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Families learning together: reflections from Nepal and the Philippines

In this blog, researchers from the GRTA Family Literacy, Indigenous Learning and Sustainable Development project reflect on emerging findings from ongoing field research in Nepal and the Philippines. This first instalment focuses on insights from our teams in South and South-East Asian regions. Look out for our second instalment from our teams based in Africa (Malawi and Ethiopia)!

One morning in a hill district in Eastern Nepal, a family is busy preparing local wine. Phulmaya Rai*, now in her seventies, first learned this with her mother and is passing her skills onto her children. Her eldest son looks after a boiling pot of grains with his wife. Phulmaya's daughters prepare the yeast while her youngest son collects chito (a plant used to prepare yeast) from their home garden. Once they start selling the wine in the weekly market place, her daughter-in-law will keep the records and accounts. In this indigenous community, wine brewing has traditionally been women's specialism and an important source of income that they can control.



Phulmaya Rai sharing yeast and wine preparation techniques

In a small town on the plains near the Indian border, fourteen-year old Rubina stands tall and confident on the verandah of her house, reciting Islamic prayers and devotional songs in Urdu. Sitting on a large string bed next to her are ten young girls and boys who come every evening to learn with her – their 'big sister' teacher as they call her. They go to a Government school by day, studying in Nepali language. Crouching over their books in the dim light, they spell out the Arabic letters and wait for 'big sister' to correct them. During the daytime, her sister Laila sews clothes for the family, taking measurements down in English as she has seen the local tailor doing.



Older sister Rubina teaching younger siblings Urdu and Arabic

**all names used in this blog are pseudonyms*



Miles away in the Philippines, Ate Zoria prepares three sets of math workbooks on a wooden table. She complains that schools in their farming community don't give enough homework to pupils, so she makes sure that her grandchild will have school work to do at home. At times, these math tasks are helpful for her too as she is the president of their farming association and has to deal with accounting of funds from time to time.

Ate Zoria preparing worksheets for her grandson

Just like these families in Nepal and the Philippines, many others around the world engage in learning and literacy activities in their homes and communities as part of everyday life. By contrast, we observed that family literacy programmes in most countries tend only to focus on the learning of children so that they can engage better in schools. Our GRTA family literacy project aims to develop an alternative model of Family Literacy based on the intergenerational and indigenous learning already taking place among children and adults.

Through wine-making, the Nepali family above are learning from each other across and between generations. Mothers and mothers-in-law teach their daughters and daughters-in-law in preparing marcha (yeast) for the wine. The daughters use their literacy and numeracy skills to strengthen the business. In the Philippines, we observed three generations of men in an indigenous community coming home from a day of fishing. They shared that it is common practice for young boys to accompany their father or grandfather as apprentices during these fishing trips. They are taught to make traditional, hand-crafted fishing tools.

We also found that the 'transmission' of knowledge is not always one-way, from the (grand)parent to the child. Ate Zoria also learns from her grandchild as they share the math activity workbook together. She is able to apply what she has learned in her other tasks as an organisation leader, particularly, in preparing financial documents. From Phulmaya in Nepal, we see that family learning is deeply connected with her family's livelihood – to be better at wine-making means more income for the family. For Rubina, learning literacy together is an essential part of her Muslim faith and she is respected by her family as an informal teacher. These instances show that learning within families is often closely linked with other activities in their daily lives such as farming, fishing, tailoring, wine-making, gardening, running local organisations and religion.

Over the next few months, the research team will be comparing these practices with those documented from Malawi and Ethiopia to develop a more bottom-up approach and model of Family Literacy which connects with livelihood opportunities in sectors such as agriculture and health.

This blog was written by Kamal Raj Devkota¹, Sushan Acharya¹, Gina Lontoc², Camilla Vizconde², Belinda de Castro², Chris Millora³ and Anna Robinson-Pant³.

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