

Reading Skills and Hygiene Awareness in Girls: The Impact on Families and Communities - A Study Based on Field Projects conducted in Warrick County, Indiana, USA and Bapudham, Chandigarh India

Sheel, Vrinda

Grade 11, Castle High School, Newburgh, IN, USA

ABSTRACT

This study highlights the importance of reading skills and personal hygiene awareness for girls at an early age based on projects conducted in USA and India. The paper discusses the emotional, social, and economic impact of reading skills and health awareness on young girls. The study demonstrates that although reading skills and hygiene awareness are separate topics, they are very inter-related and have a powerful combined impact on building a strong foundation for healthy and economically independent women and subsequently families.

Based on my projects and research, I believe that initiatives to build skills and awareness in girls can be more successful if local organizations partner with elementary schools and libraries. A lot of difference can be made at the local grass root level, where funds and time are spent in close contact with students and teachers, understanding specific needs of each student.

I hope that learnings from this study will help us generate better and practical ways of brining literacy and hygiene awareness to young girls around the world.

KEYWORDS: Girls Education, Girls Health, Community Projects

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PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This paper is a study of projects on reading and hygiene awareness that I conducted in Chandler Elementary School, Warrick County, Indiana, USA and Kitabghar, Bapudham, Chandigarh, India. The paper examines the impact that small, focused, low budget projects can have on educating girls, and the positive impact this can have on families and communities.

MATERIALS AND / OR METHODS

I used several methods for collecting the data and information for my research. I conducted multiple surveys of the students to understand their needs. I conducted reading workshops with small groups of students. I started 'comfort cabinets' in a local elementary school, local public library, and in a learning center in India. I interviewed people in the local communities: educators, city officials, nurses, and doctors. My field work included observations during my classroom sessions, and interactions with the girls for the comfort cabinet. I read about the work being done for girls' education by Malala Yousafzai, Melinda Gates, and the World Bank. I also saw UNESCOS documentary film "Her Education, Our Future".

I also referenced online sources for data from the Warrick County, World Bank, UNESCO and other sources. I researched statistics and demographics on Warrick County.

RESULTS

The girls have benefitted greatly from the workshops and items supplied by the comfort cabinet. All nine students who participated in the reading workshop at Chandler Elementary School passed their IRead test. This is a statewide assessment for reading skills. Students who received items from the comfort cabinet have been able to participate better in classroom activities, feel more fulfilled and confident. Approximately 100 students are benefitting from the Comfort Cabinet in Warrick County; and 22 children benefitted from the Backpack program in 2023-24; and 21 children are in the backpack program for 2024-25. The 60 girls at Kitabghar who participated in the writing workshop and hygiene workshop have a better awareness of healthy hygiene practices which they can practice at home for themselves and teach their family members. They are eager to learn more and inculcate these habits in their homes.

Mrs. Stephanie Henrich, Principal, Chandler Elementary School feels that students who participated in the workshops, and were recipients of comfort cabinet items have a greater sense of pride and confidence. They also have a therapeutic effect of belonging to the community and knowing that there are people out there who care about them.

Pramod Sharma (founder and coordinator of YuvSatta, a local NGO): said “the comfort cabinet is a great resource for our students, who lack basic necessities at home. We are very pleased that Vrinda tried to understand what our students need and is leading an effort to help them. This will have a great impact on their physical and social wellbeing”.

These projects need to be continued for a longer time to create a sticking impact on the girls and their families. It is important to share the results of these projects with other members of the community so that the work can go on in the small scale and different schools and libraries.

DISCUSSION

1. MOTIVATION

I have been inspired by other women around the world who are working to improve the education and lives of young girls. Malala Yousafzai said in her Nobel lecture, “I am someone who wants to see every child getting quality education, who wants to see women having equal rights and who wants peace in every corner of the world.” (Reference 10.1).

There is a lot of work remaining to be done for gender equality. As per UNESCO, women still are 2/3 of all adults unable to read. (Reference 10.2). School completion rates for girls are lower in low-income countries where 63% of female primary school students complete primary school, compared to 67% of male primary school students. (Reference 10.3). In India literacy rates for women are far below those for men. As per the 2011 Census of India, only 64.63% of women were literate vs. 80.88% men. (Reference 10.6).

Warrick County School Corp contains 18 schools and 10,070 students. 21.5% of students are economically disadvantaged. At schools in Warrick County School Corp, 21.5% of students are eligible to participate in the federal free and reduced-price meal program (Reference 10.4). In Warrick County School Corp, only 58% of elementary students tested at or above the proficient level for reading, (Reference 10.4). Chandler Elementary school enrolls 45% economically disadvantaged students in Warrick County. The student population is made up of 43% female students and 57% male student (Reference 10.5).

As per the World Bank (Reference 10.3) “Both individuals and countries benefit from girls’ education. Better educated women tend to be more informed about nutrition and healthcare, have fewer children, marry at a later age, and their children are usually healthier, should they choose to become mothers. They are more likely to participate in the formal labor market and earn higher incomes.” A 2018 World Bank study estimates that the “limited educational opportunities for girls, and barriers to completing 12 years of education, cost countries between US\$15 trillion and \$30 trillion in lost lifetime productivity and earnings.” All these factors combined can help lift households, communities, and countries out of poverty.

2. CHALLENGES FACED BY GIRLS

Around the world, girls face many challenges that stem from poverty, illiteracy, gender related violence, early marriage, etc. This leads to lack of self-confidence, inability to distinguish between fair and unfair treatment, economic dependence, and poor health. This becomes a cycle that these girls cannot break through. In India, there are many girls who can not attend school due to unsafe environment, lack of funding, and need to support the family by working taking care of younger siblings. In Warrick County many female students are faced with a lack of supplies, food, clothes, and do not have transportation to go to school. This causes them to either not receive an education or fall far behind other girls their age. These girls are more likely to get married and have children early, thus further reducing their chance to be economically self-reliant as they grow older.

3. PROJECT DETAILS

3.1. Chandler Elementary School Reading Workshop

The workshop was held at Chandler Elementary School in Warrick County, Indiana for the academic year 2023-24. The goal of the project was to improve reading and literacy skills as well as promote a life-long love of

reading. The project benefitted 9 third-graders who did not pass IREAD. The workshop was held every other Wednesday after school for an hour. During the workshop I worked with the students on reading, spellings, vocabulary, and comprehension. Three students were awarded books as prizes for best effort during the workshop. At the end of the workshop, many students took a great interest in reading and had shown a lot of improvement. All nine students passed the IREAD after the workshop. One noticeable thing was that after the IREAD was administered, all the boys stopped coming to the class, however there were three girls who continued to come and continued to show great interest in reading books.

3.2. Warrick County Comfort Cabinet

I started the Comfort Cabinet at Chandler Elementary School in Warrick County for the academic year 2023 -24 and am also running it for the academic year 2024-25. In the summer of 2024, I also took the comfort cabinet to the Chandler Public Library twice. Chandler school district has several children who come from underserved areas of our county, many students are in foster care; and many don't have access to personal hygiene items, school supplies, or even enough food. I have special ties to the school because I attended the Excel program there. I have been working with the principal and some of the teachers at the school to identify students who need help and to try to provide items that they need. The items we need for the students are things like body wash, deodorant, toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, sanitary napkins, underwear, shoes, blankets, as well as school supplies such as notebooks, folders, pencils, crayons. None of these items are expensive, and these are things we take for granted. It is surprising to see how the lack of these items can adversely impact the students' self-confidence, learning in the classroom and social interactions. For example, after gym students can get made fun of for body odor, this makes them self-conscious, and they cannot focus on the classwork. Something inexpensive like deodorant can fix that problem. There are girl students who don't have access to sanitary napkins, so they end up using toilet paper to help themselves. Something simple like the accessibility of sanitary napkins in their locker can help them feel a lot more confident and focused on school. I have provided sanitary kits to the school nurse; these kits were distributed to the girls during the puberty discussions. Lack of toothbrushes and toothpaste makes students feel like they have bad breath, and they don't speak up in class or talk to their friends. Approximately 100 students have benefited from these programs.

3.3. Chandler Backpack Program

This program benefitted 22 students in the academic year 2023-24, and 21 students in the academic year 2024-25. These are students who have been identified by the Warrick County as 'in need.' They receive weekend lunches from the county. I worked with the principal of Chandler Elementary School to provide them with some basic things like school supplies, hygiene items, and personal items. Based on the surveys I conducted, I was able to provide items for basic hygiene necessities such as soap, shampoo, and sanitary products. I was also able to provide school supplies especially headphones which are needed for school tests; and personal items like shoes, blankets, sweats etc. It was very touching to see that in one of the survey a student asked for pet food - this just goes to show how these children are loving and caring, and something like pet food can make them happy. I met the students personally to motivate them and understand the challenges they face at home and in school. Many times, having someone to talk to is helpful and has a long-term impact on self-esteem.

3.4. Kitabghar Writing Workshop

The writing workshop was conducted in the summer of 2023 for girls in grades 6-10 at Kitabghar, a Learning Center run by Yuvsatta, for girls at Bapudhaam Colony, Sector 26, Chandigarh. 23 girls participated in the workshop. These girls come from poor families and do not have access to proper and consistent education due to financial hardship. The goal was to provide the girls with an opportunity to develop their writing skills, be productive during the summer, and have some fun as well!

The workshop concluded on August 2, 2023, with a prize distribution ceremony. Anju won first prize for her essay on 'The Importance of Girls' Education.' Richa won second prize for her writing on 'The Importance of Girls' Rights.' Sejal won third prize for her thoughts on 'The Most Important Person in my Life (Mother).' These students received a 'rechargeable fan and light' so that they can study even during power cuts. All other participants received school bags and stationery kits.

The entire workshop was conducted with distance learning tools like Zoom Meetings and WhatsApp for exchanging documents and graded papers. The on-ground support was provided by local teachers.

The workshop started on June 12, 2023, with a Zoom introduction session. I spoke to each of the 23 girls and asked them what they wanted to be when they grew up. The girls voiced their aspirations of becoming doctors, lawyers, teachers, police officers, chess players, artists, dancers, and rockstars. I gave the students a list of 20 topics to choose from, and also provided them with a writing template. My family and friends donated Rs 23,000 for prizes, writing kits and school kits for all participants in the workshop. Many students chose to write about

the significance of educating girls, some wrote about the sacrifices their parents have made, and others wrote about people who inspire them most. Areeba from class 10th B wrote, “Not only has my father taught me to become a better person, but also a real person, which I believe is more important.” Anju from 11th grade stated, “It’s an undeniable truth that girls’ education can bring about a phenomenal change in society.” Preeti from 7th grade wrote, “There are only two people in this world who feel happy in answering my silly questions. One is my mother and the other is my schoolteacher.” Anuradha from 10th grade stated, “If there is anyone out there who loves us more than our mother it’s only God.” The essays were truly inspiring to read and learn from.

I provided individual feedback to each student through Zoom sessions. The essays were examined on grammar, sentence structure, capitalization, idea building, and spelling. Every participant was given the opportunity to improve and succeed.

It was amazing to see the drive and resilience in these girls. It was a very satisfying and deeply moving experience for me. I am grateful for the opportunity to make a very tiny difference in the lives of these 15 girls. And I really hope I can continue to learn from my new friends and also help them as they work hard to make their dreams come true!

Mr. Pramod Sharma added “this was a great way for the students in India to interact with and learn from another student living in the USA. Vrinda provided great inspiration to the girls”.

3.5. Kitabghar Hygiene Workshop

The hygiene workshop was conducted in Spring of 2024 for girls in grades 6-10 at Kitabghar, a Learning Center run by Yuvsatta, for girls at Bapudhaam Colony, Sector 26, Chandigarh. 37 girls participated in the workshop. These girls come from underprivileged families and do not have access to proper and consistent education due to financial hardship. The goal of the workshop was to provide the girls with an opportunity to share the health issues that they face at home and in their community. The entire workshop was conducted with distance learning tools like Zoom Meetings and WhatsApp for exchanging documents and graded papers, with on ground support provided by the local teachers.

The workshop concluded on March 23, 2024, with a prize distribution ceremony, and the inauguration of a ‘Comfort Cabinet.’ The Comfort Cabinet will provide some essential items like shampoo, soap, sanitary napkins, toothbrushes, and nail clippers that the students need and don’t have access to.

As part of the workshop, 37 students answered three short questions on the most important health issues facing them. They provided a list of health and personal hygiene items that would help them daily, and some things they can do to promote better health and personal hygiene in their neighborhood. It was interesting to see the responses. Many students listed tobacco as a cause of poor health. They also mentioned the need for proper immunization. Students mentioned basic things like brushing their teeth and washing hands frequently and keeping nails clean. Reena mentioned that people should not spit on the roads, people should use toilets and restrooms to relieve themselves. Anuradha mentioned how the most important thing is to find water and soap to take a bath every day. She also mentioned the importance of washing hands after using the bathroom. Manu mentioned how people should not wash clothes or bathe in a way that pollutes drinking water and the importance of not leaving open garbage on the streets. Their answers were inspiring and showed the value that healthcare brings to lives. My wish is to help instill these values into these students and their communities by helping them be aware, and also by providing for their basic needs from time to time through the Comfort Cabinet.

I was fortunate to be able to visit my students in Bapudhaam in the summer of 2024. It was so satisfying and touching to be with the students today and finally get to meet them!

4. BENEFITS

It is amazing to see the cascading impact that a small effort with just a few students can have on the girl herself, her family, her local community and subsequently to our countries and the world. Sometimes we may feel that the little we can do is not enough however I feel every little effort that goes into educating a girl has an impact that is so big it’s difficult to imagine. With programs like this, we can encourage each girl to stay in school, get an education, become financially independent, and also prevent early marriage and pregnancy which are big roadblocks to girls’ self-reliance and independence.

As Melinda Gates, says (Ref 10.7), “When we invest in women—the most critical and under-resourced asset in the world—we unlock a better future not only for women themselves, but also for the next generation. To activate women’s potential as agents of change and position them to break the cycle of poverty, we need to

ensure they have three fundamental things: access to healthcare, decision-making power, and economic opportunity”.

5. PROJECT FUNDING

These projects can be done on small budgets. Many times, we feel that a small budget project may not have a big impact. However, these kids need some very basic things which the local community can provide with a small monetary investment.

5.1. Funding for projects at Chandler School & Library, Warrick County, Indiana, USA

These projects were supported by ‘Make A Difference’ Grants from Youth Resources of Southwestern Indiana, my family, and funds provided by my friends. One large donor was Mrs. Janice Miller, who is a leading woman entrepreneur in the city. So far, the cost of the projects has been approximately \$3,500. But if I have more funds, I can do a lot more for these children.

5.2. Funding for projects at Kitabghar, Bapudham, India

These projects were supported by my family, and fundraising that I did with the Indian community in my city. The cost so far has been approximately Rs 85,000 (USD 1,000). There is so much more to do for these young girls, if I have more funds available.

6. COLLABORATION

These projects would not have been possible without the support and collaboration with two people.

- 6.1. Mrs. Henrich, Principal, Chandler Elementary School. She is very committed to her students, always made time to meet with me, supported, and encouraged me for all my work at the school.
- 6.2. Mr. Pramod Sharma, founder and coordinator of YuvSatta, an NGO in Chandigarh, India. He was a wealth of knowledge on the needs of the girls and helped me understand the challenges they faced.

7. INTERVIEWS

I gained a lot of context, background and confidence by talking to educators, doctors, and social leaders in Warrick County, and in Chandigarh, India.

- 7.1. Mrs. Henrich, Principal, Chandler Elementary School, Indiana, USA.
- 7.2. Leading physicians and health care providers in my community.
- 7.3. Mr. Pramod Sharma, founder and coordinator of YuvSatta, an NGO in Chandigarh, India.
- 7.4. Dr. Seema Biji, Principal, Moti Ram Arya School, Chandigarh, India.

8. FUTURE PROJECTS

I plan to continue my work at Warrick County and Kitabghar. Consistent and persistent effort is what will help make a difference. Continuity is difficult, but important. I would like to expand these programs to other local schools in my community but for that I will have to collaborate with some other volunteers, and I will need additional funding.

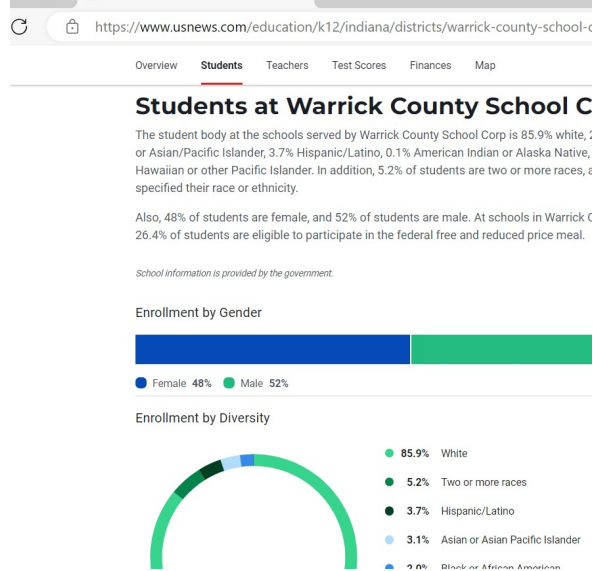
9. CONCLUSION

Girls are the future of every community. When we educate girls, we educate a family, which has an impact on the community, and the country. There are many roadblocks that young girl's face, it is not easy for them to stay in school, be accepted socially, and be safe in their communities. Girls face bullying, trauma and molestation, they become shy and withdrawn and become dependent on others. It is very fulfilling to help even a few girls gain more confidence, and hence be more comfortable in continuing their education. I hope I can continue my work with these students. I also hope that leaders around the world recognize the importance of reading skills and hygiene awareness in girls and start funding more local community programs.

10. FIGURES AND PICTURES

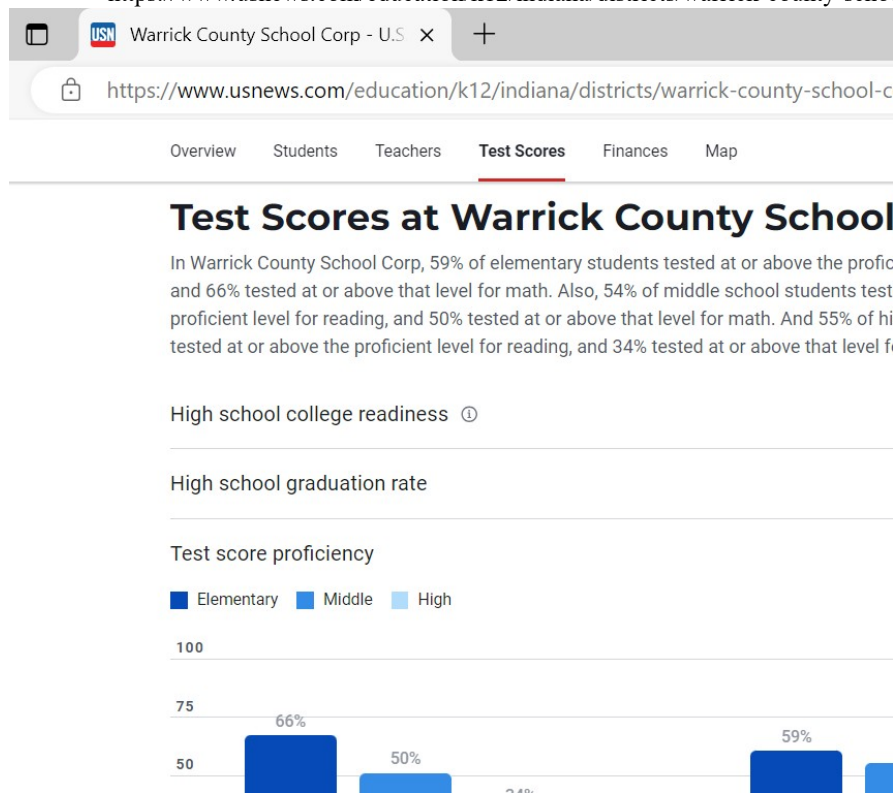
10.1. Warrick County School Enrollment

<https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/indiana/districts/warrick-county-school-corp-111922>



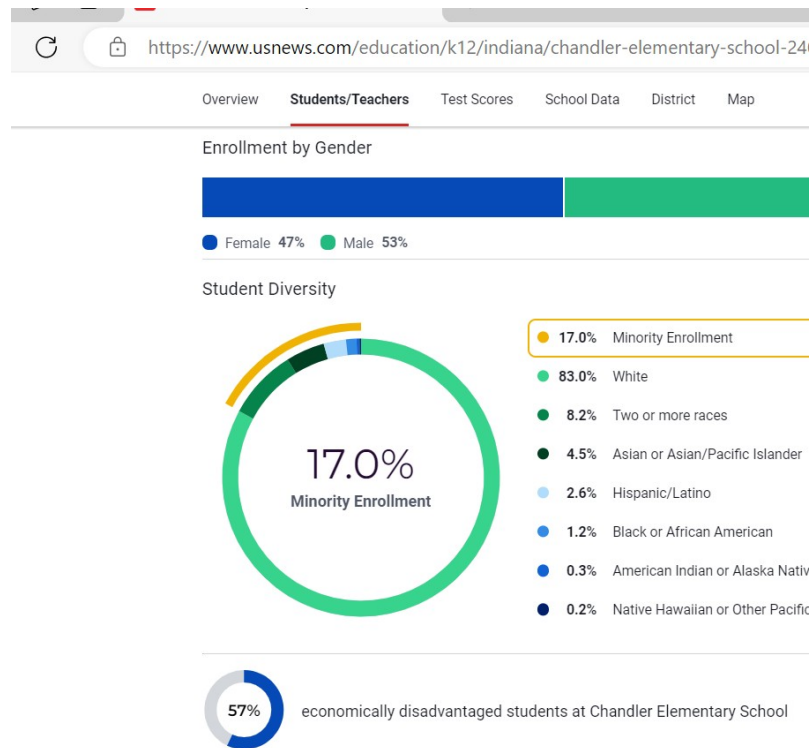
10.2. Warrick County School Test Scores

<https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/indiana/districts/warrick-county-school-corp-111922>



10.3. Chandler Elementary School Enrollment

<https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/indiana/chandler-elementary-school-240684>



10.4. Literacy Rates, India

https://mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/reports_and_publication/statistical_publication/social_statistics/WM16Chapter3.pdf

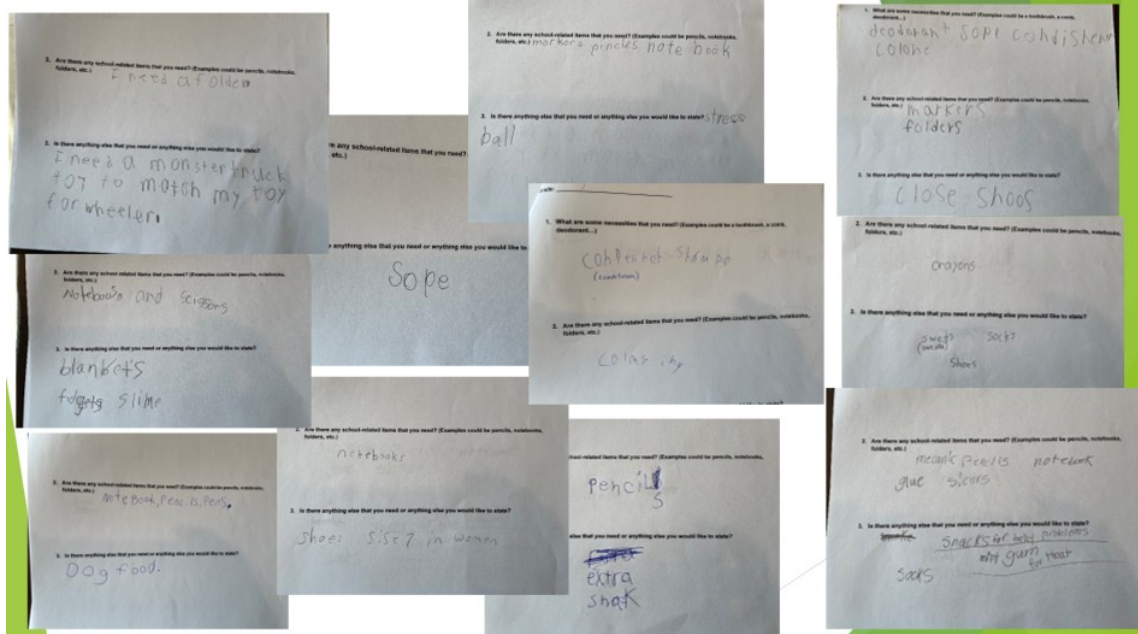
3.1 : Trend in Literacy Rates in Post Independent India

Year	Rural			Urban		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
1951	4.87	19.02	12.1	22.33	45.6	34.59
1961	10.1	34.3	22.5	40.5	66	54.4
1971	15.5	48.6	27.9	48.8	69.8	60.2
1981	21.7	49.6	36	56.3	76.7	67.2
1991	30.17	56.96	36	64.05	81.09	67.2
2001	46.7	71.4	59.4	73.2	86.7	80.2

10.5. Kits provided for 'back to school' at Chandler Elementary School for the academic year 2024-25



10.6. Survey Results for Backpack program in 2023-24



10.7. Reading Workshop at Chandler Elementary School for academic year 2023-24



10.8. First Aid Supply Kit for Chandler Elementary School Clinic, November 2024



10.9. Puberty Kits for Girls at Chandler Elementary School, November 2024



10.10. Supplies for Chandler Elementary School, December 2024



10.11. Newspaper article in local language, Hindi, published in India, regarding the reading workshop at Kitabghar in August 2023



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14 मेधावियों को स्कूल बैग और स्टेशनरी किट बांटी

दसवीं कक्षा की छात्रा वृंदा शील ने किया वर्कशॉप का संचालन

चंडीगढ़, 3 अगस्त (असलीप): सैक्टर-26 स्थित बापुधाम कालोनी में लड़कियों को स्नातक बनने के सेंटर किताबघर में आर्थिक तौर पर रूचि लड़कियों के लिए आयोजित विभा समर ट्रेनिंग वर्कशॉप वीरवार को पुरस्कार विहार समारोह के साथ संपन्न हुई।

यह वर्कशॉप शहर की स्वयंसेवी संस्था युवसत्ता द्वारा संचालित लर्निंग सेंटर किताबघर में छठी से दसवीं कक्षा की लड़कियों के लिए आयोजित की गई थी। पूरी वर्कशॉप जूम मॉडल और व्हाट्सएप जैसे डिस्टेंस लर्निंग टूल के साथ आयोजित की गई थी। वर्कशॉप के लिए ऑन-ग्रैंडसमर्थन किताबघर की मैनेजर पिकी और किताबघर की शालिनी द्वारा प्रदान किया गया था।

वर्कशॉप का संचालन इंडियाना अमेरिका की दसवीं कक्षा की छात्रा वृंदा शील ने किया। वृंदा का लक्ष्य लड़कियों को अपने लेखन कौशल

मेरे पिता ने मुझे बेहतर इंसान बनना सिखाया

दसवीं कक्षा की अरोबा ने लिखा मेरे पिता ने मुझे न केवल एक बेहतर इंसान बनना सिखाया है, बल्कि एक वास्तविक इंसान भी बनना सिखाया है, जो मेरा मानना है कि यह अधिक महत्वपूर्ण है।



सैक्टर-26 स्थित बापुधाम में आयोजित पुरस्कार विहार समारोह के दौरान युवसत्ता को बैग और किट दी गई।

को विकसित करने और साथ ही कुछ मीज-मस्ती करने का अवसर प्रदान करना था।

वर्कशॉप के समापन पर पुरस्कार युवसत्ता के संस्थापक और समन्वयक प्रमोद शर्मा द्वारा सौंपे गए। अंजू ने लड़कियों की शिक्षा

का महत्व विषय पर अपने निबंध के लिए प्रथम पुरस्कार जीता।

श्रद्धा ने लड़कियों के अधिकारों का महत्व विषय पर अपने लेखन के लिए दूसरा पुरस्कार जीता। संजल ने मेरे जीवन में सबसे महत्वपूर्ण व्यक्ति मां विषय पर अपने विचारों

17वीं कक्षा की अंजू ने कहा यह एक निर्विवाद सत्य है कि लड़कियों की शिक्षा समाज में अभूतपूर्व बदलाव ला सकती है। सातवीं कक्षा की प्रीति ने लिखा इस दुनिया में केवल दो ही लोग हैं जो मेरे मूर्खतापूर्ण सवालों का जवाब देने में खुशी महसूस करते हैं। एक मेरी मां हैं और दूसरी मेरी स्कूल टीचर हैं। दसवीं कक्षा की अनुष्ठा ने कहा कि अगर कोई है जो हमें हमारी मां से ज्यादा प्यार करता है तो वह केवल भगवान है।

के लिए तीसरा पुरस्कार जीता। इन लड़कियों को एक रिचार्जबल पेंसिल और लाइट दिया गया, ताकि वह बिजली कटौती के दौरान भी पढ़ाई कर सकें। अन्य सभी 14 मेधावी प्रतिभागियों को स्कूल बैग और स्टेशनरी किट दिए गए।

10.12. Newspaper article published in India, regarding the hygiene workshop at Kitabghar in March 2024

<https://www.babushahi.com/full-news.php?id=181344>

Date: March 23, 2024



Chandigarh: Health workshop conc Kitabghar, Baapudham

By : Zinnia Balli First Published : Saturday, Mar 23, 2024 04:33 PM
Updated : Saturday, Mar 23, 2024 04:33 PM



Reference

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