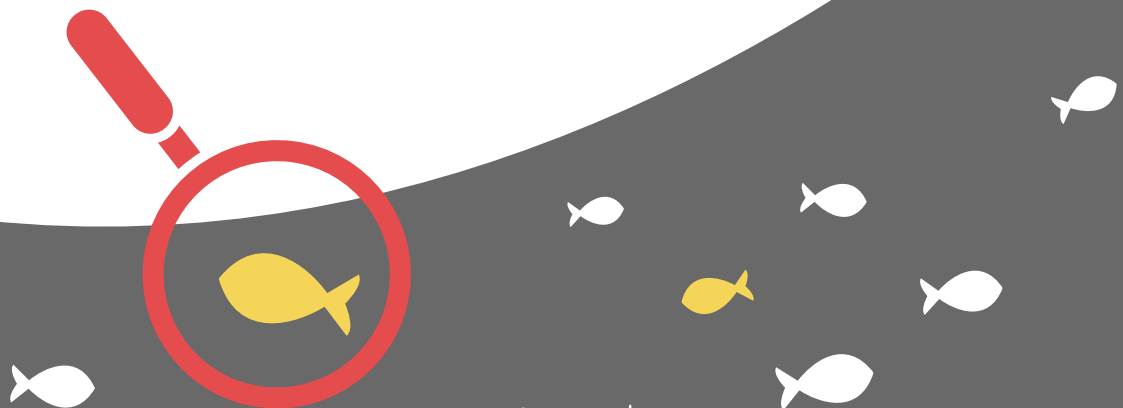


Working Paper Series

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Challenging Narrow Conceptualisations of 'Education' through the Nook Model in Uganda, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, India and Bangladesh

Anoushka Gupta, Abhijit Sinha and Manavi Das | [Project DEFY](#)



Summary

This working paper discusses the 'Nook', alternative community learning spaces introduced by India-based non-profit, Project DEFY across India, Bangladesh, Uganda, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe to illustrate experiences of implementing a model that challenges traditional notions of 'education'.

The paper begins with situating the Nook model against the backdrop of larger debates surrounding education and society located within the sociology of education, and critical educational research. The analysis and discussion focuses on three key areas of accessibility, learner motivation, and community ownership of the space.


First, location and accessibility of the Nooks are discussed in relation to age, gender, geography, socio-economic background in communities that face overlapping challenges of exclusion, restrictive gender norms, ecological crisis, and poverty. Findings show how access to learning in Nooks challenges the exclusion of certain 'categories' deemed incompatible with schooling drawing on examples of drop-outs, teenage mothers, the elderly, women with care-taking responsibilities and Dalit communities.

Second, motivation of learners to undertake different projects are analysed thematically (environmental challenges, income generation, health concerns, preserving local knowledge, tackling social stigma). The discussion here focuses on how access and exposure to learning resources, materials, the presence of a safe space, and a deep questioning of one's interests and aspirations shows potential to induce a sense of confidence to tackle various problems seen in one's surroundings.

Third, the potential of community ownership of the model is demonstrated through examples of how key decision-making central to the sustenance of the Nook are taken collectively by learners through co-creation of trust codes, trouble-shooting problems, and keyholder responsibilities. Through this, a connection is drawn between the Nook as a collaborative learning space, community building, and ultimately the power of people defining how education responds to their own needs and aspirations.

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Introducing the Working Paper Series




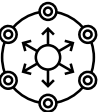

The inception of the 'Nook' began with the questioning of an often-repeated 'truth' - that educational attainment leads to happiness and prosperity and that the marker of a successful education was solely defined by the remuneration one gained through employment.

The next step was to ask, *'What would an education system look like in which people themselves decide what they want to learn, how they want to learn, and for what purposes they want to learn?'* At the same time, *'How can we create a system free of indoctrination and the dissemination of pre-defined knowledge that exclusively serves the interests of the rich and powerful?'* Searching for these answers, the Nook was envisioned as an experimental self-designed learning space seven years ago. Since then, 41 Nooks have been introduced in vastly different contexts, with 32 of these currently in operation across India, Bangladesh, Uganda, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe.

Project DEFY (Design Education For Yourself), the organisation that introduced the Nook concept, has partnered with governments, community-based organisations, donors and non-profits to bring the vision of alternative learning to communities. The Nook has been recognised as a global innovation in education five years in a row from 2018 to 2022 by Finland-based organisation, HundrED. A HundrED Academy Review noted, *"This project is completely driven by learners' curiosity and imagination. The community-focus also strengthens networks. It provides a safe space to explore new, meaningful concepts and projects to truly transform individual learning"* (HundrED, n.d.).

As the Nook continues to grow and new partnerships are forged, recognising the need for building a thorough knowledge base, and generating critically-oriented research, Project DEFY recently launched a dedicated research arm, RAGE or Research in Alternative Global Education.

The core pillars of RAGE include :

- A **community-based research outlook** with research that ultimately speaks to the needs and aspirations of communities where Nooks are located; 
- An **iterative research process** of refining research questions based on dialogue and evolving expectations of various stakeholders; 
- **Contributing to the global knowledge landscape** on alternative learning and engaging in larger dialogues around educational innovations and alternative learning; 
- **Diversifying methods** to capture a range of experiences with particular emphasis on centring learning as an experience and not simply an outcome; 
- **External engagement** with researchers, practitioners, and partners to support independent research and articles around the Nook model as well as engage in joint research endeavours. 

With these core pillars in mind, Project DEFY is extremely happy to introduce this Working Paper with the larger objective of soliciting feedback from all those interested in learning more about the Nook and engaging with us further to improve our research capabilities. Alongside the paper, we aim at publishing an 'engagement with the paper', which documents critiques, feedback, inputs from a range of stakeholders including researchers, team members, Nook Managers, and most importantly, Nook learners and community members.

Introduction

The 21st century has seen remarkable changes that hold potential to fundamentally alter unequal structures underpinning the global world order. The increasing penetration of digital technologies, rapid growth of artificial intelligence, shifts in traditional global power relations are examples of developments that are bound to define the coming century. Simultaneously, the sheer scale of ecological collapse, humanitarian crisis, displacement, and rise of fundamentalism continue to ravage societies, threatening to neutralise or reverse progress towards a more equitable world. Global inequalities in the form of wealth and gender are alarmingly high, with intra-country inequalities on a rise as illustrated in the World Inequality Report, 2022. In this contradictory phase of rapid change and yet stagnation, the role of education in responding to overlapping crises, and playing a critical role in shaping individuals and societies to contribute to socio-economic transformation for a just world cannot be understated.

The world over, enhancing access to education is touted as a vehicle for progress. Yet, for education to enable transformation instead of reproducing inequalities that sustain the status quo, its fundamental principles, assumptions, and philosophy underlying knowledge production must be subject to questioning. Specifically, is the learning within dominant models of institutionalised schooling contextually relevant and suited to the needs and aspirations of communities? Does it promote agency and self-expression among 'students' and enable them to think critically? Does the mode of assessment and reward system encourage curiosity among learners? Should educational goals be driven by the primary motivation of creating a workforce? These are some questions that necessitated a search for alternatives to mainstream education and led to the 'Nook', a concept that forms the core thesis of this paper.

The paper begins with an engagement with literature around critical assessments of mainstream education, and alternative models that have been experimented with in various contexts. It provides an overview of the data sources used to substantiate analysis, before discussing the key features of the Nook model. The analysis discusses the Nook in relation to three key areas of accessibility, learner motivation, and community ownership of the space. The paper ends with a discussion around the potential of the Nook model to challenge exclusion along various parameters and present itself as an alternative to mainstream education.

Engaging with Literature around Critiques of Mainstream Schooling, its Connection to Growth and Alternative Ideas in Education

This section situates the concept of the Nook against the backdrop of larger debates surrounding education and society located within the sociology of education, and critical educational research. The tendency to isolate education from wider social and economic forces is often seen in siloed NGO interventions. In these, the approach to solving 'education' challenges such as gendered barriers to access is undertaken without a parallel consideration of the drivers of such inequality that exist outside of immediate educational settings. This resistance to engage with the complex dynamics of inequality and concomitant de-politicisation of education, among other areas of 'development interventions,' has its roots in a larger global trend, as discussed further.

The idea that “education remains a social institution that reflects and reproduces the socio-economic and cultural disadvantages that prevail in the rest of society” (Antoninis et al., 2016, p63), a notion discussed in depth by French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, warrants that any discussion on education must begin with an understanding of its interconnectedness with other institutions. The connections between the economy and dominant models of schooling are used to illustrate and add to the argument that education, with its enduring influence on individuals, is a key institution that helps sustain the dominant growth-oriented model of economic development.

Explaining the basic premise of growth-oriented development, Daly (2005) writes, “growth is widely thought to be the panacea for all the major economic ills of the modern world. Poverty? Just grow the economy (that is, increase the production of goods and services and spur consumer spending) and watch wealth trickle down.” (Daly, 2005, p100). This logic, adopted prominently by international multilateral institutions, further emphasises market-led growth, liberalisation, open trade and investment as enablers of a competitive economy. For instance, the OECD, a powerful advocate for market-led growth, argues in successive briefs that “all countries have a coincidence of interests in pushing ahead with more open trade and investment. They also have a coincidence of interests in building strong policies and institutions for a well-functioning market economy” (OECD, 1999, p13). Despite the original and primary function of OECD as a body to promote economic cooperation, the emphasis on education as an institution that supports growth is reflected in the sheer scale of investment towards education. Backing this investment is the logic of education producing positive externalities and “theories of economic growth that emphasise human capital accumulation [with education as a critical component of human capital]” (Lange & Topel, 2006, p461). In this model, education is therefore instrumental for growth and productivity as illustrated through Ozturk (2001)’s argument that, “it is widely accepted that in order to adapt to an environment of stronger competition, and to a world emphasising the role of information, knowledge and skills, advanced economies need continuously to upgrade the overall quality of their labour force” (Ozturk, 2001, p46).

The growth-oriented development agenda manifests in education in several ways. Some parallels are drawn between the two to illustrate this interconnectedness further. Using the example of early childhood interventions by the World Bank, Penn (2012) shows how the underlying rationale is heavily rooted in ideas of cost effectiveness, and high rates of return on investment. Penn further argues, the uniform application of principles on what constitutes success within interventions, is dominated by Western rationality and principles of individuality that do not account for multiplicities of an understanding of a ‘good childhood.’ Disproportionate attention on returns on investment also signals the belief that children are seen as ‘future actors’ and the primary role of the State is to cultivate productive citizens for the future.

Parallely, hegemonic global agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals, Education for all, and 'best buys in education', serve to further reinforce the application of a uniform set of principles driven by economic rationality. This monopoly over knowledge sidelines alternative ideas under the garb of being 'unscientific', lacking evidence, or simply not being cost-effective. As Sachs (2009) argues, "spreading monoculture has eroded viable alternatives to the industrial, growth-oriented society and dangerously crippled humankind's capacity to meet an increasingly different future with creative responses" (Sachs, 2009, p18).

The insidious use of this singular set of principles is further seen through a near-universal application of standardised testing, international comparisons and definitions of 'quality' in education. In a compelling account of the rise of global testing culture, Ydesen and Andreasen (2020) show how the increasing use of tests and resultant comparative ranking measures are intricately tied to ideas of accountability and taken as the measure of a well-performing education system. Based on such results, this benchmarking is a critical determinant of funding and legitimacy. They further reveal how under this logic, "efficiency and quality in pedagogy were thus identified by different performance measures and economic factors and best practices became what appeared to be economically the most affordable and rational practices in light of such performance measures" (Ydesen & Andreasen, 2020, p157). The synonymity of test results as quality and effectiveness, and as measures of accountability is fundamentally rooted in neoliberal education policies and thus forms a critical lens to understand the value-systems dominating schooling.

Owing to the massification of schooling, the search for alternatives becomes daunting in an institution so deeply convinced of its robustness. As Escobar (2007) famously argued in context of the prevailing development discourse, education similarly saw a "creation of a vast institutional apparatus through which the discourse was deployed, that is, through which it became a real and effective social force, transforming the economic, social, cultural and political reality of the societies in question" (Escobar, 2007, p19). Yet, the un-sustainability of this set of principles and the ecological devastation that has occurred as a result of it, has been subject to widespread discussion notably in relation to the environment among degrowth, postgrowth, post-development, and other similar circles.

A common thread is the idea of moving away from growth as a marker of progress and embracing “a different set of principles and values than the ones on which the currently dominant economic and political structures are based” (Kothari, 2023, p57).

The search for alternatives is a re-assertion of the plurality of pathways that long existed before the institutionalisation and hegemonisation of education and knowledge. It is a pushback to the way in which “contemporary schooling renders certain types of knowledge invisible, unlearned, silenced, ignored, or made irrelevant” (Abebe & Biswas, 2021, p3). This endeavour entails “valuing the diversity of knowledges, so the intentionality and intelligibility of social practices are as broad and democratic as possible” (Santos & Meneses (2014), quoted in Sepúlveda et al., 2022, p277).

Alternative education is a response to this very need. Yet, it often conjures images of the elite escaping the shackles of a broken educational system, and seeking well-rounded development through alternative avenues. Indeed, “the dominance of Montessoris, Sudburys, and Summerhills within alternative education has created a perception that seeking these pathways is accessible to a privileged few, predominantly located in affluent nations” (Gupta, 2023). The paucity of examples away from Western economies serves to reinforce this perspective. Yet, Kothari (2023)’s account of alternatives to development, shows there are certainly frameworks that challenge this, including examples of Land University in Oaxaca, Mexico, Vikalp Sangam in India, the Ecoversities and Multiversities Alliance, and the Rojava community’s (Kurdistan) use of education to value local knowledge as a means to engage with questions of power (see Dirik, 2018). These examples speak to the growing community of people looking for avenues to reclaim education, an institution that has excluded, disempowered, and individualised struggles away from those of the wider community. Against this backdrop, the following sections introduce the Nook model and discuss its contribution to forging new collectives and ways of understanding education.

A Note on Methods and Data Sources

The analysis makes use of qualitative and quantitative data sources collected through tools such as a baseline survey, documentation of learner goals through 'learner goal sheets', Nook set-up reports, learner profiles and storytelling sheets, and in-depth interviews with learners who have spent more than one year at the Nook. It is important to note that several of these tools are part of routine monitoring and evaluation processes that have been analysed further for this paper. Moreover, a combination of sources have been used to triangulate information and substantiate analysis.

A description of data sources is as follows:

- **Learner Goal Sheets** - Learners document their motivations for projects undertaken in each cycle. 354 such goal sheets completed during the period 2020-23 were analysed in this paper.
- **Nook Set-up Reports** - The set-up of the Nook is preceded by an understanding of the needs, aspirations, and value-addition of a Nook through community outreach exercises (including surveys, interviews, informal discussions). The report documents geographic location, population, socio-economic composition, gender norms and expectations, community challenges and aspirations, available resources, community knowledge, and expectations from the Nook. 8 set-up reports were analysed for this paper from the following nooks - Barishal (Bangladesh), Bulawayo (Zimbabwe), Gahanga (Rwanda), Mt. Elgon (Uganda), Dhun (India), Katchipedu (India), Sohrarim (India), JP Nagar (India). The 8 Nooks were selected based on differences in geography and context so as to represent a diverse mix of experiences.

- **Baseline survey** of 123 learners completed in September 2023. The objective was to understand demographic details, motivations behind learning goals, relationship with the Nook, goals, and future expectations from the space.
- **Learner Profiles and Storytelling Sheets** - 30 sheets were further analysed. In these, learners describe their experiences at the Nook focusing on their motivations, dreams, personal highlights, learnings, and what they look forward to at the Nook.
- **In-depth interviews** of 15 learners who have spent more than 1 year at the Nook to specifically ask about their pedagogical experiences, changes in behaviour, aspirations and expectations from the Nook. These learners were drawn from different Nooks - Bulawayo, Zimbabwe (3), Whitefield, India (1), Barishal, Bangladesh (2), JP Nagar, India (2), Katchipedu, India (1), Gahanga, Rwanda (4), Nongwah, India (1), and Sohrarim, India (1). The selection of learners also reflects geographical spread and the maturity of the Nook as is illustrated through the case of Gahanga, a four year old Nook.

Whose Education is it Anyway? - Introducing the 'Nook' Model of Learning

Nooks are physical community learning spaces with principles of self-designed learning (SDL) as the overarching pedagogical inclination that enables people to explore their interests. SDL can be described as a set of principles in learning where “learners— from a young age on—decide what to learn based on their own interests and passions, how they want to learn it, how long they want to learn about it, and how and in which ways they are using and applying their learning” (Neusiedl, 2021, p50). Nooks are set up in under-resourced areas where communities feel that this space potentially adds value. This is gauged through conversations and community mapping before a Nook is introduced. Each Nook is equipped with basic tools and resources such as technology, laptops with an internet connection, and locally sourced raw materials.

Learners of different age groups, genders, and socio-economic backgrounds are invited to join the Nook. Given that SDL is a new concept in most communities, learning is broken down into cycles where learners immerse themselves in a pathway designed to ignite curiosity, discover interests and develop a sense of community. Each cycle comprises various stages described below.

Early Projects: When a Nook is set up for the first time, the local community is approached for them to get involved in various projects and is used as a method of outreach to spark interest in the space.

Exploration: The learners embark on a learning journey lasting roughly two weeks where various activities across disciplines like programming, welding, art, storytelling are briefly touched upon to introduce a sense of the expanse of knowledge and sheer variety of options available for them to explore further. The set of topics is put to vote and learner interests eventually drives the final selection of areas to be explored.

Goal Setting: This is the phase where learners articulate the goals they specifically want to pursue. They often form teams with others for similar goals.

(The first three phases together are also referred to as 'Induction Phase')

Design Week/Phase: This is the phase to execute the project. Learners use the tools, information and knowledge sources at the Nook to identify how to create the project.

External Review/Exhibition: Learners present their projects (both finished and unfinished) to the community to showcase, get feedback as well as market products in some cases. In this phase, community members are once again encouraged to get involved in the Nook.

These cycles repeat, often attracting new learners as well as existing ones that wish to either discover new areas or build on a previous project in greater depth. The cycle is designed to break many preconceived notions around what is learning? who can learn? how should they learn?, what should they aspire for?, or 'pre-defined' trajectories and ways of knowing passed on through institutions, notably the schooling system. This process of 'learning how to learn' is strengthened by daily discussion circles where learners engage in conversations on a range of topics from project-based troubleshooting to discussions of problems plaguing their community. As seen through the description of the cycle, there are no assessments or teachers in a Nook. While a Nook Fellow is always present to support learners, facilitate activities and discussions and carry out administrative tasks, their role is distinctly different from that of a teacher in a typical classroom setting.

The partnership and funding model of the Nook is key to understanding the sustainability of the concept. The first and foremost 'partner' is the community where their needs and aspirations are considered in the design of the Nook itself. From the beginning, the focus is on building a community identity around the Nook, with the eventual goal of passing on ownership of the space to learners dedicated to taking the idea forward further. At the same time, Nooks are implemented with local organisations who have additional insight and experience of engaging with the context.

Partner strengths often lead to variations in the design of the Nook with examples of those with previous focus on mental health or sexual and reproductive health and rights introducing additional avenues for engagement with these areas. Partnerships enable the Nook to respond to local needs and adapt to each unique context. For instance, Friends for Matibi, the organisation co-implementing the Matibi Nook in Zimbabwe follows a multi-pillar approach focusing on education (through scholarships and resources), health (through medical camps and health awareness campaigns), food (through community gardens and nutrition programmes) and income (by supporting income-generating activities and entrepreneurship). Indo-German Centre for Sustainability at IIT Madras and Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth Development, the partners in Katchipedu, have a long history of working with the community as well as specific expertise in the area of peri-urban growth and sustainability, a key challenge in the area. Mt. Elgon Self Help Community Program, the partner in Mt. Elgon, Uganda, brings experience facilitating 'narrative therapy' to foster community resilience around experiences of trauma, erasure of local histories, and generate pride and a sense of belonging. These examples illustrate how partnerships, built on combining strengths and experiences of local organisations when woven into the Nook model, enables a strong element of localisation and contextually-relevant learning.

Similarly, donors wishing to invest foremost in community knowledge and development are approached for further partnership. In Meghalaya state of North-East India, the state government has come onboard to scale the idea of Nooks across the state.

With 22 Nooks in Meghalaya, government partnership is a major avenue to spread the idea of a Nook further and embed it in the institutional apparatus of the State.

Importantly, given the variation in contexts where Nooks are located, each space tends to differ in certain aspects depending on local needs and partner strengths, leading to an ingrained flexibility of the concept.

The following analytical section draws on various aspects of the Nook to shed light on the central questions in this paper.

Analysis

This section focuses on three key areas of location and accessibility of Nooks, a thematic analysis of motivation of learners to undertake different projects and uncover elements of community ownership of the model. In doing so, it sets the basis for the discussion around the potential of the Nook to challenge exclusion, enable contextually relevant learning and instil community ethos around the space.

Location and Accessibility

As seen in Figures 1 (a) and (b), existing Nooks are located across Asia (India and Bangladesh) and Africa (Rwanda, Zimbabwe, and Uganda) and represent extremely diverse communities even within countries. For example, in India, Nooks are located in urban villages (the case of J P Nagar), peri-urban areas (Katchipedu in Tamil Nadu) to remote rural parts of Meghalaya in the North-East.



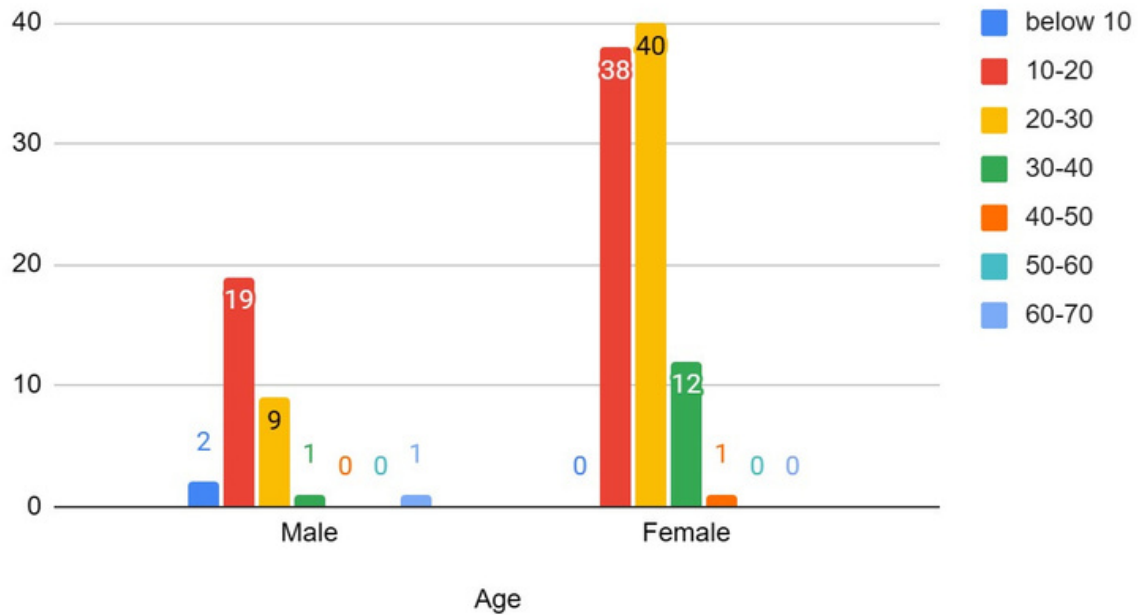
Figure 1(b) Nooks across Bangladesh, Uganda, Rwanda and Zimbabwe



In areas where Nooks are located, communities face overlapping challenges of poverty and social exclusion, making them vulnerable to exploitative practices and a dearth of opportunities. Several learners have been excluded from education systems, pushing them to take on precarious forms of labour. Against this backdrop, the particular form of inclusion envisioned in the Nooks is a critical component, differentiating it from traditional models of education. This section explores the various 'categories of exclusion' experienced by communities while parallelly discussing how the Nook challenges these ideas.

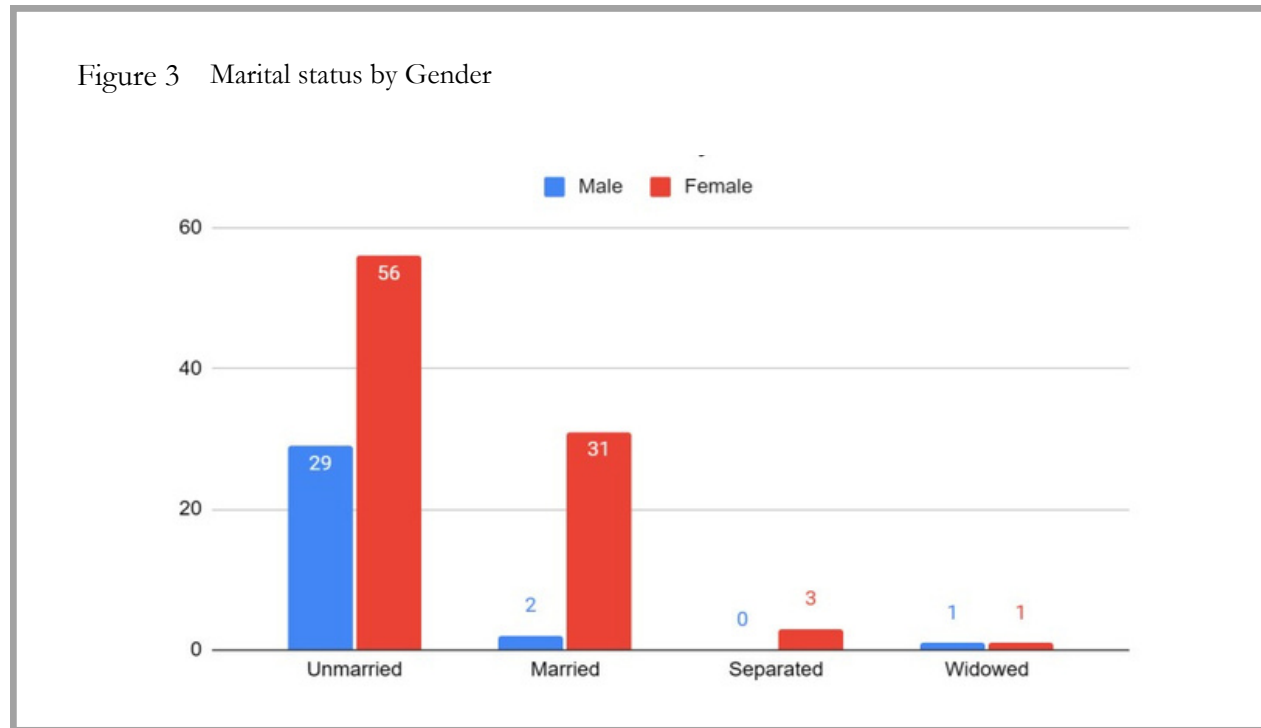
In mainstream models of schooling, chronological age is used to determine when children enter school. Age is further used as a cut-off criteria for learning, imposing restrictions on what to learn, how much to learn, and for how long to learn, citing evidence of 'developmentally appropriate' educational milestones. At the Nook, the age of learners currently ranges from 8 to 65, and learners of all age groups are actively encouraged to take part in the Nook activities. Baseline survey data reveals this variation (see Figure 2). Among females for instance, it shows a near-equal participation of learners in ages 10-20 (38 learners) and 20-30 (40 learners).

Figure 2 Gender distribution by age



In many communities, restrictive gender norms impede access to equitable learning opportunities. In Dhun (in Rajasthan, India) restrictions on movement translate to women not getting the chance to travel more than 10 kilometres away from the village their whole life. The men, however, have the freedom to leave their village and earn a living. In JP Nagar (in Karnataka, India), a female learner aged 28, remarked that she had never stepped out of the vicinity of her village. Opportunities through the Nook were her first experiences of exploring the city she had lived in her entire life. In Barishal (Bangladesh) as well, women largely stayed at home, confined to the roles of taking care of the household. Of 87 females surveyed in the baseline, 31 were married, 3 were separated and 1 was widowed, showing how married women for instance, many of whom were inundated with domestic chores and household responsibilities, were able to find a space for learning and recreation at the Nook.

Figure 3 Marital status by Gender



In Rwanda and Zimbabwe, gendered exclusion in communities is compounded through the high rate of teenage pregnancies owing to a lack of comprehensive sex education among young people. These realities lead to social stigma with a large number of teenage mothers shunned from the fold of education. In Zimbabwe, a recent 'Psycho-Social Support Camp' organised for learners in the two Nooks in Matibi and Bulawayo saw a subset of learners who were trained to provide counselling and guidance and share their understanding further with all participants. Topics related to gendered exclusion, safe-space building and allyship were covered during the camp. Unlike targeted interventions aimed specifically at girls and women, the Nooks address gendered exclusion through advocating for gender mixing. With the presence of males and females across ages, the idea is to engage men and boys in conversations about gender, sexual and reproductive health and rights and break stigmas around gendered notions of learning and work.

Other forms of vulnerability stem from socio-economic status, poverty, and the impacts of climate change, and are illustrated further to situate the form of marginalisation that exists in areas where Nooks are located. In terms of social status, caste and tribal conflict exclude communities from shared resources. In Katchipedu and Dhun, caste hierarchies prevent learners from seeking learning opportunities and specific types of work. In Dhun, the village comprises individuals with a surname that has come to be associated with a 'village of thieves.' Members of adjacent villages remarked that these individuals are coarse in their behaviour and their presence was deemed unpleasant. In the community outreach in Dhun, it was found that even scarcity of water in adjacent villages was attributed to their presence. In Mt. Elgon in Uganda, the Nborobos tribe were similarly excluded from shared resources, several of them previously confined to forest areas.

This context of social exclusion, poverty and climate crisis often compounds an already difficult position. Spiralling prices of basic commodities in Zimbabwe, the presence of a large informal economy with non-existent labour protection in Barishal, JP Nagar, and Gahanga, drives individuals to take on precarious jobs. In the area where the Gahanga Nook is located, community members pointed out that poverty drives children and youth to drop out of school because they cannot afford school fees and need to pursue different jobs to support their families. Similarly, in Barishal, most of the community members think of learning new things as a luxury and instead opt for daily labour. In recent decades, climate crisis has manifested in rapid weather change, frequent flooding, and industrial pollution (Barishal), water scarcity (Bulawayo, Gahanga, Katchipedu, Dhun), heavy rains and landslides (Nooks across Meghalaya). For communities reliant on agriculture, the unpredictability of weather patterns has negatively affected crop yields, leading to income loss. These forms of vulnerability and marginalisation are essential to understand since they play a key role in the formulation of needs and aspirations among community members. Collaborative learning and community-building in the Nook model are envisioned as key tools to tackle exclusionary dynamics, as discussed in subsequent sections.

Motivation of projects and learning goals

As illustrated in the previous section, the dynamics of exclusion contribute to precarity of communities where Nooks are located. Poverty and stigma play a key role in excluding communities from the fold of education, and dictating their choices of learning and employment. Providing a platform for those deemed incompatible with formal schooling is a key element of the inclusion envisioned through Nooks. In introducing SDL and alternative forms of education, the emphasis on safe-space building running alongside the pedagogical input is key in situating learners' motivation for projects.

Of the 354 goal sheets that were analysed, learners in 313 projects (88.4%) stated that they were exploring an area for the first time. Goals were categorised in terms of

- (i) interest and curiosity;
- (ii) income prospects;
- (iii) community problem-solving.

In terms of interest and curiosity, the following sub-themes emerged - learning something new and getting a platform to showcase talent. New areas of learning included those that were earlier inaccessible to the community, with majority of these goals articulated through the medium of technology. Similarly, getting a platform to express one's talents through the exhibition where learners showcase their project in front of an audience of community members and other visitors stemmed from the lack of exposure to expressing oneself publicly. For instance, in Whitefield in Karnataka, a motivation statement behind a project on choreographing a dance performance fusing 'Kathak' and hip-hop read, *"We are interested in the art form, so we want to explore different dance forms, and choreograph our own performances. We have also not performed on stage till now in front of an audience which we aim to do at the end of the cycle. Dancing makes us happy and we want to share that with our audiences."*

Within projects with the primary motivation of supplementing income, a recurring element of using local materials emerged. These include beading techniques such as tambour, and using bamboo and resin to make jewellery in Nongwah (Meghalaya, India) and waste materials to make clothes, backpacks and other products. In Umling (Meghalaya), a goal statement read, *“We will learn to make soap for washing utensils and clothes by replacing palm oil and caustic soda with organic fruits like papaya, lemons. There is no soap making yet in the community. It will be affordable and a way for us to earn.”* It is relevant to note that a large number of projects in Meghalaya were related to income prospects owing to an entrepreneurship programme (Prime Sauramandala Rural Entrepreneurship Fellowships) run by Sauramandala Foundation, the on- ground partner. Many learners participated in this as a means to improve their abilities in marketing, packaging, and sales.

In projects aimed at community problem-solving, goals were further sub-categorised based on

- (i) Tackling environmental concerns such as waste management, plastic pollution, energy consumption;
- (ii) Health and wellness-related projects;
- (iii) Supporting the Nook through beautification, addressing space constraints, and enhancing mobility for learners;
- (iv) Promoting local knowledge and solving local challenges; and
- (v) Addressing social norms and stigma.

While this categorisation was done for purposes of analysis, it is important to note that there were strong overlaps between the motivations and interdisciplinarity of areas, as will be illustrated in the goal statements below.

In projects related to tackling environmental degradation and climate change, majority of the goals were articulated in context of specific challenges faced in the community and problems that they saw around them. For instance, recognising the need for clean energy, a goal statement in Dhun (Rajasthan, India) read, *“We want to make a biogas container in the next 3 months. We will be performing three trials, which will all be done in a 400 litre can. We will use the energy generated in our gas stove and light in the Nook.”* The motivation behind this project was, *“in the context of the growing price of fuel that is required to sustain our everyday lives, the effective utility of biogas as a source of energy is of great importance. It is a sustainable and attainable/ readily available alternative that makes me believe in the future of the world running on energy obtained from biogas.”* Similarly, to tackle the growing pollution from vehicles in Barishal, learners decided to make a smoke absorber for motor vehicles. In communities such as Sohrarim in Meghalaya where agriculture is the primary occupation, learners stated, *“we can see people watering the crops two/ three times a day while on a day to day basis, people face scarcity of water. We want to grow 5 varieties of vegetables by using an aquaponic system to help people reduce their use of water.”* In Gahanga, learners sought to address the twin problem of charcoal consumption and excessive time spent on cooking by working on an electric stove.

Projects related to health and wellness include creating products to address skin and hair-care, as well as addressing high costs associated with such products in the market. For instance, in Langsymphut, Meghalaya, a goal statement read, *“We as a group wanted to do skin care in our project, but we wanted to focus on Melasma. We chose this because in our village, many people suffer from Melasma. Our project can help the group and also the community people.”* Similar concerns of the inaccessibility of artificial limbs in Bulawayo drove a learner to *“make an artificial limb that fits both legs, designed for disabled people using flat bars and round steel tubes”* explaining the motivation as, *“Personally, I need it. I would also want to help other people in my community who are disabled once I achieve this goal. The cost of artificial legs is very expensive in the country so that is why I decided to make a cheaper and innovative one.”*

The third set of projects relate to improvement of the Nook itself and intend on solving constraints related to inadequate space by creating foldable furniture, addressing water scarcity through rain water harvesting, among other examples. In Gahanga, learners chose to create an irrigation system for the garden inside the Nook. The motivation statement read, *“Even though there is a high density of rainfall in the region, we face a lot of water shortages in the community and it affects the farming practices. I want to harvest rainwater and with the technology, I hope that it will help the people/farmers to save time and reduce their labour.”*

In projects related to local knowledge, representation and solving local problems, several learners articulated their desire to preserve cultural heritage using various mediums of storytelling, music, hairstyling, cinematography, graphic design among others. Using the medium of documentaries, learners in Jakrem, Meghalaya wanted to show how the local language (Maram) is different from other languages in the state. Learners stated, *“right from our childhood days, we have been watching local films but no one has ever made a documentary on our village so this triggers us to make the people know about our language, culture and history of our village.”* Learners in Pasyih, Meghalaya similarly created a documentary to showcase the story and uses of a *“fermented bean called Tungtoh (local chutney) as it is very famous in the whole of Jaintia hills.”*

Some learners used animation and graphic design to showcase traditional folklore. In Sohrarim, Meghalaya, learners created a *“10 Minute animation video of the story of Mawnguidbriew Folktale using Plastic Animation Paper software.”* The issue of language barriers facing communities was also addressed in some projects. While learners in Barishal expressed that they wanted to use ‘Bangla’ commands to create a voice control car, in Gahanga, learners worked on a Kinyarwanda to English language learning Mobile App. They stated, *“There are few Kinyarwanda to English Learning apps and they are not interactive. We wanted to create a fun and interactive language learning app. Even in the Nook many of our co-learners are facing language barriers and challenges to access content from the Internet.”*

Finally, projects addressing social norms and stigma dealt with issues ranging from victim blaming to early marriages, drug abuse, gender-based-violence, teenage pregnancies and challenges faced by youth in the community. Like projects around local knowledge, a wide range of mediums such as poetry, comedy, documentaries, stage dramas, and music were used to discuss these issues. Many drew on their personal lives and of people in their community for inspiration and sought to enhance awareness to support others. In Matibi for example, learners made a documentary in Shona with English subtitles on the impact of early child marriages focusing on stories of 5 mothers. They stated, *“our families have gone through early child marriages and have gone through a lot. We could see how they are affected and how life has been affected. So we want to advocate for young people to make choices that help build their lives.”*

In Gahanga, learners used the medium of comedy to talk about sexual violence and respecting others. The learners wrote, performed, recorded and published 3 of these stand-up comedies on Youtube. Explaining the use of comedy, learners stated, *“comedy brings happiness and I want to perform on the stage. Also, I want to create awareness on these topics through my comedies. My society in Rwanda is facing a lot of these problems and the awareness level is very low.”* Learners in Bulawayo similarly created a research-based documentary on teenage pregnancies. Explaining the motivations and process for the project, one of the team members mentioned, *“During Covid-19 lockdowns, many teenagers were sitting idle and there were a large number of teenage pregnancies. My teammate and I thought we should create a documentary to raise awareness and consulted the community members first, who thought this was a great idea. We interviewed several people including mothers who had become pregnant. They shared the challenges they faced at home and in the community. They told me that the negative perception really affected their mental health, some fell into depression, and no one was there for them. We found that some parents did not want to support their children because they felt humiliated. Our documentary wanted to show these challenges and was meant for teenagers, but also parents so that they can understand how to support their children in such situations.”*

As seen through the articulation of goals, a strong element of localisation and problem-solving emerge. Moreover, the usage of creative methods such as documentary films, poetry, comedy, storytelling, as well as hands-on technical projects showcase the diversity of both areas of interest as well as the various channels through which learners chose to communicate. As opposed to high-stakes testing seen in education systems in many of these regions, the learning envisioned in the Nook emphasises interest and motivation, as well as an engagement with wider problems to define how learning is approached. By doing so, it tackles the lack of relevance of formal curriculum as explained by several learners which push them to drop-out of schools and pursue employment. Projects around income-generating activities show that the pursuit of employment does not have to be divorced from learning as a joyful process.

Community Ownership and Decision-making at the Nook

Motivations of projects showed how several learners pick up problems they see in their immediate vicinities and try to tackle them creatively. Given that the idea of a Nook is to eventually pass on ownership to communities themselves, this aspect becomes important for the sustainability of the concept. Community ownership of the Nook is discussed in relation to decision-making responsibilities and various components of Nooks that help create a shared identity around the space.

Decision-making is approached through a decentralised structure where Nook Managers act as a mentor and facilitator. While they play a greater role in the induction process and introducing principles of SDL, day-to-day responsibilities are encouraged to be taken on by learners. For instance, the identification of 'key-holders' or individuals tasked with opening and closing the Nook encourages learners to develop a sense of responsibility for the space. Key-holders have previously gone on to become Nook Managers themselves and often take on additional roles such as acting as facilitators during the 'Psycho-Social Support' camps in Zimbabwe.

The co-creation of trust codes is a set of guidelines that learners ideate and implement at the Nook. The Matibi Nook Hub Trust Code, a set of 29 guidelines, for example, comprises various rules related to safety, communication, how to arrange learning materials and ensure they are not damaged, among other areas. These trust codes naturally differ in each Nook and yet, reflect a shared understanding of learner driven guidelines.

A few examples from the Matibi Trust Code are:

- *Abuse of any form is not tolerated. We should not hurt anyone physically or emotionally. Any physical fighting in space endangers others and therefore can lead to expulsion. Gentle arguments and disagreements are however encouraged without resorting to violence.*
- *We should encourage everyone to participate in the discussion session and give space and time for everyone to participate in it.*
- *When working in groups, everyone needs to have equal possibility and time to use resources such as laptops, tools, materials etc.*
- *We should always wear protective gear and appropriate clothes while operating the power tools and machines.*
- *We should return our laptops, tools, and materials to their respective places after using them.*
- *Every Wednesday, we should dedicate our time (2 hrs) to cleaning outside and watering.*

While decentralising responsibilities through key-holders and co-creation of trust codes forms key elements of community decision-making at the Nook, community ownership necessitates seeking wider community feedback as well as adapting the space to make activities more locally relevant.

In the initial stages of the set-up of the Nook, communities are approached for their feedback and suggestions on how the space could potentially add value. In these sets of questions, community aspirations are gauged. In the Barishal community household survey (with 105 respondents), for example:

- 25 % of the survey participants, mostly females, said they were interested in learning sewing and tailoring;
- 10 % responded that they were interested in acquiring computer skills;
- Others mentioned arts and handicrafts, cooking, English language proficiency, gardening, graphic design, painting, dancing, coding, robotics, among other areas.

While community members are assured a safe space to take forward their interests, the induction phase as described previously is designed to introduce learners to the expanse of knowledge. Many learners in several Nooks have reported that they came with a certain expectation of pursuing one area, but with time, they experimented with different projects. Community perceptions, therefore, are sought to build a sense of trust from the inception of the Nook. Regular community interactions during the exhibition and through outreach activities form additional avenues to ensure that the Nook is seen as an accessible learning space. In a recent study evaluating the impact of Nooks in Meghalaya (Bradbury et al., 2023), a community satisfaction survey among households in Sohrarim and Nongwah, found that among 171 participants who were aware of the Nook, 80% favoured its operations. Respondents were also asked to describe their first impressions of the Nook and the most commonly associated words were “different” and “educational.” The study, however, suggests that there is scope to enhance community’s awareness of the two Nooks and that factors such as proximity to the space mediate levels of awareness.

Another aspect central to building a shared community ethos is how the Nook adapts to the needs of learners and the larger community. In this regard, certain contextual features are discernible in several Nooks. In Barishal and Bulawayo, it was observed that the Nook serves as the only community space where youth can come together for learning and recreational activities. As described in a previous section, the relevance of a space where one can explore their interests without set regulations or expectations must be seen against the backdrop of precarity and inadequate opportunities. Moreover, learner initiative has led to features that help fellow learners tackle barriers of access. To address precarity in the form of food insecurity, all the four Nooks in Africa set up a kitchen where learners use local produce and cook meals on a daily basis for learners. The idea of a 'roof garden' within the Nook was also implemented in Katchipedu with learners cultivating vegetables and herbs such as ridge gourd, bottle gourd, cucumber, watermelon, mint, and aloe vera. In another instance of child rearing responsibilities becoming a barrier to access the Nook, fellow learners turned an 'individual' problem as a shared responsibility of tackling the root cause, pointing to the potential of community-building in navigating barriers. This was seen in the Mt. Elgon Nook when a dedicated space for childcare was created as a permanent fixture. Similarly, in Gahanga, learners built a ramp to facilitate access to the Nook for a differently-abled co-learner. These examples demonstrate that shared values enable a sense of community cohesion, solidarity and are critical to building community ownership around the Nook.

Discussion

Drawing on the description of the Nook model and analysis of data around accessibility, learning goals and community ownership, this section aims to connect dots between various elements uncovered and larger debates around society, education, and growth.

As opposed to education interventions that take a targeted approach, often isolating the diagnosis and solution of the 'problem' from wider processes of exclusion, Nooks do not impose restrictions on 'eligibility.' The powerful influence of chronological age, for example, is seen in regulating curriculum and determining 'age-appropriate' learning outcomes. As Laz (1998) shows, its application is extended to "linguistically mark the discrepancy (teenage mothers, nontraditional students), and we want an explanation, an account, for being "off time" (Laz, 1998, p86). Nooks challenge this imposition through the variation of age groups of learners at the Nook, including those considered being 'off time.' Findings show how access to learning in Nooks challenges the exclusion of certain 'categories' deemed incompatible with schooling, drawing on examples of drop-outs, married women, teenage mothers, the elderly, women with care-taking responsibilities and Dalit communities.

While Nooks enhance accessibility of learning in communities, there is a parallel expansion in the understanding of learning itself. A discussion on the philosophies of growth-led models of education showed how education is primarily used as a tool to cultivate productivity and enhance human capital, seen through the narrow curriculum-driven nature of schooling. With the primary view of 'children as future workers', high-stakes testing and assessments are in turn used as methods to assess their value. The results of such tests are then converted into comparative metrics, used for ranking, measuring accountability and channelling funds to better performing' institutions.

The overall vision of education is therefore individualised, and fails to cultivate a sense of community among learners. Nooks challenge this conceptualisation of education by re-centring the value of interest and choice-based learning, as embodied through principles of SDL. Within this, contextual relevance, interdisciplinarity of learning areas, and education as part of wider socio-economic dynamics is further emphasised. Discussions around motivations of projects showed how context-based learning was used to identify and ideate around challenges such as the high cost of medical equipment, problems of mobility, water scarcity, and platform local folklore. As opposed to standardisation of experiences and learning areas, the diversity of projects reflects the fundamental belief that removing restrictions and rules around what constitutes learning allows learners to explore and build on their interests. Examples of community-solving in projects showed how the learning envisioned in the Nook transcends boundaries of 'education' to integrate a wider humanistic understanding of the world and the role of individuals in shaping it.

Discussions around elements of community ownership of the Nook model showed how rule-making through trust codes, keyholder responsibilities and discussions involving wider community stakeholders, challenges the dominant top-down inclination of education interventions where goals, objectives and activities are pre-determined. Additionally, a large majority of interventions “take on a deficit view of communities and assume the role of saviours” (Gupta, 2023) thereby ingraining a degree of 'dependency' on beneficiaries. In stark contrast, the learner-led philosophy and decentralisation of responsibilities is envisioned as a key element of eventually passing on ownership of the Nook to the community itself. Addressing barriers to learning, turning 'individualised' challenges such as care-taking responsibilities among women to co-created solutions, further demonstrates connections between learning, solidarity, and the value of community-led problem-solving. This further implies a shift from dependency within programmes to transformation of communities as agents of change.

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