

Perspectives and Feedback on the RAGE Paper
‘Challenging Narrow Conceptualisations of Education
through the Nook Model in Uganda, Zimbabwe, Rwanda,
India and Bangladesh’ (Project DEFY, 2023)



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Foreword

Finding empirical evidence for alternative learning models is a rather difficult task, akin to finding needles in a haystack. The haystack here is school-based education, and research through this lens has monopolised mainstream publication. For fresh alternatives in education around the world, any trust building required to be done with donors, partners, local administrative bodies or even with local communities relies largely on articles and some subjective studies and theses. **This makes it extremely difficult to bring in the resources that such schools and organisations need to survive long enough to one day conduct such research themselves and offer evidence of their own** that can be accepted by the larger education community. This chicken-and-egg survival constraint has meant that many wonderful alternative ideas in education die before long, and no strong research studies come into existence. Education thus remains the same, unchallenged in its fundamental design, while no alternative ideas grow and thrive.

With great difficulty and undying spirit, Project DEFY has been able to challenge this status quo, and last long enough to build enough resources to start off on our own journey of creating research evidence on 'Nooks', our own alternative model for education.

We want to make sure that all those who come with radically new ideas after us will have our shoulders to stand on, and our research to reference.

However, there are many questions that still must be asked as to how research is done. We do not mean the specific methods of collecting and analysing data, and finding results, around which there are many ways to choose from. What we are rather bothered by is the limiting nature of modern research, which, if we may boldly put it, tends to be elitist. With a significant bias and support of publishers and reviewers towards White, Western and Male researchers, the research landscape is hardly equitable. It instead proliferates this inequity by ensuring institutional attachment to research, which are already much better accessed by people with wealth and power, than those without.

We believe that **research should not need PhD degrees and institutional subscription**, or a background of wealth and generational power. Furthermore, **research that is produced should not hide behind paywalls** that further the inequity, extending it even to the access of knowledge and institutionalising knowledge to exclusive portions of society. Hence, **all the research we produce shall be published freely on our website with no requirement of any payment or subscription.**

Even so, a final question still remains. How do we validate research?

Surely, asking peer researchers and experts to support the outcomes of studies is one important way. However, we feel that such validation is incomplete in the absence of commentary from the ‘subject’ of the research itself. We do not wish to see human subjects of research as inanimate and unintelligent. Hence, **we make it an essential practice to seek commentary from the learners and communities from whom the data is collected, and attach their comments onto the research**, ensuring that their thoughts on various findings of the study are shared and attached without being filtered, as are peer reviews and expert comments.

RAGE is the collective culmination of these beliefs that we share at DEFY, and are also surely shared by many other educators, researchers and changemakers. Our intention is to open RAGE to the world in the form of an alliance, enabling more individuals and organisations who believe in these ideals to do research under this umbrella.

We are taking our baby steps. We hope you enjoy our very first publication.

Abhijit Sinha
CEO, Project DEFY

Overview of the RAGE: Research Engagement Process

In December 2023, Research in Alternative Global Education (RAGE), the research arm of Project DEFY, released its first working paper titled, ‘Challenging Narrow Conceptualisations of ‘Education’ through the Nook Model in Uganda, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, India and Bangladesh.’ The paper shed light on how the Nook advances an understanding of alternative education in a Global South context by discussing experiences of learners and communities, and how these relate to “**community building and ultimately the power of people defining how education responds to their own needs and aspirations**” (Project DEFY, 2023).

In line with RAGE’s overall vision of research as an iterative process that involves dialogue, feedback and challenging dominant top-down methods, this document seeks to record and showcase what our learners, communities, team members, and other stakeholders had to say about the paper. This exercise serves as a critical component of our research process, and feeds into the way we approach our evolving research agenda.

The forms of engagement with the previous RAGE paper include:

1. **Inputs and suggestions from Nook learners and community members** through discussions around various areas of the paper.
2. **Feedback and critiques from researchers** in response to a presentation based on the paper at the 19th Development Dialogue Conference

This document is divided into three parts - the first part discusses the methodology and process of conducting engagement activities with learners and community members; the second part sheds light on key insights uncovered during this exercise, and the last segment outlines the takeaways and lessons for future research.

Methodology

Envisioning **research as a bottom-up process that actively involves learners**, RAGE sought to extend this approach to our feedback activities by adopting creative methods of dissemination and engagement. To facilitate feedback and gather perspectives on areas covered in the paper, the activities were broken down into two parts - first with learners at the Nook who had completed at least 1 learning cycle and second with community members (people living in the community surrounding the Nook representing different professions, ages and genders and who were not currently enrolled as learners at the Nook).

Before conducting the feedback exercises, the key takeaways and areas covered in the paper were converted into a story-board. The story-board incorporated a mix of findings and questions interspersed throughout so as to gauge perspectives on the research areas. The questions were framed to gather additional context on experiences of learners and community members, given the variation in socio-cultural and economic composition of places where Nooks are located. This stemmed from an understanding that while the paper sought to analyse various data sources across Nooks, there could be variations in experiences in a particular setting.

This approach to gathering feedback was used due to **the need for simplifying research findings and incorporating visual elements to sustain engagement** with the exercise. It further included questions which went beyond the focus of the paper to understand what aspects of the Nook could be adapted to meet challenges, needs and aspirations of learners and community members in the future. There was, therefore, an element of gathering inputs to eventually inform programmatic design in addition to seeking feedback on the paper itself.

Nook Managers were trained over a series of sessions which covered the objectives and aims of the exercise, role of facilitators, going over the storyboard, format for recording observations, and logistical preparation required. After each day of the activity, facilitators filled the format to share their observations and added key insights and other details in the format (see **Annexure 1** for the sample formats).

While the RAGE team was on ground in Kaggalipura, Karnataka to pilot the activity and make necessary modifications for ease of facilitation and improving engagement, managers conducted the exercise in other locations (Shangpung, Meghalaya and Matibi, Zimbabwe) with oversight from the team.^[1]

¹ *Adhering to principles of dignity and privacy of those sharing feedback, informed consent was sought at the beginning of the exercise. Names of learners and community members have been omitted in this paper.*

Key Insights from Stakeholders

Nook Learners

Gender Composition and Accessibility of the Nook

The paper referred to baseline survey data on gender distribution by age and found that Nook learners were overwhelmingly female in the age group of 10 to 30. Among males, the highest percentage of learners belonged to the 10-20 age group. When asked about the gender composition of their respective Nooks and **why learners felt a particular age and gender was more dominant in their context**, the following insights emerged.

- Learners observed a higher number of women who attended the Nook, barring the case of Shangpung in Meghalaya, India (where there were near equal numbers of women and men, albeit coming to the Nook at different times of the year).
- Some reasons they mentioned included **gendered notions of work** - women were expected to take responsibility for household chores and child rearing while men were the primary breadwinners in their households. Yet, the **flexibility of timings** in the Nook meant that women who were able to complete their chores/ children who were enrolled in school could come to the Nook at a time convenient for them. In Matibi, Zimbabwe, a 28-year-old male learner pointed out, *“males opt to work. They see it [coming to the Nook] as something not feasible for them to do since they have to provide for the family. However, they admire when others do it [projects at the Nook] and succeed but would rather work.”*
- The role of **restrictive social norms** in many of the contexts was reiterated by learners in Kaggalipura, Karnataka, when they mentioned that many women are not allowed out of the house. However, **proximity to the Nook** is a factor that allows them to come here.

Nook Learners Speak:

“Through your experience, can you tell us what is a Nook?”

There is a lot of Pressure in schools and colleges. We have to do as we are told. Nooks are a place where we are encouraged to try new things. When I see other people working on something, I also feel encouraged to do it. Additionally, I would not have been able to afford these materials outside of the Nook.

A place to relax and learn based on interest and figure out the solution to a problem independently.

Nook is a place which changes your perception and way of thinking. If you spend a few days at the Nook, you change the way you think, you start thinking outside the box. It makes you creative , it gives you vision and broadens your brain. To me, the Nook is a stepping stone, it elevates you to a better way of thinking which will help you in life.

It is not only for training but much more.

Nook is a place where you get knowledge and help, in what you wish to do in your life.

Project-Based Learning and Teamwork

A key aspect of the self-designed-learning approach in Nooks described in the paper revolved around breaking preconceived ideas of who should learn what, and for learners to gain exposure to different learning areas through the ‘exploration’ phase of the learning cycle. This was discussed in the paper through analysis of the motivation statements behind 354 projects across Nooks. As part of the engagement exercise, learners were asked about the projects they have done, what motivated them, and their views on the freedom to choose a project irrespective of one’s background or age.

- While there are cases of Nooks that continue to associate specific learning areas with a particular gender (tailoring and baking - females, carpentry - males), learners mentioned the **role of the Nook environment in encouraging transgression of gendered notions of learning areas**.
- An 18-year-old female learner in Kaggalipura, India remarked, “*usually everyone thinks carpentry is just for boys. While I did not do this in collaboration with boys, I saw boys working on carpentry and I also engaged in a carpentry project. Generally people also think painting walls is for men. But I have seen both men and women at the Nook painting.*” Similar comments were made by learners in Matibi, Zimbabwe, where they pointed to females undertaking projects on welding, or males experimenting with cooking, examples of areas that are perceived as highly gendered in their context.

Community-Building and Conversations at the Nook

The paper discussed the role of decentralisation of day-to-day responsibilities, co-creation of trust codes, and adapting to community needs and aspirations as central features discernible as part of community-building at Nooks. Learners were asked about experiences at the Nook that helped build a sense of community and trust, and whether conversations around contextual challenges or wider problems supported this process.

- While conversations did take place across Nooks, the **frequency and depth varied depending on the age composition of Nooks**. It was pointed out that older learners are more forthcoming while expressing their concerns and challenges. Yet, in defiance of this observation, a 13-year-old male at Kaggalipura, Karnataka recalled conversations around gender norms in the community and how it was expected for women to stay at home, while men could go and work outside. Similarly, a 17-year-old female learner in Shangpung, Meghalaya said, “*I can trust and be free, and can talk easily at the Nook.*”
- The paper referenced the role of ‘psycho-social-support camps’ in Zimbabwe in facilitating **conversations around mental wellbeing and providing a safe space** to explore difficult topics. This was reiterated by learners in this exercise. A 28-year-old male in Matibi mentioned: “*we talked about drug abuse, friendships, early child marriages, HIV/AIDS which are helpful. And also try to make people comfortable because there are some issues which they keep to themselves. During discussions you can clearly hear that these are personal issues but someone can talk about them during our circles and while chatting.*”

Key Insights from Stakeholders

Community Review

Understanding the value of the Nook in the community

Across contexts, community members **overwhelmingly highlighted material and resource related-aspects** of the Nook and **possibilities of income generation by honing specific skills**. The zero financial cost implications for learners and **free availability of resources** was reiterated by several people. Parents of learners compared the Nook to other institutions for learning which charged a fee and had rigid timings, and pointed out that the **flexibility of the space** further allowed people to access it as per their availability. A 42-year old mother of a learner remarked, *“there is no set time here, they can stay here for 1 or 2 hours to learn things. Even in 1 hour they can learn many things. There will be limited timings in other learning centres. This place is flexible with timings. There are other limited courses for 3 or 6 months, and we cannot continue after that.”*

Beyond free access and flexibility, community members perceived projects at the Nook as contributing to **enhancing one's skills in a particular area and eventually becoming financially independent**. A 46-year-old male, who works as a flower vendor in the Kaggalipura community remarked that the process of working on projects were testament to a specific skill picked up by learners, and these **could be monetised** in the local market.

Ideas of **productivity and maximising one's time** were also put forward by community members. Many felt that the Nook provided avenues for children to take up new learning opportunities instead of roaming around or playing in their free time. There was a difference in the perspectives and emphasis within what constitutes learning and ‘wasting time’ in responses by community members. A 23-year-old female who is currently a homemaker said, *“children and youth of our neighbourhood are spending time unnecessarily wandering around. By bringing them all together and making a change in them, we can change all the youth of our community. You can conduct community events in large groups, so more people will get to know about Nook.”* At the same time, a 42-year-old female working currently as househelp from the same community remarked, *“many people can come here and learn. If you are interested in learning, you can learn everything. One can be tailoring, one can learn about computers. If people learn all this, it will not be difficult for them. Isn't it for the benefit of the people?”*

Feedback and Critiques from Researchers

A presentation based on the paper was selected as part of a panel discussion at the [19th Development Dialogue Conference](#), 'Reckoning with the past and imagining the futures of development' organised by the International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam.

Through the presentation, we **received critical feedback**, comments and questions from the audience which were further discussed with team members. Questions revolved around how DEFY addresses **opportunities beyond the Nook for learners**, the **outlook on inclusion** of learners with disabilities, among other areas such as **financing mechanisms, monitoring and evaluation frameworks**, and **evolving the Nook model in response to aspirations** among communities.

While the team acknowledged addressing areas such as creating a plan for opportunities beyond the Nook within programmatic design discussions, a question we picked up for further discussion as a team was around the Nook's outlook on inclusion of learners with disabilities and how the Nook adapts to these needs. The team agreed that in many contexts where Nooks are located, such learners are often overlooked and marginalised in educational environments. The researcher too pointed out that given the flexibility of the Nook, it seemed like such an environment could potentially cater to these needs. While a ramp was built by learners in Gahanga Nook in Rwanda to facilitate access for a fellow learner, this was more of a collective response that emerged rather than a design element of the Nook. This points to a tailored response in specific circumstances. However, the programme design itself does not currently account for the resources or support structures that organisations with expertise in facilitating inclusive learning environments could offer.

Beyond addressing the questions in the presentation, fellow panellists shed light on different forms of creative research such as **participatory arts and alternative monitoring and evaluation methods**, leading to many insights for shaping future RAGE research agendas.

² *Programme teams have already begun implementing initiatives to support opportunities beyond the Nook. Notably, 'Sandbox' aims to empower learners by enabling start-up funding, learning programmes and targeted mentorship. See [Re'DEFY'ning Education: Empowerment Fueled by Curiosity and Choice | LinkedIn](#) section on Sandbox for more details.*

Key Takeaways from the Engagement Exercise

When the idea of RAGE emerged, there was a clear intention that research, like education, must be brought back to the hands of learners and communities. This engagement exercise sought to collect feedback and perspectives from these groups to inform our future research agendas and ensure voices of learners are prioritised within the research process. The key takeaways from the engagement exercise include:

- **Demystifying the idea of ‘research’** is critical to build a sense of trust among learners and team members. Due to the dominance of top-down research in social sector programmes across contexts, there is a fundamental need **to introduce more collaborative and participatory research** and build the confidence of learners to actively participate in this process. While other research methods offer insights depending on the nature and objectives of the research, participatory design holds potential to empower learners and communities in the research process.
- **Engagement through visual elements like story-boards, videos, and images helps in simplifying research findings** and allowing learners and communities across ages and genders to stay engaged. Moreover, if they are engaged in more than one way (listening/discussion), they are less likely to get bored.



Lessons for Future Research

Several insights emerged from responses particularly from learners and community members. This exercise helped identify gaps and potential areas for future research. It further allows programme teams to utilise findings from this exercise and identify any areas that require changes/ a different approach.

- It was observed that by the time learners begin working on projects, they engage in collaborative work and in several instances, transgress gendered notions of work that may exist in their societal context. Yet, there is scope to **examine the role of gendered ideas and the peer culture effect at the point of Nook entry**. For instance, examining questions around whether a higher number of females or males come to the Nook and take up certain projects through observations of what their peers are doing at the Nook.
- Gathering information **directly from males to better understand imbalances in the gender composition of Nooks and cultural norms** that may impede participation.

These may include questions such as:

1. What do they usually do in their leisure time? What are some community platforms they frequent?
 2. How do their family members and their peers think of them if they regularly come to Nook?
 3. How does it make them feel if they have to come and learn at the Nook led by a female?
 4. What would be a favourable situation to come and learn/share at the Nook?
- **Facilitator's inputs** seemed to play a strong role in steering sometimes difficult conversations that helped build a community ethos. Their role in encouraging learners to open up was key to taking up these topics across age groups. There is a **potential to examine the nature and depth of conversations at the Nook** and understand what styles of facilitation or interpersonal characteristics facilitate this.

Baby Steps: Taking these Learnings Forward

Taking forward participatory approaches to research, RAGE conducted extensive field visits in Meghalaya in North-East India in March 2024 where there are currently 22 Nooks under the umbrella of the Chief Minister's Youth Centre (CMYC), a partnership between Project DEFY, Sauramandala Foundation and the Government of Meghalaya. **The centres covered were CMYC Pasyih in Jaintia hills and CMYC Rongsak Songma in Garo hills.**

The objective of the visit was to dive into the **community impact** of select centres in-depth and together understand with learners and community members how the space can add further value to address the community's unique context and challenges.

Field work followed the principles of **participatory action research** and involved learners, community members and other key stakeholders over the course of one week in each research location. Over the next two months, analysis of raw data and field material will follow and the results of the study will be made available in mid-2024.



Annexure 1 - Sample Formats for Learner and Community Engagement

1.1 Sample Format for Recording Learners' Feedback

Recording Basic Information:

Name	Age	Gender	How long have they been coming to the Nook? (do not count long gaps)	How far they stay from Nook ?	Attending any other educational institution (school/ college/ training/ tuition)
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Indicative questions:

- **Who all come to your Nook?**
 1. **Follow-up 1** - Are there people from different ages, gender, and stay in different parts of your community?
 2. **Follow-up 2**- If there is more of one group, why do you think this group comes more to the Nook? (example - if there are more women, then why do they think this is the case?)
- **Have there been conversations on social issues in your Nook (opening and closing circle, or some other instance)?**
 1. **Follow up 1**- (if yes) what are some of the issues you all had conversations about?
- **Through your experience, can you tell us what a Nook is?**
- **If you had to change something about your Nook, what would it be?**

To be filled after conversation ends:

- Facilitator and observer comments (separately).
- Participation of learners in activity.
- Were the questions clear to them ?
- What are some suggestions for improvement ?

1.2 Sample Format for the Community Review

Overall, the objective of the community review was to drive the discussion more towards the community nature of the Nook and explore contextual features. Some areas included the relevance of the Nook in the community and a wider conversation around alternatives to mainstream models.

Recording Basic Information:

Name	Age	Gender	How far they stay from Nook	Profession
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Indicative questions:

- How can people utilise the things learned from here in their day to day life?
- What do they think is the motivation for the learners to come here?
- What do we need to change in the Nook to ensure more people access the place ?
- How can the nearby surroundings or society benefit from the Nook?



  
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