Pedagogies for Development
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The Politics and Practice of Child-Centred Education in India
Introduction by the Series Editors

Worldwide, the education community has sought to find more effective ways to improve the quality, equity and relevance of school education. This is of particular importance with regard to education in developing countries, where there are millions of children and adults who have been excluded from formal education. In the case of those who have had an opportunity to attend school, many drop out before they complete a full cycle of primary education for a number of reasons including the irrelevance of the curriculum taught and the systemic disempowerment of teachers and students. It is largely because of such concerns that international, national and local communities have invested in programmes to achieve high-quality Lifelong Learning, Education for All and Education for Sustainable Development. Progressive pedagogies have been utilised in these efforts, and have been linked to the modernisation of schooling in developing countries, aiming to improve the quality of education for the poor, and to social democratisation.

Given this background, Arathi Sriprakash has written an important book that deals with a globally significant subject. She critically examines the politics and practices of progressive, child-centred education to consider how schooling in developing countries can deal more sensitively and effectively with persisting issues of social inequality and exclusion. Although the author focuses on India, the research reported on here provides provocative insights into reform processes which are relevant to other developing countries and beyond.

The volume is a definitive work, drawing as it does on the theoretical contributions of Basil Bernstein’s sociology of pedagogy. The sophisticated and nuanced application of Bernstein’s theories reveals the social and political complexities of pedagogic reform in the developing world. Bernstein’s ideas, developed over many decades in the UK, and which focused on the analysis of social class inequalities in British education, are shown by Sriprakash to have a wider application to other national and social contexts.

This book contributes striking insights concerning the theoretical and practical aspects of reform in contemporary India. The focus is on the delivery of child-centred education in Indian government primary schools which gained momentum in the 1990s through government interventions, internationally sponsored programmes
and NGO initiatives for pedagogic reform. It maps the relations between micro and macro practices of education reform, and in doing this it considers how pedagogy is socially and politically constituted at national and school levels.

Sriprakash’s research focuses on two specific reform programmes that have been implemented in the South Indian state of Karnataka. The first is the Nali Kali (‘joyful learning’) reform, which has been described as ‘one of Karnataka’s most successful, innovative and even revolutionary reform programs’. The objectives of this reform were to change the teacher-centred, nonparticipatory traditional pedagogy to one that was activity-based and child-centred. By 1997 there was a Government of Karnataka programme adopting this approach and it was implemented in over 4,000 rural primary schools. The second programme was the Learner-Centred (LC) initiative, implemented in 2005 in government schools in Karnataka. This approach was a reaction to the existing system of primary education which stressed teacher-centred instruction and the memorisation of facts. The LC initiative sought to focus on the relevance of rural schooling, and through a discussion-based pedagogy, it emphasised the importance of how children learn, not only what they learn.

After many months of detailed interviews with teachers, and the undertaking of extensive observations in classrooms, Sriprakash shows how the education reform process is not as rational, neat or coherent as policy pronouncements expound. Instead, they are socially and materially contingent and often reform ideals are recontextualised through competing social and cultural frameworks in schools. The book’s in-depth discussion demonstrates the crucial importance for policy and reform actors to address the deep social inequalities operating in Indian schools through which pedagogic practices are shaped. Sriprakash concludes that encouraging teachers to critically reflect on the social role of education, and their social distance from the rural child, is a much needed strategy for future reform.

The book makes a significant contribution in its ethnographic insights and theoretically informed sociological analyses to the study of pedagogic reform and to the field of comparative and international education more broadly. The nuanced methodological approach it offers is especially valuable to education development research which has tended to be oriented towards quantitative analyses of reform. An important addition to critical scholarship, the volume will resonate with educational theorists and reformers interested in social change, not only in India, but also globally.

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# Contents

1 Introduction: Pedagogy and Development ............................................. 1  
   1.1 Introduction ........................................................................................ 1  
   1.2 The Task for Teachers ........................................................................ 5  
   1.3 Organisation of the Book ................................................................... 6  
   References ................................................................................................... 8  

2 Researching Pedagogic Reform ............................................................... 11  
   2.1 A Sociological Analysis of Pedagogy ................................................ 11  
   2.2 Researching Education Reform in Karnataka .................................... 17  
   References ................................................................................................... 27  

3 The Political Project of Child-Centred Education in India ......................... 29  
   3.1 Contesting Pedagogy for a Post-colonial India.................................... 29  
   3.2 National Policy Discourses on Child-Centred Pedagogy .................. 32  
   3.3 Child-Centred Education and the Development Paradigm .............. 40  
   3.4 Re-examining Pedagogy .................................................................... 42  
   References ................................................................................................... 45  

4 Education Reform in Karnataka: Two Pedagogies for Development .......... 47  
   4.1 State Education Agendas ................................................................... 48  
   4.2 Nali Kali ‘Joyful Learning’ .................................................................. 52  
   4.3 The ‘Learner-Centred’ Initiative ......................................................... 60  
   References ................................................................................................... 68  

5 On Being a Teacher: Work Stories in Contexts of Change ....................... 71  
   5.1 The ‘Good’ Teacher ........................................................................... 72  
   5.2 Becoming a Teacher ........................................................................... 74  
   5.3 The Moral Authority and Social Status of Teaching ....................... 78  
   5.4 The Regulation of Teachers’ Work .................................................... 84  
   References ................................................................................................... 87
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Educating the Rural Child</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Educating the ‘Uneducated’</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>The ‘Good’ Student</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td><em>Nali Kali</em> and LC Classroom Relations</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>References</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Principles of Instruction</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td><em>Nali Kali</em> Principles of Instruction</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td><em>LC</em> Principles of Instruction</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>References</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><em>Nali Kali</em> at Mallige Primary School</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>School Environment, Community Contexts, and Educational Cultures</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Child-Centred Teaching in Savitha’s Standard 2 Classroom</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>Pedagogic Messages</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>References</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Learner-Centred Teaching at Kamala Primary School</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>School Environment, Community Contexts, and Educational Cultures</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>Child-Centred Teaching in Anitha’s Standard 2 Classroom</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>Pedagogic Messages</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>References</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Child-Centred Pedagogies and the Promise of Democratic Schooling</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>The Recontextualisation of Child-Centred Education in India</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>New Learner Subjects?</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>Lessons for Development</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>References</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appendix: Notes on Caste</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>About the Author</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Index</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# List of Boxes

| Box 2.1 | Conventions Used in the Representation of Interview and Observational Data | 24 |
| Box 4.1 | LC Sample Concept Map | 62 |
| Box 5.1 | Kamala and Mallige Teachers’ Conceptualisations of a ‘Good’ Teacher | 73 |
| Box 5.2 | Entry into Teaching | 77 |
| Box 5.3 | Women’s Perspectives on Entering the Teaching Profession | 79 |
| Box 6.1 | Constructing the ‘Good Student’: *Nali Kali* Teachers | 96 |
| Box 6.2 | Constructing the ‘Good Student’: *LC* Teachers | 98 |
List of Tables

Table 2.1 2001 Population summary, Mallige cluster and Kamala cluster ......................................................... 19
Table 2.2 School profiles, Mallige cluster and Kamala cluster ................................................................. 20
Table 2.3 Profiles of teachers who participated in the research ................................................................. 21
Table 3.1 MLL competencies for language learning, Stds 1 and 2 ................................................................. 37
Table 4.1 *Nali Kali* selected activities for teaching five Kannada letters .................................................. 55
Table 4.2 *Nali Kali* ‘ideal type’ regulative discourses .............................................................................. 57
Table 4.3 Summary of *Nali Kali* pedagogic principles (ideal type post-2001, Stds 1 and 2) ...................... 59
Table 4.4 *LC* ‘ideal type’ regulative discourse .......................................................................................... 65
Table 4.5 Summary of *LC* pedagogic principles (ideal type 2007, Stds 1–5) ............................................ 67
Table 5.1 Percentage of women government primary school teachers employed in Karnataka .................. 78
Table 5.2 Sarangapani’s (2003) models of Indian teacher–student relationships ...................................... 80
Table 8.1 Student enrolment by gender and caste category in the academic year 2007–2008, Mallige HPS ................................................................. 131
Table 8.2 Mallige 2005–2006 KSQAO results by subject and school, cluster, taluk, and district .................. 135
Table 9.1 Student enrolment by gender and caste category in the academic year 2007–2008, Kamala HPS ................................................................. 155
Table 9.2 Kamala 2005–2006 KSQAO results by subject and school, cluster, taluk, and district .................. 160
List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

DIET District Institute of Education and Training
DPEP District Primary Education Programme
EFA Education For All
GER Gross Enrolment Ratio
GoI Government of India
GoK Government of Karnataka
HPS Higher Primary School
KSQAO Karnataka State Quality Assessment Organisation
LC Learner Centred reform
LPS Lower Primary School
MHRD Ministry for Human Resource Development
MLL Minimum Levels of Learning
NCERT National Council for Educational Research and Training
NCF National Curriculum Framework
NGO Non Government Organisation
NK Nali Kali
NPE National Policy on Education
SC Scheduled Caste
SDMC School Development Management Committee
SSA Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan
ST Scheduled Tribe
Std/Std's Standard/Standards
UNDP United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF United Nations Children Fund