

Case Study Analysis: Room to Read Literacy Program in India

Ping Xu¹

¹ Department of International & Transcultural Studies, Columbia University

Correspondence: Ping Xu, Department of International & Transcultural Studies, Columbia University.

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Abstract

This article discusses India's Room to Read literacy program, an initiative established by the nonprofit organization Room to Read to improve literacy levels in India. The article first discusses the literacy situation in India and the challenges it faces. Next, the article describes the three stages of development of the Room to Read literacy program in India and its impact and analyzes the program's strengths and weaknesses. Finally, the article analyzes the program from two theoretical perspectives—human capital theory and human rights theory. Overall, the article demonstrates the importance of literacy and the need for effective programs to improve literacy levels in low-income countries like India.

Keywords: literacy, room to read, India, human rights, human capital

1. Introduction

The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more you learn, the more places you'll go.

—Dr. Seuss, *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!*

What is literacy? It has been difficult to reach a complete agreement on the precise definition of literacy. Its definition has changed in response to the needs of global society, the demands of economic development, and advances in literacy research. It is widely accepted that literacy generally is defined simply as “the ability to read and write” (Rintaningrum, 2009). However, the importance of literacy is a topic that can generally be agreed upon. For individuals and families, literacy is an instrument of empowerment to improve one's health, one's income, and one's relationship with the world.

For countries, literacy is critical to a nation's economic development. A nation's economy is enhanced when learners have higher literacy levels.

The global literacy rate has increased by 4% every 5 years, from 42% in 1960 to 86% in 2015 (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2016). Despite the large improvements in the global literacy rate recently, there are substantial challenges ahead for some poor countries, like India. As a leading nonprofit for children's literacy across Asia and Africa, Room to Read set up a literacy program in India. Room to Read's Literacy Program cooperates with its countries' existing language curricula and includes detailed lesson plans, classroom materials, and comprehensive professional development resources for teachers. Literacy

coaches are placed in classrooms alongside teachers to provide instructional support throughout the intervention, and library activities are combined to create environments that promote reading. Through structured monitoring processes, literacy coaches provide teachers with actionable feedback to improve their teaching methods and assess their students' reading improvement over time, at the same time library management facilitators provide similar feedback to librarians. All these efforts mentioned help develop children's reading skills and their habit of reading so that they become lifelong, independent readers (Alexander et al., 2016).

This article briefly introduces the Room to Read as an international organization first. Then the literacy situation in India is described. Next, I present the Room to Read Literacy Program's three important development phases in India and each stage's impact, followed by the strengths and weaknesses analysis of this program. Moreover, this article analyzes this literacy project from two theoretical perspectives- human capital theory and human rights theory. Literacy, as one main content of education, could not only justify based on human capital but also human rights (Chabbbott & Ramirez, 2000).

2. Room to Read

Room to Read is a global non-profit organization, headquartered in San Francisco, California. Driven by the belief that world change begins with educated children, this international organization focuses on working with local communities, governments, and partner organizations such as USAID and UNICEF to improve literacy and gender equity in low-income countries' education. It does so through two main programs—the literacy program and the girls' education program. The literacy program supports literacy development for primary students (the focus of my final case). The girls' education program provides resources, mentorship, and a life skills curriculum for secondary school girls. At the heart of girls' education, gender equality efforts are the importance of keeping girls successfully engaged in school and helping them develop the life skills they need to gain control over their own lives. Through quality education and mentoring, girls can grow into accomplished women and reach heights they never thought possible.

Through Literacy Program and Girls' Education Program, Room to Read develops literacy skills and the habit of reading among primary school children and then supports girls in finishing secondary school with the relevant life skills to succeed in school and beyond. Since Room to Read was established in 2000, the two programs together have helped more than 23.8 million children in 20 countries all over the world (Room to Read Annual Report, 2020).

3. India Literacy Context

According to the UNESCO report of 2017-18, India accounts for 35% of the world's illiterate population (Prabhu, 2021). The World Development Report (2018) stated that low-income and middle-income countries tend to have lower rates of literacy than high-income countries. Compared to developed countries with literacy rates close to 100% in 2015, the literacy rate in India is 72%, still far below the global average rate of 86% (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2016).

Since the second half of the 20th century, the spread of basic education has contributed significantly to the global increase in literacy rates (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2016). In India, the Right to Education Act, passed in 2009, makes education free and compulsory for all children between the ages of 6 and 14 (Kaushal, 2012). But factors such as inadequate facilities and lack of access to quality education continue to lead to low levels of learning and subsequent high dropout rates. At the primary level, 4.34% of children drop out of school, and at the secondary level, the figure reaches 17.86%. UNICEF estimates in 2018 that 8.1 million Indian children are not enrolled in school. Most of them belong to vulnerable groups. These children who do not have access to basic education would have little chance to master basic literacy.

Further, even when every child could receive a basic education, there is no guarantee that they will be literate. There is growing evidence that while more children complete six years of elementary school, many leave school barely able to read and write in the language of instruction (Barrett et al, 2015). Without well-trained teachers or good quality literacy programs, children who have attended school for several years can still be far away from being literate. For example, although 95 percent of children are enrolled in school in rural India,

fewer than half of fifth-grade students can only read at the second-grade level (ASER Centre, 2015). More universal access to higher quality education programs remains an indispensable way to increase literacy rates in India.

Another challenge for India is the country's linguistic diversity. There are 23 official languages and more than 700 unofficial languages and dialects spoken throughout the country (Mitchell, 2009). Most classrooms in India are multilingual in nature. Children speak many languages, often in languages different from the official language of instruction. The diversity of languages poses considerable difficulties for the spread of literacy. There is a significant lack of children's literature and educational resources in most official and unofficial languages.

4. Room to Read Literacy Program in India

Facing those challenges mentioned above, Room to Read established a high-quality literacy program in India, which focus on both reading habits and reading skills of children in primary school. Since 2003, India has gone on to become its largest country of operation. Room to Read Literacy Program in India is a school-based intervention that ensures primary schools have libraries filled with books in the children's local languages, as well as teachers and librarians who are trained on how to engage a classroom of eager, young learners. After reading each year's annual report of Room to Read in India provided on the official website, I summarize its development into three main phases in chronological order. There are some implications for Chinese NGOs working on literacy projects at different stages of development.

4.1 Initial Development Phase

In 2003, Room to Read set up the Literacy Program in India (Room to Read, 2020). In the beginning, the program was limited to providing critical support by establishing libraries there. However, the best literacy instruction programs for children are a combination of effective techniques and worthwhile reading material (Gunning, 2000). Later, important components of library management and reading activities were added. Based on knowing that children can only benefit from a school library if they have the skills to read, Room to Read then made reading and writing skills acquisition a strategic priority in India.

In the following years, Room to Read has intentionally shifted from establishing libraries alone to implementing its more intensive, full Literacy Program at local schools. By the end of 2014, 7037 Literacy Program schools were established in India (Room to Read Annual Report, 2014). At this stage, Room to Read also established some tests for assessing students' reading habits and reading skills in its literacy program. The purpose of the tests is to gauge the quality of learning and to promote better practices (Ramirez et al., 2018)

4.2 Large-Scale Development Phase

Working more closely with international organizations and local government, Room to Read bring its literacy programs to a large scale in India. The international organizations and government played a key role in the creation of a world education culture that encouraged educational program expansion (Resnik, 2006). Exposed to the world education culture, the local government adopted the education-economic growth ideology and launched ambitious education programs too (Resnik, 2006).

In 2019, Room to Read worked on literacy projects funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Cambodia, Honduras, India, Laos, and Rwanda. Committed to improving literacy rates in India in partnership with the local government, Room to Read and USAID embarked on a five-year project known as SERI — Scaling-up Early Reading Intervention in India. The project aims to demonstrate an effective model for improving reading outcomes among primary school students and an innovative approach for scaling NGO-led interventions through the government system. The project includes two main components: (1) Literacy instruction; (2) School libraries and quality reading materials. This project unfolds in two main ways: (1) Demonstration approach—demonstration of the program model in selected government schools by Room to Read (Joddar, 2018a); (2) Partnership approach—close collaboration with state governments to scale up the program model across an entire district (Joddar, 2018b).

SERI project under demonstration approach launched the Literacy Program at 80 schools in Raipur district in Chhattisgarh and 100 schools in Dehradun district in Uttarakhand at the beginning of the 2015–16 academic year and

expanded to 100 new schools in Raipur district in Chhattisgarh and 100 new schools in Udham Singh Nagar in Uttarakhand next school year. SERI project under partnership approach launched the Literacy Program at 500 schools in Baloda Bazar district in Chhattisgarh and 510 schools in Champawat district in Uttarakhand at the beginning of the 2016–17 academic year. The results of the final evaluation indicated the literacy program is having a large positive impact on reading skills. Children in project schools could read two to three times more fluently than children who did not benefit from the program (Joddar & Cooper, 2017).

Room to Read also works with UNICEF in Bangladesh and India. From August 2018 to July 2021, the Room to Read Literacy Program partnered with UNICEF to scale the literacy program across the states of Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh in India. In 2018, 100,000 new children and 1,786 new schools benefited from the program in Chhattisgarh, and 72,000 new children and 1,600 new schools benefited from the program in Madhya Pradesh.

4.3 Innovative Online Development Phase

Local schools in India have been closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Literacy Program for in-person learning cannot continue. Room to Read adapted its Literacy Program in additional ways of working to benefit children remotely during this crisis, including -1) Digital books; 2) TV and radio programming; 3) Guidance via messaging, calls, emails, and social media; 4) Hard copy learning materials; 5) Virtual training and support (Room to Read Annual Report, 2020). In 2020, Room to Read expanded Literacy Cloud access in India, which provide training for teachers and offer a digital library of children's book. Room to read collaborated with television stations in India to reach rural areas where the internet may not be accessible and introduced literacy-focused radio programs. Direct messages, calls, and emails are used to ensure parents and children remain engaged in improving literacy skills and reading habits at home. Wherever possible, Room to Read also provided books, worksheets, and other learning resources to home so children had access to hard copy learning materials. During the pandemic, virtual training and support to teachers, school leadership, authors, and illustrators are delivered in support of literacy learning (Room to Read Annual Report, 2020).

Below is an example from Room to Read Annual Report (2020). From this example, we can see how children benefit through online distribution during this special time.

The closure of schools due to the pandemic lockdown was especially hard on seven-year-old Harmeet, a student in Uttarakhand, India. He missed the reading sessions organized at his school before. His parents called the teacher asking for materials to engage him. The school and local government called on Room to Read as the key partner in this task. Harmeet was so happy when he first saw the read-aloud videos from Room to Read. These audiobooks have text and pictures, and he could read them at his own pace. What's more, there were questions that kept him engaged. Harmeet's parents are thankful that even during these challenging times, their son could pursue his passion for learning.

5. Project Analysis

5.1 Strengths

5.1.1 The Effectiveness of Early Intervention

Numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of early literacy interventions (Baker et al., 2015; Gilbert et al., 2013). Early intervention is important because the gap between the lowest and highest performing children is narrow in lower grades. Without early intervention, these gaps widen later in elementary school. In addition, the earlier the investment in a child's education, the higher the financial return. Early intervention in children's education brings multiple beneficial returns to individuals and society. Room to Read Literacy Program in India focuses on literacy interventions for first and second graders in local elementary schools, instead of upper grades or adults. The selection of the literacy program intervention population helps increase the literacy program's effectiveness and maximizes the return on investment.

5.1.2 The Culturally Relevant Texts

The best children's literature text is a mirror in which children can see themselves and also a window through which children can explore the world (Alanis, 2007). For literacy intervention programs, the type of book and text chosen also seems critical. Culturally relevant texts increase student engagement in reading (Feger, 2006). At the beginning development stage of the Room to Read Literacy program in India, the internal assessments and early cross-national evaluations of its library establishment program

demonstrated that children were still unable to read at grade level and were not reading for pleasure. Attributing this finding to the lack of culturally relevant reading materials, in 2003, Room to Read began publishing quality, age-appropriate books written in local languages. The organization began to identify and train local authors and illustrators to produce local-language reading materials (Alexander, Kwauk & Perlman Robinson, 2016).

5.1.3 The Larger-Scale Distribution Through Online

Many studies have proven the advantages of online education (Dumford & Miller, 2018; Mukhtar et al., 2020), especially during the pandemic period recently. Literacy education online can reach a larger scale of distribution at a much lower cost. During the COVID-19, local schools in India were closed. Literacy programs that were previously operated offline and in-person also had to be suspended. Pandemic brought the Literacy Program in-person challenges and also new opportunities at the same time. Here comes the innovative development stage for the Room to Read Literacy Program in India. Those innovative remote interventions enable Room to Read to expand its reach in India and benefit more children than ever before. A hybrid approach incorporating in-person and remote elements later could support dignified and inclusive learning for as many children as possible.

5.1.4 Research, Monitoring, and Evaluation with Data Support

Research, monitoring, and evaluation have become important components of Room to Read. From school to district to national, staff at all levels purposefully link action-oriented data to program decisions. In the process, information is fed into a larger national monitoring system to explain trends and modify program content or strategies as needed. For example, once the organization recognized from its data detection and evaluation process that it needed more books in local languages, it launched a publishing initiative. Room to read trained local authors and illustrators in India and published high-quality children's books in different local languages for distribution to its library network. The organization then realized that because children's learning levels were still low and thus unable to read the books provided to their schools, Room to Read carefully designed its

literacy instruction to ensure that reading and writing were taught more effectively in grades one and two. In this way, The Reading Room has been a "learning organization," continually cycling to assess and correct its philosophy. This has been a key factor in keeping an INGO alive for so long.

5.2 Weaknesses

Despite more than a decade of hard work, the Room to Read Literacy Program in India has achieved amazing results and had a positive impact, room for improvement still exists. Project school children's overall reading fluency levels (37 correct words per minute, on average) were below the goal of at least 45 correct words per minute by the end of Grade 2. Additionally, seven percent of project school children were effectively non-readers, while 16 percent of project school children were unable to answer even one reading comprehension question correctly (Joddar, 2018b). These results suggest that more can be done to improve the quality and effectiveness of program delivery. The focus of the program should be more from the popularity and coverage of the program to the quality of the program. At the same time, the dimensions of testing reading quality should be broadened to focus more on the child's understanding of the text itself, rather than just the right number of words read in a given period of time. After all, the reading ability that can benefit a person for life is not just the number of words you know, but more about whether you can truly understand the content of the text.

The project talks almost exclusively about the importance of reading skills and reading habits for children to read. How the child's own enthusiasm for reading is built is not mentioned. A love and passion for reading are also one of the prerequisites for learning how to read (Verhoeven & Snow, 2001). Developing a passion for reading should also be an important part of an early literacy intervention program. If students do not develop a passion or love for reading in a literacy program, we should consider whether they will be able to persist in reading after leaving the support of the program without peripheral demands and assistance. A very frequent phenomenon is that children are compelled to read at school, but when they return home, they do not actively choose to read without a request from their parents and the school. The reason for this phenomenon is that

children themselves lack a love of reading. Helping children develop an interest and self-drive for reading is the key to their becoming lifelong readers.

6. Key Theories

6.1 Human Capital Theory

Human capital is defined as “productive wealth embodied in labor, skills, and knowledge” (OECD, 2001). In the 1960s, US economists such as Schultz and Becker explored the idea and implications of investment in human capital by measuring the rate of return to investment in education and training (Woodhall, 2001). Human capital theory suggests that an individual’s educational attainment is related not only to his or her economic development but also to the economic progress of a country. A person’s education is a possible pathway to a broader economic opportunity for that individual, and the education of the multitudes can lead to the stronger economic development of a nation (Tonnini, 2021).

6.2 Human Capital Theory & Room to Read Literacy Program

Many scholars tried to apply human capital theory specifically to literacy. Anderson and Bowman (1965) stated that a 40% national adult literacy rate formed a necessary threshold for economic development. Wagner and Venezky (1999) claimed that, according to the 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey in the United States, “the income of American adults was substantially higher for each level of literacy attained,” and they concluded that “literacy and education are closely related to a nation’s economic development” (p. 21). These statements have prompted repeated calls for investment in literacy programs. International Non-profit organizations and governments are gradually asserting the concept of “literacy as human capital”, running or supporting various literacy programs in global south countries.

Founded on the belief that World Change Starts with Educated Children, Room to Read focuses on working in collaboration with local communities, partner organizations, and governments to improve literacy in India. From the organization’s mission- World Change Starts with Educated Children, it is clear that Room to Read believes that the education of individuals is not only related to the change and development of individuals, but also to the change of a country and the world. As stated in

the human capital theory, the education of individuals plays an important role in the change of the economic development of a country or even the world, although it is only one economic dimension of the change. The local Indian government and international NGOs have also embraced the key concepts of Human Capital Theory and have strongly supported the expansion of the Room to Read Literacy Program in India.

6.3 Human Rights Theory

Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, human rights education has become a global field of academic practice. Over the past 70 years, different definitions and forms of practice have been developed in different contexts (Bajaj & Mabona, 2021). The most widely accepted definition of human rights education is offered by the United Nations: Human rights education and training comprise all educational, training, information, awareness-raising, and learning activities aimed at promoting universal respect for and observance of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and thus contributing, inter alia, to the prevention of human rights violations and abuses by providing persons with knowledge, skills, and understanding and developing their attitudes and behaviors, to empower them to contribute to the building and promotion of a universal culture of human rights (Tibbitts, 2017). Human rights education includes education about human rights, education through human rights, and education for human rights (Tibbitts, 2017).

6.4 Human Right Theory & Room to Read Literacy Project

In 2003, the UN launched the United Nations Literacy Decade with the slogan ‘Literacy is Freedom’ (Limage, 2009), which provides the rationale for recognizing literacy as a human right. UNESCO (2016) states that Literacy is a fundamental human right and the foundation for lifelong learning. Literacy has been considered not only as a right in itself but also as a mechanism for the pursuit of other human rights. The World Literacy Foundation (2015) observes a correlation between levels of literacy and personal income, health outcomes, trends associated with crime and welfare, educational outcomes, political participation, ability to use digital technologies, engaging in activities that

require critical thinking, and intergenerational support such as an ability to help children with their homework.

International NGOs have always played a very important role in the practice of human rights (Murdie, 2009). A human rights-based approach to development has become the new and dominant norm in most development organizations (Broberg & Sano, 2018; Schmitz, 2012; Uvin, 2007). Room to Read, as an INGO, accept the human rights-based approach too. In the Room to Read Annual Reports, we can see many times that the official talks about, “education is a fundamental human right” to call for attention and investment in education in poor areas. As an important part of basic education, literacy education is also one of the most basic human rights of every child. Room to Read brings quality literacy programs to more children in India, guaranteeing the basic right to literacy for those in poorer areas. Children who acquire these basic literacy skills will also have the possibility to pursue other rights and freedoms of their own on their life journey. Literacy is a fundamental human right critical to accessing other human rights too.

7. Conclusion

Children’s literacy may be considered an economic indicator for the country, at the same time, it is also a basic human right for every child. Room to Read, an international NGO, has been running literacy programs in India for nearly 20 years now. Room to Read’s innovative literacy programs ensure that elementary schools have libraries filled with books in children’s local languages and teachers and librarians trained in engaging young students in their classrooms who are eager to learn. Room to Read’s literacy programs in India had remarkable success. By the end of second grade, children in Room to Read’s literacy program were reading two to three times faster and had 87 percent better reading comprehension than their peers in non-Room to Read program schools. The Reading Room is breaking the cycle of childhood illiteracy and poverty in just one generation. At the same time, Room to Read has begun to pay more attention to the sustainability of its internal organization. After recognizing that its internal systems were not growing at the same rate as its program impact, it identified improving staff efficiency and reducing redundancy as its next challenge. By strengthening staff capacity building, improving

technology infrastructure, and expanding internal communications, Room to Read has set the course for the next goal of achieving organizational sustainability.

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