

Background history

My introduction to Nali-Kali was in 2007 through the *Child-Friendly School Initiative* (CFSI) in Surpur, Yadgir district. We were working in one block for the overall, holistic improvement of government schools and Nali-Kali was an important component in this initiative. For the team in Surpur, after a lot of struggle, it was clear that the education level of the children would improve only when attention is focussed on the teaching-learning process and that was possible through the Nali-Kali methodology.

Nali-Kali was important also because through this multi-grade, multi-level, activity-based teaching-learning process, it would address another critical constraint: the lack of required numbers of teachers. As we worked through it, we were convinced that this methodology, more than anything else, would reach every child with quality education as its core element – a foundation on which the Nali-Kali methodology is built. It boosted our motivation to reach each and every child with quality education in all the 309 schools of Surpur.

To make this a reality, we organized a large scale, online capacity-building process in the third week of May, in six districts of north-east Karnataka for the Nali-Kali teachers. Eleven thousand teachers participated in this capacity-building process for a week at the invitation of the Education Commissioner's office in Kalaburgi. We assisted them in all aspects: visualising, planning, training the resource persons, and assisting smaller groups in the field to handle the digital platforms. Interestingly, this week-long programme was received very well by both the teachers and the functionaries. Barring the initial glitches, teachers were able to make meaning of what was being discussed and interacted actively.

This was an achievement, considering these were mainly primary school teachers and the majority of them were from rural schools from the most backward districts of Karnataka. A study attributed this success to Nali Kali's organised system and a clear-cut methodology. By and large, the process is laid down with instructions and the TLMs provided.

It guarantees a basic level of learning to all children, giving importance to *self-initiated, self-paced learning*, with the support of the teachers and the peer group. In this methodology, the teacher's role as a facilitator is very important. Hence, reaching every Nali-Kali teacher was crucial for the success of this programme.

For Team Surpur, the work around Nali-Kali was quite intense as we were involved at three levels: first, weekly onsite support to individual teachers at the classroom level, second, review meetings once a fortnight of the work done, and third, planning bi-monthly teacher capacity-building processes at the cluster and block levels. For the team, too, it was a process of on-the-job learning, like the in-service training of teachers. Consequently, the learning and the contribution of individual members was quite high.

We had started the CFSI in 2004 and in 2007, we had an evaluation of the learning levels of the children. To our surprise, the results were disappointing, because evaluation revealed that, even after three years, there had been *no improvement in the learning levels* of the children. Obviously, we were questioned. With so much investment, how could there be no results? Or no improvement in learning levels of the children! We were a bit shattered. We requested for three more years, which we were granted. Now, the expectations were very clear.

Ring in changes

We started a focused journey of working with teachers to build their capacity. One thing that was amply evident was that resources were not freely available for teachers for their own development. Additionally, there was no space for teachers to come together, discuss, share their experiences and challenges, get inputs and upgrade themselves. We found that creating a voluntary learning community of teachers was very important for their professional development.

Teachers' forums and learning centres

Thus, was born the Voluntary Teachers' Forum (VTF) for teachers who wanted a space of their

own, to meet, discuss and share. This led to creating *Teacher Learning Centres* (TLCs) which were very well-resourced. They had a good library, collection of science and maths TLMs and computers with internet connections, though our experience tells us that attracting teachers to the resource rooms is not easy, not even with richly equipped teacher learning centres. However, the TLCs slowly became popular and today, we have fifty such teacher learning centres in ten districts of Karnataka.

Establishing a newsletter

One criticism of Nali-Kali was that the existing structure did not give teachers space for thinking and reflection – speaking about their experiences helps in thinking and reflecting. Since writing is a step ahead in helping people reflect, we started a newsletter which carried articles on the teachers' classroom experiences. Initially, teachers wrote only on what they did, but slowly moved forward and started reflecting on these experiences. Writing led them to read other material too and this helped in expanding their horizons.

Melas

Another innovation which moved learning beyond the classroom and textbooks was the *melas* where children prepared material on different concepts of science, language, maths and social science and made public presentations to other children, parents and the community. Though there were no dramatic results, all these things helped in moving beyond the narrow structure and complemented the Nali-Kali process.

Mentoring

A thorough review of the Nali-Kali programme was enabled by the interventions of Hridaykant Dewan who, by then, was working closely with us. He helped us to analyse and understand the Nali-Kali programme. An important insight gained from this was that our methodology was so structured and centrally driven that it did not leave room for the agency of the teacher. Everything could not be pre-designed and structured for a teacher without any space for her to think, respond spontaneously and make learning happen then and there for a particular child, in a given context. It made teachers follow instructions and do what they were told!

Hridaykant Dewan pointed out that such a method is more an activity and less an education. So, although it had been a good start, teachers had to go beyond this. They had to think independently, creatively, understand the child and her context and

respond favourably to it. The teachers would have to go beyond the instructions, not just follow them and limit themselves to doing what they were told! They would have to think for themselves, reflect on the process and innovate to facilitate learning in every child.

That is when we started the entire process of creating opportunities and spaces for teacher education. We started working very closely with teachers and together with them, co-teaching, supporting, hand-holding, while continuing with our initiatives of VTFs, *melas* and TLCs. The entire focus was on the teaching-learning process.

The long haul

As anyone who has worked in education knows, improvements take a long time. Seeing results and creating impact are slow processes; a long haul! It tested our patience, because the improvement, though steady, was slow. We saw slight improvements in the learning levels of the children only after seven years of dedicated work. It is only now, after 2015, that we see seeing Surpur performing consistently better in the SSLC results in comparison to all the other blocks of north-east Karnataka.

Looking back, Nali-Kali has been in existence in Karnataka for a quarter of a century now, starting in 1995 as a UNICEF-assisted pilot project in H D Kote, Mysore district. The person who was instrumental in starting this multi-grade, multi-level, activity-based teaching-learning process was M.N. Baig, the then, Block Education Officer of H.D Kote. He started with a few interested teachers, who went to the Rishi Valley School in Madanapalle, Andhra Pradesh, to study the Rishi Valley Satellite Extension Programme started by Rama and Padmanabha Rao, who had transformed the Rishi Valley School's Rural Extension Centre into a model for effective primary education in rural areas.

The work of these teachers of H D Kote in 1995 is commendable. They were a motivated and hardworking lot, who worked and created everything needed for Nali-Kali – the curriculum, teaching-learning materials, the process, the review and research. More than anything, they had a deep faith and hope in this experiment.

A child-centred approach

As Mr Baig used to say, Nali-Kali was designed to be a joyful child-centred approach which paid attention to the multi-grade, multi-level learning in a classroom. Taking into consideration different

learning styles, it made learning a fear- and stress-free experience by changing the typical assessment styles to continuous and comprehensive assessment as part of the learning process.

The curriculum is reorganised into small manageable units called milestones. There are milestones for each subject (language, mathematics, environmental studies). The child goes through the learning ladder, with activities and learning material as steps. Classes are clubbed together and there is ample scope for peer group learning. Children actively participate in the learning process, they identify their positions, select an activity group card and join the activity group they belong to. These are:

1. Pre-preparatory
2. Preparatory
3. Competency preparatory activities
4. Learning
5. Practice
6. Evaluation

The teacher moves around the classroom to provide different type of support to children in different groups. The materials produced by children are exhibited in the learning pandal/roof created in the classroom.

Progress and present history

In its 25-year journey, the Nali-Kali programme has gradually scaled up from a few blocks in H D Kote to across all the forty-nine thousand government schools in Karnataka. Starting with the help of the UNICEF in 1995-96 in a few schools in H.D Kote, by 1999-2000, it had been adopted by all the schools of the district with, again, the UNICEF and World Bank support. In 2004-05 it was introduced in all the small schools in eight additional blocks of the state. By 2007-8, it was introduced in all the schools of the state with less than thirty pupils on their rolls by combining classes I and II. In 2009-10, Nali-Kali was introduced in all the Kannada medium schools of the state integrating classes I, II and III. Now we have Nali-Kali in all the schools of Karnataka. There is now a lot of thinking happening around Nali Kali in Karnataka and it has become the subject of many studies. The main aim of the method is to see that every child participates in the learning process and enjoys learning.

The way forward

For an all-inclusive education, the teacher reaching out to each and every child is very important. The

advantages of this are:

- Children can ask questions without any fear and teachers and peers answer patiently.
- Every child who needs guidance is getting it from their teachers or peers.
- Children's work is prominently displayed on the Organised Learning Roof (the makeshift roof that is created inside the classroom to hang all the materials prepared by the children, and other learning materials for them to see).
- Learning materials are available in the classroom.
- Students work in a fear-free environment.
- Children's responses show that they have understood the teacher's explanations and instructions.
- The home languages of the children are freely used.

In conclusion

Though there have been lots of ups and downs, we feel that the 25-year old journey of Nali-Kali has been a successful one. We have been able to train our teachers; the training modules, resource persons, and material are in place though there is now an immediate need to recruit more teachers. *Education for All* is not a simple neutral idea; it is a very potent concept and, in some senses, a highly political one, where 'political' means empowering everyone by making education available to all, including the most marginalised sections of society.

For that to happen, we will have to be prepared to walk the extra mile, because merely reaching every child is not enough. What is equally important is the kind of education that is being imparted. Inbuilt into the idea of education for all is *quality* education, for which we have a long way to go. We may have reached almost all children through Nali-Kali, but are all children receiving quality education?

To answer this, a LIRIL study done in two districts (one in Karnataka and another in Maharashtra) by the Azim Premji Foundation and Tata Trusts gave us some insights into improving the language learning in the lower classes. The study has revealed that in both the districts, language learning is below average. The methodology of Nali-Kali is child-centred and individual learning processes do not allow room for the much-needed skills of listening, speaking, interacting, working in groups and giving the child opportunities to use language to communicate. Group work in Nali-Kali is also limited since the child may sit in a group but is

working individually. I feel that this aspect – of the classroom and its processes being conducive to learning with a lot of latitude for children to listen others speak, being encouraged to speak on a variety of topics themselves, from concrete experiences to abstract ideas – is very important. This happens only in different groups, occasions and situations because, in these interactions, children have to use language for communication. It is a very important insight from the LIRIL study that we will have to take seriously and incorporate

into our Nali-Kali methodology to reach every child with quality education.

Today, the situation is very different from the one in 1995, when the Nali-Kali experiment began in H.D.Kote. Over the years, the Nali-Kali methodology has created a wide base, reaching all children with a basic minimum level of learning. The challenge in front of us is to empower teachers to go beyond the basic framework and structure and to use their agency to make quality learning available to *all* children.



Umashanker Periodi is Head, Karnataka State, Azim Premji Foundation. He has over thirty years' experience in the development sector. He has contributed extensively to the National Literacy Campaign as well as towards tribal education in BR Hills, Karnataka. He has been training grassroots-level field workers and primary school teachers in, what he calls, 'Barefoot Research'. He is also the Founder Member of Karnataka State Trainers' Collective. He may be contacted at periodi@azimpremjifoundation.org