generally, do not feel accountable for student learning, and cite lack of parental support and the multigrade teaching situation as the main reasons for low reading achievements of students. However, there were some differences in the situation between the two states. While, reading achievements are characterized by ‘low means and high variance’ in both states, the levels are much lower in Rajasthan in all the skills that were tested. The use of textbook and TLM is more common (for more of the class time) in Assam classrooms. In-service training and academic support strategies are serving some limited purpose in Assam. In Rajasthan they are completely discredited and dysfunctional.

6.2 IDENTIFICATION OF THE MAIN ACADEMIC FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE READING ACHIEVEMENTS

The findings from different tools used for the study have been presented in Chapters IV & V. This data analysis formed the basis for the identification of the main academic factors that seem to affect reading achievements in early grades in primary schools in the two states. A summary of these findings and the linked academic issues or factors is shown in Table 6.1 below.

Even though these two states are located in very different parts of the country, and are very different on cultural and ethnic dimensions, the issues in the area of language teaching and learning in primary education are remarkably similar. *This could mean that the issues and factors identified in this chapter could also be relevant for many other states in the country.*
### Table 6.1: Summary findings and linked academic factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Main Findings</th>
<th>Linked Academic Issues</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student assessment</strong></td>
<td>• Low scores on letter and CV recognition</td>
<td>• Poor teaching of decoding</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Low achievements on word and oral reading fluency</td>
<td>• Little practice for reading words and connected text</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Poor writing skills</td>
<td>• No independent writing practice</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Poor performance on inferential type comprehension questions</td>
<td>• Little focus on higher order comprehension skills</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• High intra-class disparity in reading achievements</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Classroom Observation</strong></td>
<td>• Low time-on-task for students</td>
<td>• Low instructional time</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Students passive most of the time</td>
<td>• Teachers not aware of strategies/activities for improving students’ time-on-task and</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Teachers find it difficult to conduct effective multigrade teaching</td>
<td>their active engagement in learning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Little use of TLM</td>
<td>• Teachers not oriented on effective multigrade teaching strategies (also, more teachers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Mechanical activities of choral repetition and copying are most common</td>
<td>needed)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Teachers aware of intra class disparity in reading skills; but unable to</td>
<td>• Teachers and district/block/cluster academic staff do not have a conceptual understanding of effective practices for teaching of reading and language in early grades</td>
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<td></td>
<td>address this problem</td>
<td>• Teachers do not have the knowledge, skills or attitude for addressing needs of weaker students who lag behind</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• No practice for reading for beginning and early readers</td>
<td>• Textbooks are ambitious and not in line with students’ level of reading development</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Revision, reinforcement and extra attention to weaker students is rare</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Writing tasks limited to copying and handwriting practice</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Lack of teacher preparation for lessons; no group work in Rajasthan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Comprehension highly neglected</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Teachers do not ask enough questions. Most questions require yes/no type or one word answers; Very little scope for oral language development</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Students who speak a different language at home face a serious challenge in early grades</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Texts in textbook lessons have language difficulty levels much beyond students’ average reading and language comprehension skills in grades 1 and 2.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>Main Findings</td>
<td>Linked Academic Issues</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers’ Survey</td>
<td>• Teachers have low expectations of young children   &lt;br&gt;• Teachers blame lack of home support and irregular attendance for students’ low achievements   &lt;br&gt;• Teachers place emphasis exclusively on teaching of letters and matras. Believe that reading and understanding follow later in the sequence &lt;br&gt;• Teachers find multigrade teaching to be a big problem &lt;br&gt;• Language teaching should get more time &lt;br&gt;• In-service training programmes and regular academic support is not effective and has not focussed on early grades language teaching &lt;br&gt;• Good quality pre-primary education would help improve learning &lt;br&gt;• Non-teaching tasks take away precious teaching time</td>
<td>• Teachers do not feel accountable for student learning   &lt;br&gt;• Overall instructional time for language is low   &lt;br&gt;• Teachers do not have a good understanding of the ‘learning to read’ process and effective teaching practices &lt;br&gt;• More teachers are needed &lt;br&gt;• In-service training has not focused on early grades; also not effective</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers’ Interviews</td>
<td>• Teachers’ shortage results in low instructional time &lt;br&gt;• It is difficult to address differentiated needs of students in a classroom</td>
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<tr>
<td>DIET/BRC/CRC interviews</td>
<td>• Lack of parental awareness results in irregular attendance of students and little or no home support for learning &lt;br&gt;• Training has been ineffective &lt;br&gt;• Textbooks are at a level much higher than students’ reading levels</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Curriculum and textbook analysis</td>
<td>• Curriculum does not articulate principles of early grades language teaching-learning &lt;br&gt;• No specific emphasis on reading &lt;br&gt;• Clear measurable outcomes and standards not defined &lt;br&gt;• Textbooks are difficult and not aligned to students’ reading levels &lt;br&gt;• Teaching sequence and strategy is unclear &lt;br&gt;• Not enough scope for oral language development &lt;br&gt;• Texts not simple and interesting to help in developing fluency</td>
<td>• Training has become routinized &lt;br&gt;• No focus on language teaching-learning or early grades &lt;br&gt;• Training methodology didactic and not appropriate to bring about change in teaching practices &lt;br&gt;• The problem of multigrade teaching and multilevel classrooms is not addressed during training &lt;br&gt;• Lacking in vision for classroom level change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>Main Findings</td>
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</table>
| **Case studies of schools and teachers**   | - Teachers make a crucial difference to student participation and learning  
- Teacher qualities that distinguish ‘good’ teachers from others include:  
  o Enthusiasm; ability to keep students engaged  
  o Concern for equity and effort to help those students who are falling behind; empathy with children from deprived backgrounds  
  o Creating a positive classroom climate  
  o Willingness to learn how to improve teaching practices |
| **Comparison with practices in ‘good’ school** | - Students’ time-on-task can be increased by using appropriate learning activities and workbooks  
- Frequent assessment is useful in guiding teaching  
- Group work is an important strategy for active learning  
- Training and frequent on-site support is useful for teachers  
- Systematic activities for teaching decoding help children learn  
- Access to simple storybooks and reading cards and dedicated time for reading contributes to improvement in reading skills  
- Oral language development work is crucial  
- An instructional package is not enough. Teachers must understand the rationale behind new practices being suggested.  
- Change in classroom practices takes time. Needs careful nurturing and consistent follow-up  
- Regular consultation and dialogue with teachers is essential  
- Multigrade teaching situation poses a challenge for teachers, and significantly reduces face-to-face instructional time. This issue has not been addressed in training |
Better understanding of the importance of reading and language learning in early grades within the education system. Greater accountability for students learning to read in early primary grades.

Encouraging teacher professional learning through a variety of strategies

Quality pre-primary education

One factor that is not listed above is ‘teacher quality’. This is not an omission through oversight. The researcher agrees with Kimperley (2008, p. 6) that “Notwithstanding the influence of factors such as socio-economic status, home, and community, student learning is strongly influenced by what and how teachers teach”. However, through this study, the researcher could not identify any clear link between the most commonly discussed dimensions of teacher quality, viz. teacher experience, educational qualification, professional training and the quality of the classroom teaching-learning process or student achievements. Rivkin et al. (2005) come to the same conclusion through analyzing relationships between student achievements and school and teacher characteristics in a longitudinal study in Texas, USA. There is no doubt that teachers make a huge difference in the quality of the teaching-learning process (Felsenthal, 1978; Fuller, 1987; Rowe, 1995). Unfortunately, measurable teacher characteristics like education and years of experience do not explain the significant difference between teachers’ performance.

Through the case studies undertaken as a part of this research, a very important factor that came to the fore was the role of certain qualities of a ‘good’ teacher. These include (a) empathy with students, especially those from a deprived background, (b) concern for equity and effort to help those students who are falling behind, (c) creating a positive classroom climate, (d) enthusiasm for teaching, and (d) a desire to learn. These are not easy to measure. These qualities form a part of an overall belief framework and world-view of a person and are not easily influenced by any intervention that can be taken up by the education system. Aspects of teachers’ knowledge about effective language
teaching strategies and skills of appropriate learning organization within the classroom are included in the seven factors listed above. Some dimensions of change in teachers’ attitudes and perceptions are discussed under the academic factor, ‘Teacher professional learning’.

The seven factors listed above that influence reading achievements are analyzed below in the sections that follow.

6.3 FACTOR 1: ENHANCING INSTRUCTIONAL TIME FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING
Instructional time, also considered as ‘opportunity to learn’, is a multifaceted variable. Its impact or correlation with learning achievements is an under-researched topic in developing countries. The link appears intuitive, viz. if students receive instruction for more time each day, they could learn better. However, this view is considered behaviourist (Berliner, 1990). This researcher is in agreement that merely increasing instructional time (by say, extending the school day) may not result in higher student learning. It is the quality of instruction that is crucial. Cognitivists consider instructional time as an unimportant variable for studying student learning. This is the ‘quantity’ versus ‘quality’ of instructional time debate. Berliner (1990, p. 10) quotes several studies to argue that in developing countries (unlike developed countries) effects of both quantity and quality of schooling are important because of the large variation in instructional time available and the extent of teacher preparation. He quotes a study by Herbert Walberg published in 1986 that reviewed 31 studies of instructional time and achievement that found a median correlation between the amount of instructional time and student achievement to be 0.40.
6.3.1 Why is Instructional Time so Important in the Indian Context?

(i) Low coverage of low quality preschool education

In developed countries, the foundation for early literacy is laid during one or two years of preschool. Even in primary school, 4 years of reading/language instruction (Kindergarten to grade 3 with about 35-40% of instructional time for language teaching) is considered necessary for a child to attain reading fluency and independent writing ability. In India, students are expected to attain good reading and writing skills in just 2 years of instruction. In Assam, a pre-primary class (Ka sreni) is included in every school. However, there is no dedicated teacher for the class and this is the most neglected class in the school. Teachers have not received any training on early childhood education and foundations of reading. In Rajasthan, there is no preschool class in the primary school. The Anganwadi Centres (AWC) are supposed to provide preschool education. However, based on limited observation in this study, and perceptions of teachers, it was apparent that there is really very little learning that happens at the AWCs. In the absence of a strong preschool that can lay the foundation of language learning, adequate instructional time in the early grades becomes even more crucial.

(ii) Indian languages have a largely transparent orthography; but a large number of complex visual patterns

The large numbers of consonants, vowels, vowel signs, CV combinations, and conjunct letters require more time and practice for students to attain decoding automaticity, which is a key to reading fluency. This necessitates higher instructional time.

(iii) Deprived home backgrounds and poor literate environments at home:

Availability of print at home, reading aloud to children, and encouraging reading in leisure time are known to enhance reading achievements. In the deprived contexts studied in Assam and Rajasthan (as in most of Indian government school catchment areas), parents cannot provide this kind of literacy support at home. Therefore, this has to be compensated with more
activities to support reading at school, which implies a higher time allocation for the language class.

(iv) Significant proportion of underage children in grade 1
In Assam and Rajasthan, at least 15% of students in grade 1 and 2 are underage. They require more time to attain basic reading skills.

(v) Disparity in reading/learning levels within a class
Results of the assessment conducted for this study show that there is considerable disparity in reading achievements within a classroom. This implies that there is a need for more practice, revision and remedial instruction. This requires more instructional time. Additional time is also needed for supporting those students who are struggling to read.

(vi) Difference between home and school language
In most parts of the country, the language children speak at home is different from the standard language that is the medium of instruction. Getting children to understand the textbook standard language requires additional time for oral work including reading aloud and conversation.

6.3.2 Dimensions of Instructional Time
Instructional time has several dimensions. Figure 6.1 below shows a simplified hierarchy of concepts with the allocated or intended instructional time at the top and student learning time at the bottom.

Instructional time is lost due to a variety of reasons at the school level. This is reflected as Stage 1 in the figure below. A teacher may be present in school, but engaged in a variety of academic and non-academic tasks outside the classroom. A teacher has to teach more than one grade, and this reduces her availability in a particular classroom. All the time that a teacher spends in the classroom is not effective teaching-learning time for the students. This is reflected as Stage 2.
6.3.3 Intended Instructional Time and Actual Teaching Time in a Language Class (Stage 1)

(i) Intended instructional time for language is inadequate

The intended instructional time is what is intended in the curriculum and/or government policy. This is a product of the total number of school working days and the number of instructional hours daily. The number of working days is about 235 in both Assam and Rajasthan. However, about 30-35 days are earmarked in both states for admission process, conduct of examinations, correction of answer sheets etc. In both states, the number of instructional hours is 4.5 hours a day (accounting for assembly, MDM etc.). Thus, theoretically, 900 hours are available for instruction in a year.
Table 6.2: Instructional time suggested by the curriculum and the time actually allocated for language in the school timetable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Assam</th>
<th>Rajasthan</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Instructional Hours</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent time allocated in curriculum for Language (Assamese/Hindi)</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual time allocated in school timetable (% of total time)</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual allocated instructional time (school timetable)</td>
<td>150 hours</td>
<td>257 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clearly, the time available for teaching language (Hindi) is much higher in Rajasthan than in Assam. A total of planned 150 hours of language instruction a year (in Assam) is woefully inadequate. The following sections will illustrate that the actual teaching time is a fraction of this allocated instructional time. In a study for the Global Monitoring Report 2005 (Benavot, 2004) that documented intended instructional time in about a hundred countries across the world, India (along with a few other South Asian countries like Nepal and Bangladesh) figured in the lowest quintile for the intended time for language teaching.

(ii) Actual Instructional time (number of days teacher present in school) is much lower

There are several reasons for loss in instructional days and hours at the school level. These include:

a. Local holidays or school closure on account of festivals, strikes, natural disasters etc.

b. Teachers’ absence from school on account of training, meetings, other official work

c. Teacher absence on account of leave and unauthorized absence.
Table 6.3: Days teacher present in school and instructional hours for Language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Assam (days)</th>
<th>Rajasthan (days)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching days (net of admission and examinations)</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual teaching days (net of local closures)*</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of teacher presence days (net of teachers absence for official work)**</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of teacher presence days (net of teachers leave and unauthorized absence)***</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual instructional time for language (based on above)</td>
<td>90 hours</td>
<td>176 hours</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Based on a month-wise analysis for 2011 carried out in discussion with DEO, BEOs in both states
** Based on interviews with teachers, headmasters and responses in the questionnaire
*** Based on Kremer et al. (2005). The estimates from this study include absence of all kinds including for official work. Teacher absence rates: Assam-33.8%; Rajasthan-23.7%

This is a much bleaker picture than the intended instructional time.

(iii) Teacher present in class

There is a further reduction in time from the time that a teacher is present in school to the time the teacher is present in the classroom. This is on account of:

a. Non-academic work at school (MDM, supervising school construction, writing reports and accounts etc.)

b. Academic work outside the classroom (correcting students’ work, preparing for lessons, or simply not going to the classroom etc.)

c. Teacher being away from a class to teach in another class in multigrade situations

From the teachers’ survey, the estimate of time spent on non-academic tasks per week is 3.1 hours (11.5% of total instructional time) in Assam and 4.1 hours (15.2% of total instructional time) in Rajasthan. A World Bank Study (Sankar, 2009) for Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh estimated that teachers spent about 18% of the time they were in school on non-academic tasks. This researcher’s study did not make any estimates of
teachers’ time on academic tasks outside the classroom since the focus was on classroom observations. Sankar (2009) estimates that teachers only spend 70% of the academic time inside the classroom, while 30% academic time is spent outside the classroom.

In 15 of the 16 classrooms studied in this research, one teacher was responsible for teaching two or more grades. In this study, estimate of time for the teacher remaining away from a class to attend to the other multigrade class is about 40% of the total language teaching time. In reality, a better estimate would be 50% of the time in one class, based on an equal division of time between two classes. Thus, only about half of the total time a teacher spends teaching is available to a particular class.

Based on these estimates, the number of instructional hours for language teaching (teacher present in class) in a particular grade would be reduced to merely 27.9 hours per year in Assam and 52.5 hours in Rajasthan. These are startling figures. With this extremely low language teaching time, it is totally infeasible to expect students to learn to read and write at grade level expectations. The time for which the teacher is actually teaching, when in the classroom, is lower than the time the teacher is available in the classroom. This will be discussed in section 6.3 that deals with teacher and student time-on-task.

6.3.4 Instructional Time is a Basic Learning Condition

This researcher has argued that instructional time is a basic learning condition; a prerequisite for learning to happen. Merely providing higher instructional time will not result in learning. However, if instructional time is below a certain threshold, it can definitely be a hindrance to learning. As outlined in Section 6.3.1, certain conditions in the Indian context necessitate more instructional time for language. What is that threshold of time below which effective learning cannot take place? This study could not examine this question in an in-depth manner. However, through extensive discussions with
teachers and CRC/BRC and DIET personnel in Assam and Rajasthan, a consensus emerged that a minimum of 60 minutes a day of actual teaching time (with the teacher present in the class) could be a threshold for successful language learning in early primary grades.

6.3.5 Suggestions to Enhance Instructional Time

Ensuring that students learn to read and write well by the end of grade 2 will require a substantial increase in language teaching time. Many of the issues relating to teaching time and time-on-task are systemic issues and not confined to the teaching of language alone. For example, the significant loss in time for non-academic work, or the time which teachers spend outside the classroom even when they are in school etc. These will need to be addressed. Merely working on improving teaching methods will not help, unless instructional time above a threshold is available for classroom teaching. Some suggestions that can help enhance instructional time for language without extending school hours are below:

(i) Understanding the importance of language teaching and learning

At the conceptual level, the education system, especially the SCERTs, need to be clear that language is not just another subject in the early primary grades. Language is a medium for communication, thought and cognition. It is the medium for all learning. Once this is fully understood, state authorities and schools will attempt to provide more time for language teaching-learning. There was evidence of this during the course of this research. In Assam, where the regular pattern is just 45 minutes (one period) per day for teaching Assamese, teachers of one school, who had been strongly influenced by a reading programme implemented a few years back in that area, taught Assamese for 120 minutes (grade 1) and 90 minutes (grade 2) per day. They had made separate time allocations for teaching ‘language’ and ‘reading’ in the timetable. Another teacher in Assam had carved out 60 minutes time each day for language on her own initiative. Similarly, in Rajasthan, one teacher in a
school provided 90 minutes a day for language against an average of 70 minutes in other schools. All these teachers understood the importance of ‘learning to read’ well in the first two grades.

(ii) Adjusting time allocation for different subjects

At present, there are 6 subjects in the Rajasthan curriculum. There are 4 subjects in Assam. There are two ways of enhancing time for language teaching:

a. Reducing the time for teaching English in grades 1 and 2: In grade 1, it is inappropriate to introduce literacy in English when children are still grappling to learn decoding in the local language. In Assam, teaching of Assamese and English are given the same amount of time in a school day. In fact, some teachers keep an extra period for English because it is perceived as ‘difficult’, and there is parental pressure for English teaching. In Rajasthan, the timetable provides for about 90 minutes for teaching of Hindi, which could be adequate if it was properly implemented.

b. Using the period for EVS (Environmental Studies) for systematic oral language development and even some reading activities. This period is usually after the MDM, and hardly anything gets done in this time. A systematic oral language development strategy with reading aloud, conversation, role play etc. can be fruitfully used in this time. The topics could be chosen to include the topics suggested in the EVS curriculum. This time could also be promoted as ‘reading’ time where students are encouraged to read simple and interesting storybooks that are matched to their reading levels.

c. Improving language teaching practices will help make better use of instructional time. This will help enhance students’ engagement in learning tasks even when the teacher is away, and also reduce the dependence on mechanical repetition and copying tasks.
6.4 FACTOR 2: MORE EFFECTIVE LEARNING ORGANIZATION WITHIN THE CLASSROOM

In this section, the following dimensions of effective learning organization strategies are discussed:

- Increased students’ time-on-task and active learning opportunities
- Effective strategies for multigrade teaching
- Regular and appropriate assessment
- Strategies for greater attention to students lagging behind, including some differentiated instruction
- Adjusting teaching to the students’ reading levels

6.4.1 Enhancing Students’ Time-on-task and Active Learning Opportunities

(i) Situation in study schools

Students’ time-on-task provides an indication of the time students are engaged in a curriculum related activity. It is clear from Table 6.5 that students are engaged in any meaningful activity only for about 25-30 minutes a day. Students are off-task for about 40% of the language period. Another 52% of the language time is spent on (a) listening to the teacher, (b) copying from the blackboard or textbook, (c) choral repetition or choral response to teacher, (d) watching another student at the blackboard, and (e) transition or waiting time. Thus, time spent on active learning activities is just about 8% of the total instructional time available for language class.
Table 6.4: Estimates of Students’ Time-on-task during language class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Assam</th>
<th>Rajasthan</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average language period time per day</td>
<td>45 min</td>
<td>70 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage time off-task*</td>
<td>44.3%</td>
<td>35.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student time-on-task per day</td>
<td>24.8 min</td>
<td>44.8 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students time-on-task for the whole year</td>
<td>49.6 hours</td>
<td>98.5 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage time on passive or mechanical drill-type activities</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>57.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage active learning time (net of off-task and passive learning time)</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student active learning time per day**</td>
<td>3 min</td>
<td>7 min</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Based on percent time-on-task from Table 4.33 in Chapter IV. ** Based on Table 4.34 in Chapter IV.

Another factor that results in reducing students’ time-on-task or learning time is student absenteeism. EdCIL (2008) estimates student attendance rates in primary schools to have been 81.3% in Assam and 62.7% in Rajasthan. If these are taken in to account, the average student time for learning would be further reduced significantly. Thus, the teaching-learning time for language is a small fraction of the intended instructional time.

(ii) Enhancing time-on-task and active learning

There are two dimensions to enhancing time-on-task:

a. Enriching the nature of activities and tasks set for students when the teacher is not present in the classroom

b. Using a variety of teaching-learning activities that support active learning and a mix of whole-class, cooperative group learning work and individual practice activities.

The first one relates to effective multigrade teaching practice. This is addressed in section 6.4.2.

*Enhancing time-on-task and active learning when teacher is in the classroom*

Students learn when they are actively engaged in a learning task. Merely copying or repetition and an exclusive focus on memorization do not result in learning. The focus has to be on learning with understanding (Vosniadou, 2006; Bransford et al., 2000). Development of reading skills requires a lot of
revision, consolidation and appropriate practice. An active learning environment requires that students are provided with small challenging tasks on a regular basis and are given support or scaffolding in achieving them. The teaching process itself should be skill-focused and not entirely content-oriented. Appropriate teaching practices that supports active learning include: (a) modelling by the teacher, (b) guided practice by students, and (c) independent practice of newly learnt skills (Roskos, 2009). The classroom process should ensure a high time-on-task through a variety of (a) teacher-led, whole-class activities like model reading, demonstration using TLM and explanation, (b) systematic, outcome-oriented group work activities that focus on cooperative learning and practice, and (c) well defined independent practice work.

At present, the situation is really far from ideal. The teachers focus on content of the lesson texts of the lessons asking students to memorize the texts. There is little focus on understanding and discussion. While the teacher is reading or explaining, s/he is not able to hold the attention of all students. This is for a variety of reasons. The textbook lessons are at a much higher level compared to students’ reading abilities and students merely repeat after the teacher, rather than actually reading. Teachers do not ask many questions to keep students involved. TLM use is highly limited. It is almost non-existent in Rajasthan. In Assam it is confined to the use of pictures and letter cards. Group work is not practiced at all in Rajasthan. In Assam, group work is more common; but the tasks set for groups do not promote learning; nor do they require cooperation among students. Individual practice work is limited to copying from the textbook or the blackboard or some handwriting task given by the teacher.

Some strategies that can help enhance student time-on-task and active learning are:

- Focus on asking questions to individual students while teaching a lesson
- Teachers using a variety of TLM for demonstration, and for use by students
Creating a variety of group learning tasks that require cooperation. These could include reading from storybooks, games and puzzles. Group work needs to be monitored by the teacher. Teachers could also spend some time on small-group differentiated instruction each day.

Using workbooks for individual practice, where the tasks have been carefully designed and not confined to mechanical copying tasks

Ensuring that the teaching is matched to students’ level of language/reading development

A print-rich classroom environment with posters, charts and functional print also encourages students to actively engage with print

Availability of a variety of graded storybooks and other reading materials in the classroom and strategies for actively engaging students in reading

6.4.2 Effective Strategies for Multigrade Teaching

Multigrade teaching came up as one of the most important factors limiting the effectiveness of teaching-learning process in primary schools. Its most adverse impact is the reduction in instructional time in a classroom (teacher present in class) to less than half of the intended instructional time.

(i) Situation in the study schools: Multigrade and multilevel

All schools included in this study had multigrade teaching situations. Multigrade teaching, as defined by Little (2001, p. 482), is the situation where “teachers are responsible, within a timetabled period, for instruction across two or more curriculum grades”. All 19 teachers who were observed in the selected schools were teaching more than one grade. In terms of space, in Assam, students of different classes were seated in a long hall with separate spaces. In Rajasthan, the rooms were smaller, but 2 or more grades were seated in the same room in all schools. The schools (and they were representative of primary schools in the district) had low enrollments of less than 150. The attendance was lower. The attendance averaged 72% in grade 1 and 78% in grade 2. There
is considerable disparity in learning levels within classrooms and a significant proportion of students in grade 2 (Table 4.6 in Chapter IV) are still struggling with grade 1 competencies like letter recognition and reading simple words with *matras*. Thus, grade 1 and 2 students do not represent entirely two different sets with very distinct levels of achievements. There is a serious multi-level situation in both grades.

(ii) Teaching-Learning Strategies in observed classrooms: Quasi-Monograde

In our context, the multigrade situation is *de facto*, i.e. it is not planned, or provided for. This is a kind of deficit model of schooling where the ideal situation is the monograde teaching situation, and teachers in multigrade schools have to deal with the problems locally to ensure that all grades can be taught effectively. In contrast, there are some projects or programmes with multiage or non-graded classrooms that group students by academic or developmental level because of perceived pedagogical advantages (Little, 2004).

The approach to multigrade teaching found in the 32 classrooms observed in this study can be categorized as follows:

*a.* Teacher introduces the lesson in one class, gives some work (usually copying) and moves to the next class. She then works with students in the second class for some time before giving them some task that they can do individually or in groups and moves back to the first class. This has been called the Staggered Start strategy (Cash, 2000). Thus, the teacher moves between the two classes/grades during the period.

*b.* Teacher starts teaching one class without providing any guidance to the second class, and moves to the second class only after completing the teaching in the first class. In effect, the teacher is teaching the 2 grades as monograde classes for half the time period.

The movement from one class to another was not systematically planned. The tasks given to a class when the teacher went away were of two types:
• Copying from the blackboard or textbook, or handwriting work given in notebooks
• Reading or memorizing a lesson, or repeating after a group leader

Tasks assigned to the students before going to another class were not carefully decided or clearly explained. Most students either completed the tasks quickly, or became distracted very soon. In Rajasthan, copying was the most common task assigned before a teacher attended to another class. In Assam, memorizing or loud repetition after a ‘brighter’ student was the most common task. In 12 of the 16 schools, grades 1 and 2 were sitting next to each other. When the teacher shifted to another grade, students from the earlier class continued to bring their work to the teacher for checking, especially in Rajasthan. This disturbed the next class. There were no clear set of rules for checking of students’ work. Also, since the classes sat next to each other, there was a lot of disturbance from the adjoining class. In most cases, the students of one class were found listening/watching proceedings in the adjacent class. The time when the teacher was away to another class was not effectively utilized in any of the classrooms observed.

In none of the classrooms, was there any effort to take a combined session with both grades that could be followed by differential tasks for students of different achievement levels. Thus the individual grades were always treated as monograde teaching situations. In one school, the teacher asked some students of grade 1 to sit in the grade 2 class and a few students from grade 2 to sit with the grade 1 class while he conducted a decoding class for learning letters for grade 1, and a class for learning *matras* for grade 2. Thus, the regular practice is for all students to sit in grade groups even though the teachers are aware that some students in grade 2 definitely do not have basic letter and *matra* knowledge.

**(iii) Education system’s response to multigrade teaching**

The curriculum and textbooks are oriented to an ‘ideal’ monograde teaching situation. Teacher education (pre-service and in-service) has not given the
ubiquitous multigrade situation any priority. Thus, teachers are left to fend for themselves while managing multigrade situations. In-service training programmes focus on methodology for teaching different subjects, but have rarely addressed how effective teaching can take place in multigrade situations. There were some good training programmes in Assam during DPEP (District Primary Education Programme) and in the early years of SSA, but the follow-up has not been effective and the strategies suggested during those programmes are not seen in schools now. Workbooks and worksheets could be effective in ensuring that students are actively engaged in carefully designed tasks when the teacher is away. However, there are no workbooks in Rajasthan, and they have been discontinued in Assam from 2012.

(iv) Options for supporting multigrade schools
According to DISE 2007-08, almost 80% of primary schools in India have 3 or fewer teachers. Almost 25% primary schools have enrollments less than 50, and 44% have enrollments less than 100 (Mehta, 2010). Thus, the issue of multigrade teaching is not a ‘minor’ issue. What is needed is an open recognition of school, classroom and teacher realities and concerted efforts to re-orient teacher professional development and educational planning processes in ways that can support teachers’ work in multigrade teaching schools (Little, 2008). Curriculum developers, teacher educators, institutions like SCERT and DIETs, and academic resource persons at BRCs should work on different strategies to help teachers work in multigrade situations.

A multigrade situation requires a multifaceted approach including community involvement, use of student resources and effective teaching strategies. Here, three possible academic approaches that address multigrade and multilevel situations are outlined:

a. A multilevel (nongraded) approach that hinges on graded learning materials that help students move from one level to another through a predefined curriculum sequence. Escuela Nueva in Latin America, Rishi Valley schools in Andhra Pradesh, and the ABL (Activity Based Learning) model in Tamil
Nadu are examples of this approach. These models do not require individual teachers to reorient the curriculum and design strategies for working with multiple classrooms. In this approach, textbooks are replaced by ‘self-learning’ materials which students complete at their own pace. This approach strongly addresses the issue of the pervasive multilevel situation in each grade.

b. The second broad approach puts the initiative on teachers to adapt the curriculum and learning materials to multigrade situations by identifying common topics and learning objectives. The whole group consisting of students from two grades can be taught together for some time, followed by differentiated tasks and activities that need not be organized grade-wise. Thus, there is whole class teaching, single and mixed grade groups, and individual activities. This is very demanding on the teacher and difficult to implement, unless there is strong academic support at different levels.

c. A third approach is where several incremental changes can be conceptualized and implemented to mitigate some of the challenges associated with multigrade teaching, instead of a transformational change required in (a) or (b) above. This would be a contextualized approach where teachers are supported by local resource persons who are constantly working on materials, training and dissemination of good practices. The classes would continue to be grade-wise and textbooks would continue to be used. Some examples of pedagogical changes that can be incorporated, in this approach, without making the teachers feel overwhelmed with a huge planning burden could be:

- Development of a bank of activities that teachers can assign to students when they move to another class. These would be all linked to specific learning objectives. Some of these could be worksheet or workbook based. Others could involve games, puzzles and letter grids and word games. These would ensure that students remain engaged in group or individual learning activity while the teacher is away. At present, copying
and choral repetition are the only activities that are followed. In Assam, such activities that students could do on their own, or in groups, had been developed, and materials were also supplied to schools in 2007-08, but they are not in use because there was no follow-up.

- **Provision of a set of graded reading materials:** A set of reading cards and small, simple, interesting storybooks that are matched to students’ reading levels could be made available in the classrooms for students to read individually, in pairs or small groups when the teacher is away. This could be a follow-up activity after these books have been introduced and read aloud by the teacher. Reading tasks could also be assigned to advanced students when the teacher is attending to the weaker students with decoding instruction.

The two multilevel approaches outlined in (a) and (b) above are big departures from the current quasi-monograde teaching approach adopted by teachers. They are really useful for addressing the multigrade and multilevel issues in primary schools. There is one aspect of the multilevel approach outlined in (a) above that needs attention. In the early grades, especially for language teaching, intensive teacher-student interaction is crucial. This is crucial for the child’s language development in the foundational years. Reading aloud to students, conversation and other strategies for oral language development, focussing on meaning-making, promoting standard language comprehension, enhancing students’ vocabulary and improving reading fluency require regular teacher-student interaction. An entirely card based, self-learning approach may not be very appropriate in the early years.

In the interim, before a consensus can be arrived at on any transformational approach, e.g. (a) above, this researcher is of the view that incremental approaches, e.g. (c) above, aimed at institutionalizing strategies that can, to some extent, mitigate the problems of a multigrade/multilevel situation, should be tried out in a concerted manner.
The bottom-line for language instruction should be at least 60 minutes of teaching time when the teacher is present in the classroom for each grade. During the time, the teacher is away, independent and group reading, and fun learning activities with TLM can be assigned to students.

6.4.3 Informal and Regular Assessment

Regular assessment should be a part of the curriculum for each grade and built in to the regular instructional process. Such frequent assessments are carried out informally, on a regular basis, rather than at the end of a month or term. These help the teacher understand what students have learnt and their levels. This could be in the form of observations, e.g. asking students to read or give answers to comprehension questions. Assessments could also be in the form of maintaining student portfolios (e.g. of their writing) that show progress over time and the problems faced by them (N’Namdi, 2005; AED, 2009; Pang, 2006; Postlethwaite & Ross, 1992). Two kinds of assessments are considered necessary at the classroom level. Diagnostic assessments help to understand what students have learnt or not learnt or finding difficult to learn. Assessments of progress of student learning help to record the progress made by individual students over a period of time. Assessments should always be linked to clearly defined learning outcomes.

(i) The situation in the study classrooms

The only assessments carried out in both states are the term assessments (3-4 times a year). The term assessments do not focus on skills, and are more linked to content. The results are not analyzed to map the levels of different students for follow-up and corrective action. The teaching process or pace is not adjusted based on test results. Nor is there any initiative to identify struggling readers who would need special attention. This is not to say that teachers are not aware of the reading abilities of individual students. In most of the smaller classrooms, teachers broadly knew which students could read and those who
couldn’t. However, they did not have further details on problems of individual students. In Rajasthan, where a significant proportion of classroom time was spent on handwriting practice, which teachers corrected during the teaching time, some teachers did adjust the writing tasks to the abilities of students. The textbooks in Assam have a series of assessment activities that could be used to understand the levels of different students. However, the exercise work is not done systematically, or checked frequently. Since most students cannot read the textbook lessons in grades 1 and 2, teachers do not ask all students to read by rotation. Else, this could be a good mechanism for assessing reading levels and difficulties in small classrooms.

(ii) Feasible assessment strategies

The class sizes observed in this study were small. No class had more than 25 students on any observation day. It is feasible for teachers to undertake some kind of regular assessment in such classrooms.

a. *Word recognition type of assessments:* These can be done regularly by using flash cards, CV combinations or words written on the board, or using charts and posters in the classroom.

b. *Making individual students read* small passages and asking comprehension questions to test their understanding of the text is a simple way of observational assessment. However, since the textbook texts are at the ‘instructional’ or ‘frustration’ levels for students, they are not appropriate for testing students’ reading. Simple storybooks or reading cards would be more useful to make such assessments.

c. *Checking students’ written work* on a regular basis, preferably through worksheets or workbooks.

d. *A simple record or student-wise profile* can also be maintained. This could help in identifying students who are lagging behind and need extra attention or remediation.

e. *More formal assessments each month* could help in documenting progress and assessing the need for revision work. These would work best if they are
developed systematically keeping in mind expected learning outcomes at different times in the year. These need not be designed by individual teachers, but through workshops where teachers and other resource persons provide inputs to create a bank of simple test items that focus on mastery of skills.

f. *Clear outcomes, stated in simple terms* for reading and language development need to be defined at different stages in grades 1 and 2. The outcomes should be linked with exemplar assessment sheets that guide teachers in assessing these outcomes.

### 6.4.4 Strategies for Greater Attention to Students Lagging Behind; Including Some Differentiated Instruction

Students who are falling behind need extra attention. They would benefit from more skill oriented instruction focused on decoding. Since these students are not able to read, or read with great difficulty, they cannot participate meaningfully in the teaching-learning process when whole class reading of a lesson is being conducted. For writing also, their work needs to focus on revision and practice of letter, CV and word level tasks. Thus, the key to equitable learning in early grades is some component of differentiated instruction for students at different levels of reading achievements and extra attention to those who are struggling readers (Connor, 2007). The first assumption here is that teachers should be aware of students’ learning levels on an ongoing basis. Also, teachers should have the sensitivity and sense of accountability for ensuring that *all* students learn to read and write. The education system should also emphasize equity in learning.

**(i) Situation in study schools**

In the study classrooms, systematic revision was rarely observed. Teachers did not follow a scaffolded approach to support students through a series of steps for learning a new skill. No extra opportunities were provided by teachers to struggling readers to read more frequently. The fault is not entirely the
teachers’. The textbook lessons, being difficult, do not offer a good opportunity to struggling readers to read those texts. Unless there are other simpler reading materials available, students who are struggling to read would never get a chance to improve their reading skills. Numerous choral repetitions of the textbook text (read by the teacher or another student) will never help improve their reading. There is no system of remedial instruction to support those students who are lagging behind. Some differentiation in tasks assigned to students was observed in a few Rajasthan schools, but this was mainly for handwriting and copying tasks.

Another major setback that affects students who belong to lower socioeconomic strata is the so-called ‘summer loss’. Teachers in both states expressed concern about the fact that many students ‘forget’ a lot of what they had learnt during the long 1-2 months holidays, and that this loss was more significant for students who belonged to more deprived, low literacy backgrounds. Teachers said that they conducted some revision at the beginning of the year, and after any vacation. They agreed that this was not adequate as they were always under pressure to complete the textbook. Teachers in Rajasthan were more comfortable spending time on revision than teachers in Assam. This has been extensively researched in the West and there is conclusive evidence to show that students suffer a setback during extended holidays when they forget some of the skills learnt during the previous school session. The loss is significantly higher for students who come from a poorer background without a strong literate environment or reading support at home. This deficit continues to pile up over the years.

Teaching practice is largely teacher-centred and teachers are rarely able to make allowance for some children who require additional support to compensate for their deprived home environments and lack of preschool exposure. There is not enough scope in the teaching-learning process for intensive practice and revision that helps students get several chances to practice what has been taught. The other issue is that of teachers’ beliefs and attitudes. Teachers belong to the local social milieu where deep-seated beliefs
and biases about gender, class, language, and ethnicity related issues exist. Teachers tend to have low expectations from children who come from poor households or some socially stigmatized groups. There could also be covert/overt discrimination towards some categories of students and such children tend to fulfill these low expectations and have lower learning levels. There are also beliefs around how children learn to read that interfere with adopting systematic practices that could benefit all children. A commonly held belief is that children have markedly different abilities to learn, based on intrinsic intelligence. Students who are not able to keep pace with the rest of the class are branded as “slow learners.” It suits the system to put the blame of inadequate learning on the students and their family background, since it helps absolve the system from the responsibility of ensuring that all children learn the desired skills.

(ii) Some practical suggestions for supporting struggling readers

a. *Frequent revision and consolidation:* Frequent revision, and opportunities to practice newly learnt skills is absolutely essential to ensure that students master reading skills. This should ideally be built in to the curriculum and textbooks where there should be adequate scope to carry out revision activities after every few lessons. This can be done through revision lessons, revision exercises in textbooks and additional worksheets or workbooks. Also, teachers should understand the need for frequent revision and practice as students learn new skills. This would be of great help to weaker students.

b. *Involvement of all students during the teaching process:* For example, giving a chance to all students to read; asking questions to different students on a regular basis; monitoring of individual or group work etc.

c. *Frequent assessment of reading skills:* This would help the teacher identify students who are lagging far behind for some remedial instruction

d. *Some differentiated instruction:* Differentiated instruction helps provide different learning experiences to students who are at different learning levels. This can be done while teaching the same content (lesson) to the whole class by differentiating the tasks (e.g. reading and writing tasks) assigned to different
groups, while there is a common entry point (e.g. reading aloud to the whole class and some oral discussion) for the whole class. Another approach is to divide the class into small groups and provide a differentiated task to each group according to their level, e.g. differentiated groups with matching reading materials. Some element of differentiated reading instruction helps both weaker and more advanced students by providing structured learning experiences appropriate to their level. However, this should not be used as a regular strategy. Mixed ability groups have been known to help weaker students as they learn from their peers. Persisting with same ability (actually the appropriate term should be ‘achievement’ level, and not ability) groups as a regular classroom strategy would hurt the weaker students in the long run. Another pragmatic approach would be to include some differentiated activity at the end of every class for 10-15 minutes, when the teacher could spend extra time with weaker individual students or groups to provide additional practice for decoding and word recognition. During this time, the more advanced students could be given other reading materials to read independently or in groups.

e. *Periodic remedial instruction*: This kind of bridging or catch-up programme can be carried out 3-4 times during the school session after a formal assessment (e.g. term tests). Students could be divided in 2-3 groups and the focus would be on revision of basic reading skills with the weaker students, while the more advanced students could be given reading and writing tasks. This requires a clear bridging strategy and graded reading materials and extra worksheets. Teachers would require training and regular support in addition to materials to carry out this remedial instruction for 1-2 weeks a few times a year.

f. *Scaffolded instruction* helps students slowly reach a stage when they can independently practice and apply new skills. Providing enough ‘scaffolding’ to students while working on a new skill is a part of good instructional practice. This would benefit the weaker students more. As an example, when introducing a new text, the teacher should first read it aloud a number of times. Then s/he
should engage in whole class choral reading. This would be followed by reading in groups where a small group reads a part of the passage in chorus. Following this there would be reading in pairs. By this time all children would become familiar with the text. Only after this, children should be asked to read to one another in pairs, each child reading to his/her partner, while the partner checks for the ‘quality’ of the reading. Such a sequence would give students a chance to gradually build on their skills, and a child who may be reluctant to read aloud independently may be able to complete the reading task by the end of the lesson.

g. Some strategies need to be adopted to mitigate the problem of ‘holiday loss’ in reading skills, especially for the weaker students. An intensive phase of revision for a few weeks after a long holiday, when important competencies and skills of the previous term are revised, is very useful. There could also be a reading programme for a few weeks with some volunteer support with a large number of graded reading materials and books. A school library that remains open during the holidays with community support could also help, though it is important to have some guided reading support.

h. Implementing these initiatives will require a strong commitment to the principle of ‘learning for all’. Unless there is a strong consensus within the education system, schools and teachers, that almost all children can and should learn to read well in the first few grades, such strategies will not succeed.

i. Training, and more importantly, regular on-site academic support and frequent academic interaction among teachers will be necessary to identify and implement strategies for in-class attention to weaker students and remedial instruction.
6.4.5 Adjusting Teaching to Students’ Reading Levels

(i) What is the issue?

Teaching according to students’ reading levels seems such a logical thing to do that it sounds like a truism. However, this was not happening in most of the observed classrooms. Teachers continue teaching from the textbook, or a predetermined sequence and pace, even if students are far behind in their reading ability. One of the reasons for the disconnect between teaching and students’ reading abilities is the teachers’ compulsion to follow the textbook and complete the syllabus. Teachers ‘complete’ a lesson by going through a series of prescribed steps, e.g. reading aloud to students, choral repetition by students, reading by a few students, explanation about the text and difficult words, and answers to comprehension questions in the textbook. All this is done even though teachers are well aware that most students are not able to read or understand the text. They also don’t have an alternative since the texts in the textbook are difficult and most students are unable to read them. The curricular objectives that a child should learn to read fluently with understanding and write short sentences by the end of grade 2 (without attending preschool) are infeasible. In the educationally advanced countries this is an expectation after at least 3 years of formal schooling (Kindergarten to grade 2) and some preschool experience, along with significant reading support at home.

The other issue is: whose reading levels should be considered by the teacher? Each class has such a disparity in reading levels that it is difficult to arrive at an average level for the class. This problem of teaching being pitched at a level much higher than students’ abilities has to be addressed seriously.

(ii) Some suggestions to address this issue

a. The curriculum and textbooks need to be reviewed to align them with the more common school situation of students reading abilities. This has to be taken up on priority
b. Quality preschool education for at least one year before grade 1 must be ensured for all children if the reading outcomes prescribed for grades 1 and 2 are to be achieved.
c. Certain short-term measures can be taken to reduce this disconnect:

- Delay teaching of the textbook lessons in grade 2 till students (on an average) have acquired basic reading skills
- Extended period of revision and consolidation at the beginning of grade 2 for word recognition strategies, to prepare students to move to reading connected text
- Systematic decoding instruction, so that most students are able to ‘crack’ the code.
- Reading practice with a variety of simple and interesting reading materials before attempting the textbook lessons

6.5 FACTOR 3: TEACHERS’ UNDERSTANDING AND USE OF EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING OF LANGUAGE IN EARLY PRIMARY GRADES

As described in Chapter IV, classroom observations have clearly shown that classroom practices were far from ideal. Based on classroom observations, teacher interviews and survey, the following major practices or teaching strategies have been selected for a discussion in this section:

- Oral language development
- Systematic decoding instruction
- Focus on comprehension
- Reading Fluency through regular reading practice with appropriate materials
- Extending scope of writing to include some composition
(i) Oral language development

Little time is devoted to oral work in either of the two grades. Most teachers felt that from the beginning of grade 1, the focus must be on reading and writing since the children already know how to speak. One of the main reasons for this opinion is the lack of understanding of the role of oral language development in language comprehension, acquiring standard language vocabulary, and expanding content knowledge.

The curriculum document and training programmes do not include a conceptual framework for ‘language learning’ in general and ‘learning to read’ in particular. Thus, there is little understanding of how different foundational skills reinforce each other in overall reading and language development. The Assam textbooks do include some listening and speaking activities; though not adequate. However, in the absence of training for the new textbooks, teachers do not implement the oral work activities. In fact, during classroom observation it was clear that teachers were converting oral activities in to reading activities and expecting students to read text that was only meant for reading aloud by the teacher followed by a discussion. In Rajasthan, the textbooks do not provide for specific activities for oral language development, except in the part 1 book for grade 1 where storytelling has been suggested through pictures included in the textbook. Teachers in Rajasthan (as was seen in the teachers’ and students’ time-on-task) did not spend any time on activities for oral language development.

Listening, speaking, reading and writing reinforce each other. Unless a child’s oral language is constantly enriched, her reading skills will be stunted. There needs to be a deep conceptual understanding of a balanced literacy instruction process. In the initial months, when a child cannot decode, meaning-based activities have to be conducted as a part of the oral work in the classroom. Storytelling, reading aloud and shared reading with students being asked to answer questions, predict what happens next, retelling, summarizing, role play
etc. can help in oral language development, and keeping a strong meaning-based strand of teaching-learning in the classroom, while the major focus is on learning how to decode. In situations like the schools studied in Rajasthan, extensive oral work is crucial to ensure that students understand and acquire oral fluency in the standard language used at school.

(ii) Systematic decoding instruction

Teachers use repetition and copying/handwriting practice as the main strategies for teaching decoding. There is little emphasis on reinforcement and application. Since workbooks are not available, all writing work is of the copying kind. There is very little practice of letter-sound association and phonological practice with letter combinations and *matras*. Thus, students find it difficult to say out the sounds of different letter-*matra* combinations. It becomes even more difficult to decode words with several letter combinations. Thus, while most of the time in grades 1 and 2 is spent on decoding related activities, the instruction is not systematic.

Teachers need to use a variety of activities relating to sounds and shapes of letters and combinations while teaching decoding. This should include phonological awareness activities; activities with letter, *matra* and word cards; games with letter and letter combination grids; and locating letters and words in books and posters etc. Reinforcement of newly learnt letters and combinations through writing practice that involves application level activities in worksheets or workbooks is also crucial. Such systematic decoding instruction should be continued up to the time students acquire some level of automaticity in word recognition. Fluency in recognizing and sounding out letters, CV combinations and familiar words are the building blocks of oral reading fluency. A lot of practice at word reading level is needed to lead to a large number of familiar words being read as sight words. Students should also be exposed to connected text while they are learning to decode. Most teachers did not think there was much more to learn about teaching students to decode. However, most teachers
agreed that there are better strategies that they have not been using, when these were presented to them during the final workshop.

(iii) Focus on comprehension

Reading is constructing meaning from printed text. This aspect is neglected in the classrooms studied in Assam and Rajasthan. From the researcher’s work in eight other states (Jhingran, 2005), the situation relating to comprehension is similar in most parts of the country. The entire focus of language teaching-learning in the first 2 grades is on learning to decode. The teachers believe in a sequentiality of ‘learning to decode’ and ‘understanding what is being read’. Thus, there is little meaning-based work of listening comprehension when a child is still learning to break the code. There is also very inadequate work on comprehension when a text is being taught in the class. Grade 2 lesson texts have several ‘concept words’ where the concept needs to be explained and discussed, rather than providing a one word equivalent.\(^\text{15}\) It is not easy to make 6 or 7 year old children understand the meaning of such words. Teachers either skip explaining such words, or do it hurriedly without ensuring that they are properly understood. Even when there is some discussion on meaning, it is limited to simple recall type questions. Other levels of comprehension, e.g. simple inference, expressing an opinion, integrating ideas, retelling or summarizing are not addressed at all. Most teachers believe that young children are not capable of comprehension of any level higher than a simple recall type.

The neglect of comprehension related work, therefore, is not only because teachers are not aware of appropriate strategies for promoting comprehension, but there are deeply ingrained beliefs about reading and understanding that influence teacher practice. Since training programmes do not address conceptual issues about reading and language learning, there is no dent in the beliefs and practices of most teachers. This issue has to be addressed very seriously. The inadequate emphasis on comprehension from the beginning of

\(^{15}\) The following ‘concept words’ appeared in grade 2 texts in the two states (for example): prestige, self-respect, loyalty, duty, progress, symbol, territory etc.
primary school stunts the development of higher order comprehension skills throughout the primary stage. As the content and information overload increases in later grades, memorization takes precedence over comprehension.

(iv) Reading fluency through regular reading practice with appropriate materials

As discussed in an earlier section, students get no reading practice for most of grade 1. In the later part of grade 1, and grade 2, the only texts that are available are in the textbook lessons. These are long and difficult to read. Therefore, one major issue is the non-availability of simple and interesting texts for beginning and early readers. Additionally, the interviews and surveys have shown that teachers believe that students can be expected to read only when they have learnt all the letters and *matras*. In Rajasthan, this does not happen even by the end of grade 1.

Reading skills improve with reading. Reading fluency is best achieved by a lot of reading, so that the same common words are encountered repeatedly. As a result of these repeated encounters, the size of the visual unit increases with practice, so that the entire word can be processed as a single unit (Samuels, quoted by Center, 2005, p. 188). At each stage of development of reading skills, children should have access to a variety of reading materials that are of an appropriate level, i.e. at their independent level of reading (with only 1 in 20 unfamiliar words). The classroom should have reading cards and storybooks that are graded and help motivate students to read. Motivation to read is a very important component of learning to read. Quality children’s literature that has been carefully selected is the most important resource needed for improving reading skills. Access to interesting and simple reading materials and encouragement to read during the language class are necessary ingredients throughout the primary stage. Almost all our classrooms are multilevel. Therefore, each classroom will need to have a range of storybooks that can cater to students at different reading levels. As discussed earlier, for developing fluency, students need to read texts that are at their independent level of reading ability. Most textbook texts are at an ‘instructional’ or ‘frustration’
level of students’ reading abilities. Simple and interesting texts can be used in a variety of ways to help improve reading skills. Monitored loud reading, paired reading and sustained silent reading are some commonly used strategies. In case, there is significant disparity of reading achievements within a classroom, some differentiated reading strategies and materials would need to be used.

Reading materials are useful at every stage of the ‘learning to read’ process. Emergent readers need to engage with simple storybooks with limited text to understand concepts about print, viz. handling books, directionality, word boundaries etc. Such books should have very simple and repetitive text. For children who are learning to decode, books with limited text and very simple language with a controlled vocabulary are useful. After that, simple graded storybooks that can be matched to children’s reading levels need to be provided. Development of fluent reading skills needs a lot of practice. Textbooks cannot support that. Apart from easily accessible graded and interesting reading materials (in a classroom library or a reading corner), a dedicated reading time needs to be provided during the language class for reading practice.

In addition, students should also be encouraged to read at leisure. A lot of research has indicated that reading for enjoyment contributes strongly to development of reading skills (Connor, 2007; Elley et al., 1996; Rowe, 1995). Therefore, a school library which students visit regularly at a designated time and from where they can borrow books to take home would support reading skill and habit development. Other activities like organizing reading events and competitions, working with parents to encourage children to read at home, supporting a community library for providing books during school holidays etc. are really useful in developing a love for books and improving reading skills. Here again, there are issues of teacher (and others in the education system) beliefs and attitudes about the importance of reading. Most teachers do not read and don’t consider reading as essential for developing reading skills.
(v) Extending the scope of writing to include some composition

The only writing work that happened in these 32 classrooms (as is likely to be the case in most other grade 1 and 2 classrooms in these states) was copying from the blackboard or textbook, or handwriting practice in slates and notebooks as assigned by the teachers. Writing is also seen as an activity where students can be kept engaged when the teacher is teaching another class. Thus, there is no framework or structure for writing practice. The Assam textbooks have some interesting writing exercises, but not enough. When workbooks were being used in Assam (till 2010), they provided some degree of structure to the writing tasks. Workbooks have not been used in Rajasthan. Workbooks can provide a clear sequence for the writing work; writing tasks can graded; they can reinforce newly learnt skills; include a strong revision element, and match the decoding and reading strategy of the textbook.

But, an even more challenging task is to include some element of composition in the writing curriculum for early grades. Again, the problem is at various levels. Curriculum developers have not provided a clear conceptual framework for development of writing skills. Textbooks include very limited writing expectations as the part of the exercises. The expectations include writing letters and copying words and writing comprehension answers that are to be copied from the lesson. The Assam textbook for grade 2 has some expectation of writing one or two open-ended sentences. However, this work, usually, does not get done. Teachers (and others in the education system) do not believe that children in grades 1 and 2 can compose a few sentences on their own (see section 5.1.2 in Chapter V).

There are several strategies through which young students’ writing can be encouraged. They need not be asked initially to write independently. A shared writing activity involves a teacher asking for students’ oral responses that are written on the board. Based on a discussion, the responses are framed in to a composition that is a shared work of the class. This can then be written by
students in their notebooks. Such composition can also be done in groups or pairs. Often, a process of drafting and editing with the teacher’s help is followed before the final composition is written. These are small, simple sentences in the early grades. The basis for such writing is the scaffolding provided by the teacher that prepares the students for writing.

Composition by young students may seem too ambitious given the very poor writing skills in Rajasthan. But, it should be remembered that like (a) expressing thoughts in speech, or (b) deriving meaning from a text cannot be left to later grades, writing composition needs to be initiated early. This is also an issue of a mindset of low expectations from young students. Carefully selected strategies with adequate support from the teacher can help children in early grades write simple sentences on a picture or a topic. This dimension will help make the development of language more holistic with oral language, reading and writing developing together and reinforcing each other.

6.6 FACTOR 4: CURRICULUM AND TEXTBOOKS ORIENTED TO REAL CLASSROOM SITUATIONS AND SUPPORT ACTIVE LEARNING PEDAGOGIES

The curriculum and textbooks for language (Assamese and Hindi) for grades 1 and 2 have been analyzed in Chapter V (section 5.5). Teacher interviews and the survey confirmed some of the findings of the desk analysis of textbooks. There is a big disconnect between the reading levels of students and the kind of texts in the textbooks. SCERT faculty members, in both states, who were involved with textbook development, were candid in admitting that the grade 1 and 2 textbooks were too difficult for the students. These are read aloud by the teacher and most students only repeat after the teacher. Very few students actually read the text during this phase of loud reading. One of the objectives of lessons in the grade 2 textbooks seems to be to provide information that needs to be memorized by the students. In the absence of a good understanding of the
role of language in learning, and the importance of oral language development and comprehension, teachers focus on the content, rather than development of reading skills. *The teaching of the texts, therefore, becomes an end in itself rather than the texts being used as tools to develop vocabulary, reading fluency and comprehension.* The exercises at the end of the lesson also focus on recall of the exact words or sentences from the lesson. The Assam textbooks are much more amenable to an active learning process, but without training, teachers tend to focus on the more mechanical drill activities. The new Assamese language textbook (introduced 2 years back), which was adapted from the NCERT Hindi textbook is a radical departure from the earlier textbook. It has a whole language based approach that teachers are not familiar with. There has been no training for the new textbook. The ground situation is that teachers continue to use their traditional teaching methods.

The basic issues for improvement in the curriculum and textbooks are:

- The curriculum needs to emphasize the crucial role of language learning in early primary grades.
- The curriculum should include key principles and strategies for language teaching-learning in the early years.
- Desired learning outcomes for key language skills should be clearly stated
- Use of storybooks and other supplementary reading materials should be promoted
- Textbooks should include activities and exercises that encourage active involvement of students (the Assam textbooks do include such activities)
- Textbooks should clearly reflect good practices and teaching methods for phonological awareness, decoding instruction, building vocabulary and reading fluency and deep comprehension
- Textbooks should provide ample scope for revision and consolidation after every few units
The texts in the lessons should be gradually graded (length and language difficulty level) from the beginning of the year. They should not be difficult to read for the average student.

Workbooks are really useful in guiding writing work away from mere copying and handwriting practice towards reinforcement and practice and application level activities.

Since classrooms are multilevel with a huge difference in students’ reading levels, textbooks need to provide scope for activities at different levels. The lessons can be read aloud by the teacher followed by an oral discussion with active participation of students. Some students can read the lesson, while others engage in more basic tasks like decoding or reading simpler texts or story cards. Writing work can also be organized at different levels suited to students’ writing abilities at a particular point in time. In addition, the textbook should include some ‘spiralling’ with frequent revision of concepts and skills learnt earlier. Curriculum developers, textbook authors and those tasked with developing training programmes need to work together to convey a clear unified approach to the teaching-learning of language in early primary grades. The approach must be based on the real situation in primary schools, taking into account aspects like, (a) instructional time, including actual teaching time available at school level, (b) reading levels of students and the extent of multilevel situation, and (c) quality of teachers and their ability to adapt to approaches that are very different from what they have traditionally practiced.

6.7 FACTOR 5: DEVELOPING A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE IMPORTANCE OF READING AND LANGUAGE LEARNING IN EARLY GRADES; ACCOUNTABILITY FOR ALL STUDENTS LEARNING TO READ AND WRITE

The importance of learning to read well in the early grades cannot be overemphasized. Ensuring that all students learn to read and write by the end of
grade 2 or 3 is an important dimension of equitable quality. This is a very basic expectation from the primary education system. To recapitulate from Chapter I:

- Language, thought and cognition are closely linked. Language cannot be treated as just another subject in the early grades
- Reading is a foundational skill. Good reading skills help a child access the rest of the curriculum
- If a child doesn’t learn to read and write well in the early grades, she cannot do well in school
- Students who fall behind in language learning skills in the first one or two grades can never catch-up; the gap actually widens over the next grades. A poor reader at the end of grade 1 is likely to be a poor reader even at the end of grade 5

(i) Situation in Assam and Rajasthan

The regional language (Assamese and Hindi) that is also the medium of instruction is treated like just another subject in terms of instructional time allocation, priority for training inputs etc. In fact, in Assam, the teaching of Assamese has to compete for instructional time with English that is considered a more difficult and important subject. For in-service training, the feeling is that since teachers know the language well, they can also teach it adequately and more training time is allocated to teaching English, Mathematics or other topics like the RTE Act. In Rajasthan, teachers seemed to be more conscious of the need for focusing on teaching Hindi by providing more instructional time for it. However, there was little understanding of the larger role of language in thinking and understanding. Also, the focus was only on the mechanical ‘drill’ aspects of learning to read and write that left out the most crucial aspects of meaning making and rich interaction.

(ii) Some suggestions to address the issue: Importance of reading and accountability for all students learning to read and write

a. An education system-wide effort to develop a clear conceptual understanding of the importance of language learning in the early primary
grades: This will enable school and teacher level action for increasing instructional time for language, focusing on oral language development and comprehension, providing access to storybooks etc. There is also a need for teachers and the entire education system to understand the crucial role of storybooks and other reading materials in the learning to read process.

b. Creating a climate for a strong equity orientation in language teaching-learning: Literacy skills are basic to all learning. Unless a student learns to read (with complete understanding) and write, she cannot have an equal opportunity to learn in primary school. In the first few grades, equitable learning should be the cornerstone of the teaching-learning process. Based on adequate research evidence, it is clear that given the right conditions (including motivation to learn) almost every child is capable of learning to read and write. The school has to, in fact, compensate for the deprived socioeconomic home environment of students to ensure that they reach desired levels of reading skills.

c. Establishing school and classroom libraries: Children learn to read better by reading more. Availability of adequate books and reading materials like story cards that are simple, interesting and graded to match students’ reading levels is a prerequisite for development of reading skills. There is a big dearth of good storybooks for beginning and early readers. Storybooks also help in developing a reading habit. Reading habit and reading skills reinforce each other. Children who have better reading skills read more. Also, children who read more, improve their reading skills.

d. Organizing reading events at school and working with parents: Reading events and competitions create a climate of reading promotion. If done effectively, it raises the value attached to reading books. Similarly, a mobilization of parents to encourage children to read at home (for enjoyment) can be very useful in enhancing the importance of reading.

e. Teachers to accept responsibility for all students learning to read: There is very little accountability within the education system for student learning. Creating accountability at the school or teacher level has been a challenge,
given the lack of organization of parents and community on school issues, and the general lack of accountability in the system. However, *ensuring that all students can learn to read is a ‘limited’ agenda around which it is possible to create some accountability among most teachers.* This has been successfully tried out by this researcher in a state-wide Reading Guarantee Programme in Assam with a fair degree of success. During the teachers’ workshops conducted as part of this study, this idea was discussed with teachers in Assam and Rajasthan. There was general agreement that the school should work towards guaranteeing successful achievement of basic reading and writing skills. However, this effort will require a multifaceted strategy:

- Key reading skills and concrete learning outcomes with clearly defined expected levels (for the various skills) will have to be identified.
- The curriculum and textbooks will need some modification since their expectations are high and teachers tend to focus on teaching and memorization of content rather than focusing on key skills
- Mobilization of teachers, parents and community around the reading agenda and creating a clear understanding of expected learning outcomes
- Teacher professional development for effective early grades reading skills instruction
- Provision of appropriate TLM, storybooks, and reading materials etc.
- A regular system of assessment and sharing of results with parents and discussion around students’ learning

These, and other initiatives, can help create a virtuous coalition of teachers, parents, children and community around a shared agenda of success in reading in early grades.
6.8 FACTOR 6: TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The preceding chapters clearly establish that implementing effective early grades language teaching practices is a huge challenge. It requires a significant change from the current situation. The change is required on many fronts. Teachers (and the rest of the education system) need to develop a strong conceptual understanding of how young children learn to read; about principles of language teaching-learning in early primary grades; and the role of language in thinking, understanding and learning. Teachers will also need to acquire the knowledge and skills for implementing classroom strategies for effective teaching of reading, including oral language development, systematic decoding instruction, focus on comprehension, regular assessment, regular reading practice for students, and strategies for supporting weaker students (to name just a few). What is also needed is the ability to create an active learning environment through a variety of whole class, group and individual activities and tasks that encourage active student participation. A commitment to equitable learning in the classroom and ‘learning for all’, along with skills and strategies to address the needs of students who are lagging behind, is also crucial. These requirements fall in the realm of knowledge, skills and attitudes.

There are certain aspects of a teacher’s (or any person’s) belief system and world-view that are based on her socialization process, including schooling, and are deeply ingrained. These are difficult to influence through the kind of teacher education strategies being implemented today. However, a more comprehensive approach to teacher professional development and learning could influence some beliefs and practices, as outlined in the paragraphs below.

6.8.1 Present Situation of Teacher Professional Development

(i) Pre-service teacher education

Pre-service education offers the best opportunity for working with young teacher trainees for an extended period to develop and influence their understanding of how to work with young children for reading and language
development. During this period, it is possible to work on beliefs and attitudes of the trainees related to teaching and learning. This study did not delve into the status of pre-service education. However, the researcher has a good understanding about the nature and quality of pre-service education in Assam. The pre-service training is of a really low standard with (a) poor quality teacher educators, (b) a focus on content or subject matter and educational theories, (c) large class sizes, (d) didactic mode of delivery, with no scope for trainees’ active engagement, (e) weak relationship between what is taught and real classroom processes, and (f) no infusion of new ideas and classroom strategies. The new pre-service teacher education curriculum is yet to be implemented. The quality of pre-service education has dipped further with the huge recruitment of teachers in recent years and the pressure to get them ‘trained’ quickly. The situation is similar in most other parts of the country. Therefore, a valuable opportunity for laying the foundation of principles and practices of early grades teaching and learning of reading is lost at the pre-service stage.

(ii) In-service teacher training

For all practical purposes, teacher professional development is confined to 4-8 days of in-service training conducted every year through SSA. However, teachers in both states do not have much faith in this training. Many teachers also expressed a feeling of ‘training fatigue’; with training programmes turning into events that are routinely organized without any enthusiasm or sense of expectation or optimism about learning from them. This is very different from the early days of DPEP and SSA when in-service training held a certain ‘newness’ and was welcomed by teachers. The extent of disillusionment with the SSA in-service training is higher in Rajasthan. In the teachers’ survey, many teachers in Assam wanted improvements in teacher training, and felt this could impact the quality of classroom processes. In Rajasthan, on the other hand, teachers were quite dismissive of the annual summer in-service training. They said attendance was low, master trainers were neither willing nor able to address the real classroom issues, and everyone just went through the motions of the training. Training is held jointly for primary and upper primary teachers,
and the focus was mostly on providing information and knowledge needed for the upper primary grades or grades 4-5 at the primary stage.

The problems with the current teacher training strategy, as ascertained through interviews with teachers, CRC & BRC staff, and DIET and SCERT faculty, can be summed up as follows:

a. Training follows a top-down approach with teachers being mere recipients of information and ‘good strategies’. There is usually an overload of information, rather than a focus on addressing specific classroom issues. A large part of the training content becomes irrelevant for teachers. Often, teacher educators (called ‘master trainers’) have not, themselves, tried out the strategies they describe during the training sessions. For example, in Rajasthan, teachers said that they repeatedly raised issues about how a particular classroom strategy can be implemented in a multigrade situation, but there was no response from the master trainers.

b. The training topics are decided at some higher level, usually the state level, and a package is prepared without any consultation with teachers about their needs and priorities. In Rajasthan, the academic support system (CRC-BRC) is non-existent. Therefore, there is no feedback about teacher needs.

c. Even when instructional strategies are suggested through training programmes, they are presented in the form of prescriptive ‘packages’, without including any emphasis on conceptual grounding or rationale for suggesting certain strategies. It is argued that teachers would not be able to understand a discussion on the conceptual issues behind a particular strategy. For example, in Assam, the training in 2008 that focussed on reading skill development, stressed fluency development, but it did not include a discussion about the principles of early reading; the strong links between early fluency and comprehension etc.

d. The training delivery is not in a participatory mode. It does not create an active learning environment; something that teacher educators want teachers to create in their classrooms. The mode of delivery is didactic, with
little scope for experiential learning. In Rajasthan, less than 10% of the training time during the 6-day summer training was earmarked for demonstration and practice sessions. In Assam, this was somewhat higher at 18%. In the last 5 years, no demonstration or practice teaching sessions have been held in a live school situation during the in-service training programmes. There is no attempt to promote reflection and critical thinking during the training.

e. The quality of master trainers is not satisfactory. They have, usually, not put in a strong preparation (with classroom practice) before the training sessions. In Rajasthan, the trainers are college lecturers or higher secondary school teachers who have no experience of teaching in primary schools. Obviously, they fail in convincing teachers in bringing about any change in classroom practices.

f. Teacher educators/trainers do not understand adult learning principles. The training of master trainers does not include skills of negotiation, experiential training strategies and ways of working with experienced adults. The result is that these trainers simply state or explain the different topics, rather than engaging teachers in an active discussion and drawing in their experiences in the process. There is no attempt to negotiate for change in classroom practices. Deep rooted practices like choral repetition and copying will not change unless teachers are engaged in a consistent dialogue over a period of time that involves critical reflection.

g. Training programmes have not had a consistent focus over the years. Different topics are picked up each year and there is no reinforcement of an approach or strategy advocated in earlier training programmes. In Assam, a good training programme was implemented in 2007-08 that focussed on teaching-learning of language in early grades. However, this was not followed-up in the following years, and by 2012 teachers had forgotten about the inputs of the 2008 programme. Strategies initiated after that programme had fallen in to disuse in one or two years time. One of the main reasons for this lack of consistency in training focus from one year to
another is that there is no clear vision for the direction of change that is desired in classroom processes. It was clear in the researcher’s interaction with SCERT faculty and SSA staff responsible for pedagogical improvement that they had not formulated a clear conceptual framework of good language teaching principles and practices. Therefore, they did not see the need for a consistent focus and push on promoting classroom level change in teaching of reading and language.

A simplistic, behaviourist understanding of short duration training bringing about change in teachers’ practice is inappropriate. Most importantly, when change is needed in the realm of beliefs, attitudes and longstanding practice, a one-time training cannot be expected to have a significant impact. This is discussed in section 6.4.3.

(iii) Regular academic support to teachers

In Assam, the CRC-BRC system had been active in the initial years of DPEP and SSA. However, in later years, the CRC and BRC staff was burdened with data collection and reporting tasks, reducing their role for providing on-site academic support. Now, the CRC Coordinator is no longer a full-time person, and is responsible for some on-site academic support along with full-time teaching in a primary school. However, some good CRC Coordinators (like the one in Bhurbandha cluster) continue to interact with teachers and provide some academic support. A monthly meeting of teachers is held regularly to discuss lesson plans, TLM preparation and demonstration and other academic issues. This researcher attended one monthly meeting. A lot of time was spent on collecting data and discussing administrative problems. The discussion on academic issues was limited and routinized. In Rajasthan, the CRC system has been replaced by entrusting the headmaster of a nodal UPS with responsibility for some coordination. This nodal headmaster perceives his role to be for data collection and collecting and transmitting correspondence from the block education office to the schools in his area. The 2-3 block resource persons (BRP) in the BRC office do not perform any academic role. They coordinate
the implementation of different SSA components like community mobilization, education of children with special needs, training, alternative schooling etc. For in-service teacher training, these BRPs make arrangements like event managers. They do not even sit through the training sessions that are conducted by master trainers selected at the district level. Obviously, with no understanding of the training content, the BRPs are in no position to discuss academic issues with school teachers. Teachers were candid in saying that they had never received any academic support from the block or district level. In fact, there was no academic discourse at any level in Rajasthan. Only the nodal UPS headmasters attend a monthly meeting, where the discussion is focussed on collection of information and communicating government orders around a host of administrative issues.

DIET faculties have virtually no role in providing regular academic support to the schools. The training and academic support strategies are controlled by SSA and there are no clear expectations from the DIET. This research did not study the functioning of DIETs, but the limited interaction with the language department faculty in both districts showed that they had no interest or capacity for taking up the challenge of improving language teaching practices in primary schools.

The other important issue is that training and academic support should reinforce each other. On-site and other kinds of academic discussion and meetings should focus on the same issues that were initiated during the training programme. This implies a system-wide shared vision and understanding of the concepts and practices that are sought to be promoted, which is not in place today.

6.8.2 Good Practices for In-Service Training

In-service training has been shown to impact students’ reading/learning achievements positively (Felsenthal, 1978; Fuller, 1987). While training cannot
be the only strategy for teacher professional development, it is an important component of an overall strategy for teacher professional development. Based on the discussion in the previous section, the following changes are needed in the content and process of in-service training of teachers:

a. *In-service training should not be held as a one-off event*, once in a year. This is the usual practice in both states. There is a need for several short duration (2-3 days) refresher programmes throughout the year to reinforce core messages and provide scope for observation and repeated practice of new methods.

b. *The goal of improving students’ learning, in this case reading skills, should guide the selection of teaching methods and other training content*. Teacher acceptance is likely to be higher if they are able to see the clear link between the training content and improved student learning on valued outcomes. Thus, success of training should be defined not in terms of mastery of new strategies, but in terms of the impact that changed practice has on valued outcomes (Timperley, 2008).

c. *Training must be derived from a clear vision of change in classroom processes* that is desired. It should be centred on crucial teaching and learning activities like planning lessons, evaluating students’ work, use of TLM, designing individual and group tasks for students etc.

d. *The focus should be on teachers’ professional ‘learning’ instead of ‘training’*. An approach that treats teachers as technicians who can be taught a new set of behaviours and then be expected to implement them will not succeed (Timperley, 2008). Teaching is a complex process and teachers need to reflect on their own context and student needs to adopt some desirable practices. Also, professional learning is a continuous process and a one-off annual training cannot result in learning that can bring about changed classroom practices (see section 6.4.3)

e. *A training programme should not simply transmit a package of teaching methods and good practices*. The conceptual grounding and the body of evidence supporting a practice needs to be shared and discussed with
teachers to build conviction. Training programmes should integrate theory and practice constantly.

f. *Training delivery should be based on an understanding of adult learning principles.* The methodology should be collaborative, experiential, reflective, learner centred, and should build on the experiences of the participant teachers. The spirit of the workshop should be one of dialogue, critical reflection, and sharing of knowledge and experiences (Copeland et al. 1993). Motivational aspects of learning should be given due consideration in planning the training sessions. A significant proportion of the time should be earmarked for demonstration or modelling and practice of methods that are being suggested. Practice and observation sessions in live classrooms followed by reflection and consolidation are crucial to build conviction. Short training videos of desirable classroom practices work much better than explanation and discussion. These methods require a high level of expertise on the part of teacher educators in the content being transacted as well as a deep understanding of participatory training strategies. It also requires extensive preparation on part of the teacher educators. Teacher educators (or trainers) should have a stake in improvement in classroom practices and improved students’ learning. They should not see their role as just conducting a training session on a particular topic.

g. *The training workshops should be rooted in classroom reality.* Teachers relate much better to ideas and practices if they see the direct link with their classroom situations. Teacher educators should, therefore, have experience of classroom teaching, or at least working with teachers to understand how some of the desired practices work in classrooms in their context. Just talking about evidence of improved learning from adoption of these desired practices in very different contexts (like another state or country) will not convince teachers.

h. Instead of prescribing a strict step-by-step teaching strategy in a ‘one size fits all’ approach, *training workshops should discuss key principles and outline of some suggested practices.* Teachers could have the flexibility of
developing some strategies based on their context and student needs. However, a completely conceptual approach in a training programme that does not suggest any specific methods and practices is also frustrating for teachers. A balance between a highly prescriptive and structured agenda and a completely conceptual open-ended approach is useful.

i. **Reading should be recognized as an important area for professional learning** as distinct from the rest of the language curriculum. Training workshops that focus on conceptual issues on early grades reading and strategies for developing reading skills would be useful when teachers see the direct link with improving students’ reading skills.

### 6.8.3 Suggestions for Teacher Professional Learning

It is not easy to bring about a change in classroom processes. Authoritarian classroom practices with little scope for students’ active involvement; perception that rote memorization is important for learning to read; that all letters must be learnt before students are expected to read words; predominance of copying and handwriting practice; belief that some students are inherently ‘slow learners’ and cannot learn to read and write well etc. are examples of beliefs and practices that are not easy to change. This requires a comprehensive process of professional learning. **Professional learning is a continuous process.** A high quality training programme or workshop (based on the principles outlined in the previous section) is just one strategy for teacher professional learning. A variety of professional development activities that reinforce each other need to be used to support teacher learning and change in classroom practices. Some strategies for supporting teacher professional learning (other than training workshops) include:

a. **Regular on-site academic support:** Teachers function in isolation and need academic discussion and support to implement ideas and practices suggested during training programmes. Visits to schools by experienced teachers or
teacher educators who can observe classrooms and suggest ways of improvement are very useful. They can also help motivate teachers to make some change in practices. Good CRC Coordinators and BRC resource persons have managed to influence teachers to adopt some good practices in several states.

b. Regular academic discussions in teacher meetings: Teachers could meet at some frequency (e.g. once a month) for a day or part of a day to discuss their academic issues, exchange ideas and prepare for the next month’s lessons. In Assam, this was a strong practice in the early years of SSA. It still continues, but the academic content of these meetings needs to be strengthened. The presence of experienced teacher educators who have a sound understanding of theory and practice can add great value to these meetings. The agenda for these meetings should be decided in advance based on teachers’ needs.

c. Observation of good practice: A professional development programme should include opportunities for observing and reflecting on excellent practice by identified good teachers. This is an important strategy to build conviction among teachers for implementing improved practices.

d. Short duration courses: Some teachers, based on identified need, could be enlisted for intensive short duration courses. These could be very targetted courses covering only one or two aspects, e.g. using storybooks to develop reading fluency. Sometimes, more teachers could be included for a one-day workshop to enhance knowledge or skills on a very specific topic.

e. Distance education: Radio and television broadcasts could help reinforce messages conveyed through training workshops and provide additional information. It is also possible to start distance learning programmes, including some face-to-face sessions and study of print materials, in collaboration with an institution like a university. For example, there could be a 6 month distance learning course on early grades reading for teachers who volunteer. There could be an incentive attached to course completion. Such teachers could be included in the block or district level academic groups as
resource persons if they implement some of their new understanding in their classrooms. They could also get a pack of books for their classrooms.

f. **Teacher networks; cooperative or collegial development:** The administration could encourage teachers to collaborate on their own by forming groups based on subjects of interest. These could be facilitated by providing some financial support, if necessary. In some Western countries, cooperation among teachers of the same school is encouraged and school level staff meetings take up academic discussions. This is difficult to implement in India as primary schools have just 2 or 3 teachers, and the head teacher does not have a strong leadership role. However, informal interest groups that meet and discuss academic issues or seek ideas from resource persons can definitely be encouraged. Similarly, master trainers and teacher educators should be engaged in regular discussion and reflection based on classroom observations to prepare themselves for supporting teachers through school visits, workshops etc.

### 6.8.4 Other Factors Supporting Teacher Professional Learning and Teacher Adoption of Improved Practices

Change in classroom processes is the result of intensive and consistent teacher professional development in a positive learning environment, where beliefs and motivation issues can be addressed. Some strategies for professional development and learning are outlined in the previous sections. Other factors that support teacher professional learning and adoption of improved teaching practices include:

a. **Everyone who affects student learning is involved:** Only educating classroom teachers about early grades reading instruction will not be effective; unless teacher educators, supervisors, educational administrators, policy makers, and even parents share and work with the same concepts and
practices (Learning First Alliance, 2000). Based on this shared understanding, goals and priorities can be set with everyone’s agreement.

b. *A clear vision of effective early grades reading instruction* should be known to the senior leadership at state and district level. Often, the understanding that is articulated at the state level gets diluted and distorted at district and sub-district levels. There should be clarity on the conceptual aspects and the desirable strategies for effective reading instruction among all institutions and individuals involved with the effort to improve reading outcomes.

c. *There should be a long-term commitment to the vision and practices* sought to be promoted through various strategies of professional learning. Change in classroom practices takes time, and needs to be nurtured and supported during the initial period. In most states in India, training and follow-up does not follow a consistent path of sustained focus on a desired goal, e.g. enhancing early grade reading achievements. New initiatives are launched each year, and there is no effort to support the institutionalization of changed classroom practices over a period of few years. This researcher has called the frequently shifting approach of most state SSA programmes as a ‘tyranny of innovations’. Such an inconsistent approach leaves teachers confused and ensures that no one can be held accountable for any significant shift in classroom processes or enhancement in student achievements.

d. *Curricular frameworks, textbooks, instructional strategies, learning standards and student assessments need to be closely aligned with each other:* This study has shown that the curriculum, textbooks, teaching strategies and students’ reading levels are at great variance with each other. This disconnect causes problems for the teacher to ‘cover’ the textbook, while also being mindful of the actual reading levels of students in the class. Also, with all these contradictions, it is difficult to hold teachers accountable for student learning. When all these aspects are well aligned, it becomes easier for teachers to adopt suggested instructional strategies and monitor student learning (Learning First Alliance, 2000).
e. *Teachers need to be involved in a consultative process* at different stages. For example, before a significant change in longstanding practice is suggested, it is important to consult teachers and build consensus for the need for this change.

f. An overall environment of academic discussion and problem-solving and professional learning will promote adoption of some changed practices by teachers. This implies that cluster and block level academic staff, DIET faculty members and educational administrators need to themselves have a strong learning orientation. They should encourage and support adoption of improved practices. Resource persons and teacher educators should be easily accessible to teachers and should proactively support teachers in reflection and problem-solving related to teaching methods, student assessments etc.

g. *Teachers need to see that the education system, including the administrators, is focussed on student learning.* School visits by SSA programme functionaries, educational administrators, academic staff from cluster and block levels and DIET faculty should include an element of assessing student learning and discussion with teachers on this issue. Review meetings at various levels should not be confined to review of SSA programme components or administrative and accounts issues, but necessarily include an agenda item on student learning and related academic issues.

h. A *demand from the system (and community) for schools to ensure student learning* helps teacher adoption of good practices. Right now, there is no demand from the education system for teachers to change current language teaching practices and feel accountable for student learning. There is also no *motivation factor* operating. There are no incentives for teachers who adopt effective practices. These need not be financial incentives, but mechanisms for public appreciation and recognition of good work, inclusion in higher level teams for training of teachers, exposure visits etc.
i. The model of large scale cascade training does not help in creating live models of change, viz. classrooms that clearly demonstrate effective language teaching practices. There is nothing more convincing for other teachers than seeing a classroom that functions differently, e.g. students work in groups; reading aloud and storytelling is included; students get dedicated time to read simple and interesting storybooks; students are actively engaged in answering teachers questions and writing in workbooks etc. A separate effort needs to be made to work with good teachers to create classrooms with excellent practice that can be observed by other teachers.

j. The agenda for change should not impose a sudden heavy burden on teachers for planning, preparing materials etc. This could reduce acceptability of the new instructional strategy.

Changing old practices requires a lot of effort. Even when teachers are willing and motivated to try out new practices, it takes time to translate new professional knowledge in to daily teaching habits (Bransford et al., 1999). Unless a virtuous mix of various factors: a learning environment; regular academic support; systemic pressure for change and encouragement for adoption of good practices; creating models of changed practices etc. is implemented, only training programmes will not bring desired results. The effort to bring some desirable changes in classroom practices that have the potential to enhance student learning should include the following: (a) building conviction among teachers about the need for change, especially at the feelings level (e.g. sharing assessment results to show low learning levels with high disparity to create a consensus for addressing this crisis), (b) helping teachers understand and reflect on the changes being suggested through a consultative process, (c) helping teachers understand the rationale for suggested changes, (d) observing good practice in action, (e) allowing adequate time for practice and developing a level of comfort with changed practices, (f) arranging for regular follow-up, consultation and academic support, (g) encouraging teachers who adopt new practices, and (h) sharing results flowing out of changed practices.
6.9 FACTOR 7: QUALITY PRESCHOOL OR PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION

6.9.1 Situation in study areas

In Assam, most primary schools have a Ka-sreni (like kindergarten) as a pre-primary class. In about 20% schools where a Ka-sreni is not available, the Anganwadi centre (AWC) is located within the school premises. The early childhood education (ECE) component of the AWC functions under the supervision of the primary school’s head teacher. The coverage of early childhood education in Rajasthan is low. The AWCs are responsible for providing ECE. The AWC was located within the school campus in only one of the 8 schools included in this study. The AWCs do not have a strong early childhood education component because the Anganwadi worker has several other responsibilities; she does not receive intensive training on ECE, and many AWCs do not function regularly.

The quality of the Ka-sreni education in Assam is far from satisfactory. There is no dedicated teacher and no teacher spends more than a few minutes in this young children’s class. They spend their time either copying letters and numbers from a textbook or just doing nothing. Of course, sitting in the same room (usually) as grade 1, they do get some exposure to the teaching process in grade 1 or 2. In some schools, especially in urban areas, where there are adequate teachers and parental pressure, Ka-sreni does provide useful inputs to the young 4-5 year old children. However, there has not been much training of teachers on early childhood education practices. Teachers, whenever they get time, focus on 3 activities, viz. (a) singing rhymes (b) choral repetition of the alphabets and numbers, and (c) copying alphabets. But, whatever little happens in Ka-sreni in Assam seems to be making a difference to the preparedness of children for grade 1 and acquisition of some pre-reading and pre-writing skills. This study brings out the huge difference between reading levels of students (grades 1 & 2) in Assam and Rajasthan. One of the findings is that the Ka-sreni
in Assam helps ensure that students entering grade 1 had some letter knowledge and had spent some time singing rhymes and listening to stories.

6.9.2 Importance of Pre-Primary/Early Childhood Education

Ideally, young children should receive early stimulation at home from the time of birth. The first two years are most crucial for brain development. In later years (before attaining school going age of 5 or 6), a child would benefit greatly from a preschool programme with a developmentally appropriate curriculum. Early preschool experience has been shown to be an important predictor of emergent and early literacy skills (Connor, 2007). However, a 2-3 year long preschool programme seems like a daunting mandate in our context.

This section presents arguments for at least one year’s good quality pre-primary education before grade 1. Ideally, this additional class should be included as a part of the primary school. In this section, the limited focus will be on discussing the benefits from only the academic or cognitive aspects of a good quality pre-primary education strategy.

(i) Pre-primary education helps develop foundational skills for ‘learning to read’

Before the formal teaching of reading begins in grade 1, there are several foundational skills that need to be developed. These are crucial to success in early reading. These include:

a. Oral language development: Developing a strong foundation of oral language that includes vocabulary, listening comprehension and speaking ability is crucial for early reading skills. Conversation, asking questions, etc. help develop children’s oral language. Oral work in a preschool classroom, especially storytelling, also helps children develop an understanding of the story schema. This also develops content knowledge that is so crucial for reading with understanding. Oral language work is also crucial to develop an understanding of the standard language used in the textbooks. In India, the standard textbook language is rarely the language spoken by the children.
when they first join grade 1. The preschool class provides a great opportunity for oral work in the children’s home language(s) and helping develop some oral fluency in the standard language (NCERT, 2006). Once the teaching of letters is initiated in grade 1, oral language development gets totally neglected as the focus is only on reading and writing.

b. **Developing listening comprehension**: Reading aloud, asking children to retell stories, or predict the sequence, or asking a variety of questions helps develop listening comprehension. Language comprehension is a key ingredient of reading comprehension. This can be developed through a lot of oral language work. Once teaching of decoding is initiated in grade 1, there is little focus on comprehension, since very little meaning based work gets done.

c. **Concepts about print**: Through processes of shared reading and browsing through books, children can learn about books, the relationship between speech and print, directionality of print and develop a strong interest in reading. This pre-reading phase where children ‘pretend’ to read is also called ‘emergent reading’ and is a crucial phase in the learning to read process.

d. **Phonological and phonemic awareness**: Beginning with rhyming and alliteration, a systematic strategy to make children aware of the parts of sound in speech till they are conscious of the smallest sound at the beginning or end of a word is crucial to success in early reading. Phonemic awareness is the stepping stone to the understanding of sound-letter association. This aspect does not get any emphasis once the teaching of letters starts early in grade 1. Phonological awareness continues to be an important foundational skill for combining letters and *matras*.

e. **Visual discrimination**: Recognizing patterns and even distinguishing between letter shapes is a good foundation for recognizing letters at a later stage.

f. **Pre-writing activities**: Scribbling, free drawing, making patterns, practicing drawing of shapes etc. help children transition smoothly to writing.
The problem is that there is no time to work on these foundational skills in grade 1 when teachers straight away launch into teaching of the alphabet. One reason why students are not able to remember the letters is that the groundwork needed for pre-reading and pre-writing has not been done. This can be done only if (at least) a one year pre-primary curriculum is implemented where these foundational skills are developed systematically.

(ii) **Additional pre-primary year needed for developing reading fluency by end of grade 2**

Reading research, including cognitive neuroscience research, has established that learning to read is a complex process. A child needs to be prepared for ‘formal reading’ by exposing her to print from a very early age, reading aloud regularly to the child at home and school, providing access to a variety of books, asking questions etc. In the West, this happens at home for several years, at preschool, and the early primary grades including kindergarten. Typically, K-3 (kindergarten to grade 3) is considered as the time required for a child to develop effective reading and writing skills. In both Assam and Rajasthan (as in most parts of rural India), children do not get any such stimulation at home. But, we expect our children to acquire basic reading and writing abilities in just 2 years! The least we can do is to create a one year language curriculum before grade 1 so that an integrated curriculum for 3 years is available till the end of grade 2 to ensure that almost all students acquire basic fluency in reading and writing. This is absolutely crucial for students who come from deprived, print-starved home backgrounds. With 3 years of systematic early grades language instruction, it will be possible to hold teachers and schools accountable for all students reaching desired levels in language outcomes.

(iii) **Additional pre-primary year helps in compensating for deprived socioeconomic home environments**

The difference in socioeconomic backgrounds of children is the main cause of disparity in reading achievements in grades 1 and 2. In fact, there are significant differences at the entry to grade 1 itself based on the nature of preschool experience of different children or preparation at home. A pre-
primary class, with a strong academic and cognitive focus on oral language development and foundational skills for reading, would help to reduce disparities and help compensate for the deprived home literacy environments of some children.

6.9.3 Preschool/Pre-primary education should be of high quality
Right now, the limited preschool education available through AWCs is of poor quality. Teachers responsible for the pre-primary class (that is being suggested by this study) should receive intensive training and regular academic support. Pre-service education for all teachers who may work in lower primary grades, should include a strong component of strategies to work with young children, especially for early language development. It must be recognized that language skills in these years (preschool to grade 2 or 3) form a continuum and all teachers teaching lower primary grades need to understand the concepts and best practices for early grades language instruction.

Apart from the strong preparation of the teacher, the pre-primary class should be well resourced with a variety of interesting and attractive books appropriate for young children. These books can be used for reading aloud by the teacher, shared reading, pretend reading or logographic reading. The focus should be on development of oral language and rich meaningful use of language in the classroom. At the end of the pre-primary class, children should be ready to move on from the emergent literacy phase to the formal reading phase including learning to decode.

6.9.4 The Policy Challenge
Early childhood education for children in the 0-6 age group is a Directive Principle in the Indian Constitution. It is not included under the Right to Education Act (RTE), 2010. The coverage of ECE in the country is stated to be only 24-27%. Right now, the responsibility of ECE rests with the Ministry of Women and Child Development (WCD) in the Central and State governments
through the ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) programme. There is little coordination between the Ministry of WCD and Ministry of HRD (Human Resource Development), which is responsible for school education. This divide extends down to the state, district and school level as well. This researcher has argued, on earlier occasions, for pre-primary education to be made the responsibility of the Education Departments since the pre-primary and primary grades form a cognitive continuum. Their separation is threatening an integrated approach for early years of schooling, especially for language learning. The inclusion of a pre-primary class in almost all primary schools in Assam can be a model that can be adapted throughout the country. The ICDS programme that is responsible for early childhood care and education can take responsibility of the highly neglected area of home based early childhood stimulation of children in the 0-3 years of age group, and one or two years of preschool education prior to enrollment of children into a pre-primary class (kindergarten) in the regular primary schools. Of course, this will be a big policy shift given the different lines of control at present. Significant additional resources will be needed for additional teachers for the additional pre-primary class. We will also need to move from a ‘welfarist’ perspective of ECE (as is the current orientation under ICDS) to a strong academic and cognitive perspective for this pre-primary class which fits in to a clear framework for learning in early grades.

6.10 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY
This study has been able to highlight the significant inadequacies in the language teaching-learning processes in early grades and the dismal reading achievements of students in grades 1 and 2 in two states. Some major academic factors that affect reading achievements have been identified and suggestions have been made for improving teaching practices. However, there are some limitations of this research; mostly related to the methodology. These are outlined below:
(i) The sampling of schools was part random, and part purposive. Therefore, formally, the findings cannot be generalized for the whole district or even a block. However, during interaction with block and district education staff, it became clear that the teaching-learning situation is very similar in the entire district. Also, the researcher visited many more schools before starting the field work; and based on a superficial assessment, most classrooms seemed to have similar teaching practices. In Rajasthan, 2 primary schools had to be replaced because they had a really unsatisfactory academic environment and very low levels of student learning. Therefore, this researcher feels that the selected schools are fairly representative of the school situations in the block and district. If anything, they are slightly better than the average schools in these districts.

(ii) Almost all schools included in the sample had attendance below 100 on the day of visit. The average class size during the observations was 11 in Assam and 15 in Rajasthan. The maximum class size in any classroom was 18 in Assam and 28 in Rajasthan. Thus, the schools that were studied had small class sizes and the findings will not be directly applicable to classrooms with large class sizes of 40 or more. Of course in most parts of Assam and Rajasthan (as in many other states), government primary schools do not have high enrollments, and small class sizes are very common.

(iii) The observations for a classroom were made on 3 consecutive days. This limited the variety of teaching-learning activities and nature of topics that were observed. However, given the scope of work, it was not possible to go to each classroom after a reasonable gap. The researcher discussed the option of alternating between different classrooms, so that one classroom gets visited 3 times over a period of 15 days. However, a consensus emerged that 3 consecutive days of observation would be better as it would help observe a complete lesson and provide an overview of all kinds of activities included in a decoding or reading lesson. Visits with a gap of few
days would not help in developing a full understanding of the range of activities taken up for a particular lesson or topic.

(iv) During a limited classroom observation of 3 days, observer effects are likely to be significant. This is despite all attempts to assure teachers that they were not being evaluated and that they should teach as they would usually do. In the classroom observations for this study, reactive effects were definitely in play, since most teachers felt they should conform to the expectations that the researcher may have about teaching practice. This could be seen in aspects like, (a) teacher spending more time in the class being observed, and delaying going to the other multigrade teaching class, (b) teacher remaining on his/her feet for most of the class, and (c) teaching for most of the allocated time. It was also found that on the days of observation, some teachers taught the same lesson that they had already taught earlier. In terms of teaching methods, there was really no difference on the observed days.

(v) A one-time students’ assessment does not help in forming an opinion about the contribution of the school to student learning. There was also no attempt in this study to control for socioeconomic status and preschool experience of students. Thus, assessment results mainly helped to paint a picture of the level of reading skills, and disparity within and across classrooms. No attempt was made to correlate these assessments with any other school based academic factors. It was only in classrooms that were outliers, viz. where students performed really well or extremely poorly, that any connection was attempted between the teacher, teaching practices and student achievements through qualitative analysis.

(vi) In the survey, teachers responded to certain questions by checking the options that seemed to be ‘right’, i.e. reflected a desirable practice. This was more apparent for questions relating to classroom activities like use of TLM, storytelling, reading aloud to students etc. Teachers seem to have responded candidly to questions relating to beliefs and attitudes on a range of issues; and perceptions about textbooks, training and academic support.
(vii) The study has compared student assessments across classrooms in Assam and Rajasthan. This is not an entirely valid comparison because in most schools in Ajmer district, students’ home languages were significantly different from the standard language used at school. This was the case even for schools that were within a radius of 5-7 kilometres from the main city. In Assam, there were only a few students in these 8 schools who faced a language disadvantage.

(viii) The education system is a social system with several important groups that interact with each other and external factors through a variety of relationships, norms and power dynamics. Teachers don’t act completely independently of each other. They are influenced by other teachers and head teachers. The system of educational administration influences teacher motivation and accountability. The community and parents could also influence school functioning and accountability. These interactions have the potential of strongly influencing classroom processes. In this study, the sociological aspects of the school system have received only marginal attention, since the focus was on classroom related academic factors.

6.11 IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study has some important implications for education policymakers at national and state level; state level heads of SSA; national, state and district level academic institutions like NCERT, SCERTs and DIETs; universities and other academic institutions interested in working on issues of language teaching; NGOs working for quality improvement in the government school system; and state and district level educational administrators. Some of the important implications of the study are as follows:

(i) There is a need for development of a strong conceptual understanding of the importance of language teaching and learning in early primary grades at all levels, especially in academic institutions like NCERT, SCERT and DIETs.
Also, reading must be recognized as an important part of the language curriculum at the primary stage.

(ii) A clear set of measurable outcomes should be defined for all the important sub-skills of reading for the early grades. Desirable standards or benchmarks for achievement for each of the skills should also be defined. Significant research will be needed before such standards can be finalized. These will be useful in conducting more objective student assessments and fostering greater accountability within the system for student learning. The focus of the education system, schools and teachers should be on student learning for key outcomes.

(iii) An equity oriented approach that promotes the concept of reading for all needs to be pursued strongly, because all students must learn to read well in the early grades if they are to succeed in primary school and later.

(iv) Instructional time for language (medium of instruction) is grossly inadequate and needs to be enhanced, if curricular expectations are to be met. This needs to be reviewed in the curriculum documents; and at district, block and school level where subject-wise time allocations are decided.

(v) Language teaching strategies in early grades need a thorough overhaul. Effective strategies for ‘teaching and learning to read’ that include a focus on oral language development, systematic decoding instruction, reading practice for fluency with simple and graded reading materials, emphasis on comprehension etc. are needed to change the current thrust on repetition, memorization and copying that do not result in learning. This will require conceptualization of strategies, capacity building of academic staff at various levels, development of materials and training programmes. This need not be all original work. Many organizations are working on learning and reading enhancement programmes, and these strategies can be designed quickly. However, care must be taken that there should be significant consultation with, and involvement of, teachers in developing new strategies and materials.
(vi) The biggest issue teachers are faced with is the multigrade teaching situation. All small schools (enrollments less than 100) will have 3 teachers or less, even after the RTE norms are implemented. Textbooks and training programmes do not address multigrade teaching issues. Also, all classrooms have a serious multilevel situation. Some programmes like Tamil Nadu’s Activity Based Learning programme provide appropriate strategies to address multigrade and multilevel classroom issues. A more concerted effort is needed to develop and disseminate good practices in multigrade teaching situations.

(vii) There is widespread disillusionment with the current model of in-service training. A more comprehensive strategy of professional learning needs to be developed that includes a variety of components including training workshops, on-site support, observation of good practice, local teacher forums for discussion, distance education etc. Pre-service education should have a strong focus on the early years of primary education, especially language development.

(viii) Curriculum, textbooks, workbooks etc. need to be revised in accordance with the research based evidence about the ‘learning to read’ process. The textbooks need to be appropriately graded and sequenced with texts that are simple and interesting and at the average reading levels of students.

(ix) The quality and coverage of pre-primary education needs to be significantly enhanced if the goal of ‘every child reading’ is to be achieved. The Anganwadi system is not in a position to provide a high quality preschool education with a strong language and cognitive content in most states. A one year pre-primary class, with a clear focus on developing oral language fluency and comprehension and other foundational skills for early reading, should be included as a part of the primary school.

(x) A significant proportion of students in early primary grades face a disadvantage in developing proficiency in the standard language used at school because they speak a different language or dialect at home. The
situation and the extent of disadvantage vary from place to place. Right now, to get over this problem, teachers depend almost exclusively on getting students to engage in choral repetition and copying work. Much more research is needed in different parts of the country to understand the language issue and suggest strategies for early grades. It is not possible to develop hundreds of instructional packages and materials to address the myriad different language contexts in India. Pre-service teacher education should help empower teachers with a strong appreciation and understanding of this issue and strategies for helping young children understand and gain proficiency in a language different from their spoken language.

(xi) There is very little research in India on ‘learning to read’ and language acquisition in early primary grades. This is needed for all languages.

(xii) There is enough evidence to show that access to books of appropriate level and encouragement to read contributes strongly to development of reading skills and habit. Simple and interesting storybooks can be used for reading aloud by the teacher, shared reading, guided reading, practice reading for fluency, reading for enjoyment etc. Appropriate storybooks in adequate numbers should be provided to all schools, and students should get access to them in their classrooms through classroom libraries or reading corners. A dedicated time for reading should be carved out of the language teaching time.

(xiii) Memorization and choral repetition are very deep-rooted in the primary stage classrooms. Teachers’ own schooling experience strongly influences beliefs and perceptions about classroom processes. Also, recitation and memorization have had a prime place in the education system in our country from pre-colonial time. Through a process of dialogue and critical reflection, there is a need to question the extent of contribution of these traditional approaches to student learning.

(xiv) This study has not delved in to the non-school factor of home support for reading. Almost all research on factors that contribute to reading
achievements highlights the importance of availability of books at home; parents reading aloud to their children from a young age, and parental support for reading at home (Connor, 2007; Geske & Ozole, 2008; Leslie & Allen, 1999; Lilly & Green, 2003; Rowe, 1995; Smith, 2004; UNESCO, 2006). In the long run, schools will need to work with communities and parents to spread awareness about the importance of reading and supporting children’s reading at home. Literacy support at home can be a strong complement a good reading instruction strategy at school.

6.12 NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As pointed out earlier, there is very little research taking place in the area of teaching-learning of language in the country. This study has highlighted several findings that are important for curriculum developers and textbook writers, teacher educators, educational planners, policy makers and teachers. However, there is need for further rigorous research on a range of issues identified in this study. Some specific areas that need to be prioritized for research include:

(i) There are no benchmarks and norms for grade level expectations for various reading skills in different Indian languages. For example, reading fluency rate benchmarks need to be established for different grades for different languages.16 The visual complexity of characters is different in different languages and large scale research is needed to establish benchmarks or goals in these languages.

(ii) Research (including action research) is needed to identify and develop a menu of strategies for teachers to help students with a different home language to learn the standard language early and well. Standardized ‘L1 to L2 transition’ packages that are designed to bridge between students’ first

16 For example, US oral reading fluency norms for reading connected text for the 50th percentile were: Grade 1- 53 wpm; Grade 2-89 wpm (Abadzi, 2008)
language and the school’s medium of instruction do not work in most parts of India where there language situations are varied and fluid.\(^{17}\)

(iii) This research was focussed on reading and language teaching-learning in early grades, viz. grades 1 and 2. Early grades are the most crucial for language learning. Deficits that build up in the first few years never get bridged in later years; they actually widen in later primary grades. There are fresh challenges in later primary grades, e.g. dense and abstract texts, difficult vocabulary, need for higher fluency rates, more demanding writing expectations, and need for developing higher order comprehension ability. Other researches could study language teaching practices and student achievements in later primary grades (3 to 5) to provide a complete picture of language teaching and learning at the primary stage.

(iv) This study has found a lot of similarity (and some differences) in language teaching practices in the two states of Assam and Rajasthan that are culturally so different, and geographically so distant. A few researches in other parts of the country will help understand if language teaching practices are similar or different in other contexts.

(v) Some organizations are implementing reading improvement programmes in government primary schools and claiming good results. There is a need for rigorous evaluation of these programmes, so that some external validation is available and evidence based good practices can be disseminated widely. University education departments and other research organizations need to take this on seriously with facilitation and financial support from the government.

(vi) This study did not include an in-depth research in to in-service teacher training programmes. It is important that some researches document the content and processes of in-service training in primary education to establish the serious inadequacies.

(vii) Multigrade and multilevel situations are pervasive. This is a big constraint in effective teaching and introducing accountability for student learning.

\(^{17}\) L1 is the first language of the student and L2 is the targetted second language used at school.
Research that documents effective strategies and classroom practices to address the multigrade and multilevel issues will be very useful in shaping policy and teacher education.

(viii) There is a large body of research in the West about the strong positive contribution of early home support for reading and literacy to reading achievements of students. While, the context in our country is quite different, it is important to study the impact of home environment and encouragement for reading on students’ reading achievements.

(ix) Research with an experimental design can help identify impact of selected inputs or strategies like (a) workbooks (b) a set of graded, simple storybooks and reading cards with a strategy for reading practice, (c) increased instructional time, (d) dedicated time for revision after each extended holiday and/or a certain number of lessons/units etc. This will help take decisions for further investment in these inputs or strategies and their scaling up.

(x) Research in much greater depth about teachers’ beliefs and attitudes about teaching of reading, active involvement of students, reading of storybooks, children’s learning processes etc. is needed.

(xi) Bringing about lasting change in classroom practices is not easy. A lot of research is needed in different contexts to study factors that help promote or inhibit institutionalization of change in classroom practice. Once there is adequate evidence to show that certain practices positively impact student learning, the process of scaling up could be initiated. Research in India’s varied contexts is needed to establish appropriate processes for taking to scale new practices that have proved effective in a particular context.