IMPACT EVALUATION OF PROJECT NANHI KALI

2020-2021

A report by DevInsights

Executive Summary

Project Nanhi Kali was started in 1996 with the objective of providing quality education to underprivileged girls in India. Jointly managed by K.C. Mahindra Education Trust and Naandi Foundation, the project has transformed the lives of over 500,000 girls across 14 states. With the aim of helping girls enrolled in government schools complete schooling (Grade 1-10), the project provides girls with comprehensive support including afterschool academic support at Nanhi Kali Academic Support Centres (ASC). An annual school supplies kit comprising of a school bag, stationery, pullover, raincoat, and feminine hygiene material is given to every girl, helping her attend school with dignity. In partnership with an EdTech organization, Educational Initiatives, the project provides every girl with access to a personalized, adaptive learning software called Mindspark, which is pre-loaded on digital tablets. The AI-powered software matches instructions to the learning level of each girl, enabling her to learn with understanding and thereby, improve her learning outcomes.

The project's on-ground operations are managed by an all-woman team of over 6,000 'Community Associates' (CA) who are recruited from local communities and trained to become learning facilitators and mentors to the girls. The Project also strives to create a conducive, girl-friendly eco-system through regular engagement with the girls' families and sensitization of community stakeholders.

With daily support and care, Project Nanhi Kali affirms that every girl is given the opportunity to learn and achieve her full potential.

Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Numerous studies have documented how COVID-19 has adversely impacted the learning level of school-going children, especially underprivileged girls during the period when schools were shutdown. The negative consequences of this gender divide are aggravated by the digital divide in India. Poor families have limited resources to connect digitally; even if a family does possess a smartphone or a similar device, access to it is typically monopolized by the male members of the family. This discrimination accentuates the disadvantage that underprivileged girls face, with their education coming to a standstill. Limited social protection measures and economic hardships caused by the crisis created their own share of problems which impacted the girl child too. Due to some of the prevailing beliefs and practices in society that discriminate against girls, their education did not receive priority during the pandemic. Instead, the girls had to take on the burden of a large chunk of the housework.

Project Nanhi Kali ensured continuity in the education of girls during the lockdown and prolonged school closures. A combination of approaches which included home visits by the CAs, holding classes at community based Academic Support Centres in physical form or through digital mediums, ensured that the girls enrolled in the project continued their learning even during an unprecedented lockdown.

Impact Assessment Scope and Methodology

The objective of this study was to measure the impact of the Nanhi Kali project on various stakeholders, including both girls and their parents, in the financial year 2020–2021. The impact assessment was conducted for the girls supported by the following Mahindra Group companies 1) Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd 2) Mahindra & Mahindra Financial Services Ltd and 3) Mahindra Vehicle Manufacturers Ltd. A cross-sectional study using a mixed-method approach was conducted by DevInsights[1] in the month of March 2022. A total of 861 girls enrolled in Grades VI-X were selected from three intervention districts to capture the quantitative aspects related to the project. This included 346 girls from Shravasti, Uttar Pradesh, 454 girls from Vizag, Andhra Pradesh, and 61 girls from Nashik, Maharashtra. These girls were selected using a random sampling methodology.

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[1] https://devinsights.co.in/

Using qualitative interviews with select stakeholders, a concerted attempt was made to understand the key drivers, challenges, and motivations that determined the pattern, trend, and decisions around girl child education during the pandemic. Interviews were conducted with parents (fathers & mothers), CAs, adolescent girls who were part of the project, Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) members, District Education Officers, and Project Nanhi Kali's team members.

A descriptive analysis was completed with frequency distribution and summary statistics with a view to understanding the distribution of key indicators across the three study sites.

Key Findings

Socio-Economic Profile of Respondents

Ninety percent girls from Shravasti were from Grade VI, VII, and VIII; 84% in Vizag were from Grade VIII, IX and X; and 68% in Nashik were from Grade VII, VIII, and IX.

In terms of the socio-economic background, 48% respondents in Shravasti and 62% in Vizag were from Other Backward Caste (OBC) category. However, in Nashik, majority of the respondents were from Scheduled Caste (36%) and Scheduled Tribe (30%). In Vizag and Nashik sizeable proportion of girls reported to be first generation learners which meant no one in their family had attended school. Proportion of girls whose fathers had never been to school stood at 45% in Shravasti, at 33% in Vizag, and 21% in Nashik. Similarly, percentage of girls whose mothers had never attended school was also noted. In Shravasti this stood at 69%, in Vizag 29% and in Nashik 23%.

The primary source of income for the families of these girls was agriculture followed by labour activities (agricultural / non-agricultural) and private sector jobs.

Quality and Perception of Project Nanhi Kali

o **Motivation and key drivers to be part of the project:** Across all the three study sites, the key drivers for the girls to join the project was their *"desire to study well"* followed by their *"keenness to improve knowledge".* Also, given the high incidence of child marriage in these districts, girls reported how enrolling in Nanhi Kali ensured they not only complete their schooling but also be in a position to say no to child marriage.

o **Quality of teaching and focus on extra-curricular activities:** The quality of teaching played a crucial role in determining learning outcomes. Across all three sites, CAs reported using a two-way approach wherein they allowed the girls to clarify their doubts during the classes and participate in classroom discussions. The CAs ensured complete participation of the girls enrolled in the project irrespective of their pace of learning or level of academic performance. It was quite encouraging to see that across the centres, the CAs were paying extra attention to girls who were lagging behind or struggling with their lessons. They found that interactive tools and aids were more engaging so the CAs made extra effort to indulge in story-reading & telling, enacting skits / dramas, doing puzzles and games, and showing them visual aids to explain difficult concepts. It was also found that the teaching quality of the CAs was perceived to be better than those of the regular government school teachers, as reported by 87%, 90%, and 85% of girls in Shravasti, Vizag, and Nashik respectively.

The focus of the classes was not just on academics. Emphasis was given to extra-curricular activities such as sports and arts and crafts. Sports activities, in particular, helped instil confidence in girls and break societally defined gender roles. In all the three study sites, girls reported that the CAs encouraged them to participate in sports activities and encouraged them to participate in arts / crafts.

Impact of the intervention was evident across multiple levels including improving girls' learning levels as well as boosting their confidence and well-being

o **Academic performance:** The classes that were held as part of the project helped the girls to upgrade their learning levels, especially in English, the local language, and Maths. Almost all (99%) girls admitted that their proficiency in their local language had improved after attending Nanhi Kali classes. Similarly, 96% of girls reported that their English and Mathematical skills had improved, and they achieved a more sound conceptual understanding of the subjects.

o **Extra-curricular activities:** The study indicated that girls were keen and motivated to participate in various sports activities. Almost all of them reported that they enjoyed sports and were now actively participating in sports and fitness activities. In Shravasti this was close to 99%, in Vizag 98% and in Nashik 98%. Majority of the girls were interested in participating in arts and crafts activities. Drawing and papercraft making were popular activities. A month-long summer camp was organised during the first wave of COVID-19 wherein girls sent pictures of their artwork to CAs through WhatsApp. This was a fun activity that contributed significantly to their emotional well-being during a testing period.

o **Events:** Girls were encouraged to participate in various events organised by the project team. This gave them an opportunity to hone their interpersonal skills, avail the exposure, and also create a platform where they could showcase their skills. All the girls across the three study sites indicated that they had attended at least 80% of the events organized by the project team. Women's Day was one of the most celebrated days among all these celebrations. Teacher's day, children's day, sports events, and Independence Day were some of the other common events that were organised. Participation in these events made them more confident, happier and enhanced their overall personality.

Project team's interventions during COVID-19 to ensure minimum disruption in the education of girls

COVID-19 related restrictions and lockdowns that were announced by the Government at different points in time had acute consequences on the education of school children globally. In countries like India where rural communities struggle on several accounts with respect to education, the impact was a lot more severe. The inaccessibility of girls to basic study materials and classes had a direct bearing on the quality of learning that was seen amongst girl students. The project Nanhi Kali team constantly endeavoured to minimise inconvenience and hardship faced by girls in accessing education during the pandemic. Some of the steps taken by them included:

o **Adopting a student friendly teaching mode:** During Phase 1 of the lockdown (June – September 2020), girls took part in Nanhi Kali classes by going to the CA's home. Alternately in some places, the CA's made regular visits to girls' homes and gave them assignments to ensure their continued learning. In a few places, contingent on the local COVID-19 restrictions, classes were conducted through the ASCs (11% in Shravasti; 12% in Vizag; and 15% in Nashik). During Phase 2 (October 2020- March 2021), of the lockdown, community based ASCs emerged as the most popular means for providing classes.

o **Access to mobile phones to attend classes:** Even though a majority of the girls reported having a smartphone in their house (Nashik and Vizag >90%, Shravasti 69%), many of them were unable to use it for academic purposes. This was because in most cases, there was only one phone in the house which the father would take with him to work, limiting girls' access to the phone during the day to attend online classes. Internet connectivity was also reported to be a major issue in Shravasti.

- o **Quality of online classes:** Majority of the girls reported that they were able to understand the concepts taught through online mode (Shravasti: 89%, Vizag: 97%, Nashik: 98%). Across all the three regions, lack of access to phones was reported as a major barrier in their ability to establish deeper understanding of their lessons/lectures conducted through the online classes.

- o **Support provided by CAs to promote learning:** Despite restrictions and risks associated with COVID, the CAs played a key role during the first year of COVID to ensure none of the girls missed out on their learning journey. In all the three study areas, majority of the girls (Shravasti: 93%, Vizag: 81%, and Nashik: 93%) reported that the CAs visited them during the lockdown. 85% girls in Shravasti; 98% in Vizag; and 95% in Nashik stated that the CAs helped them in accessing the learning content online and in many places even handed over their own phones to them.

- o **Attractive school kits:** A strong association was built for the girls as they associated their sense of identity and belongingness with the school bags, stationary items (notebooks, pens, pencils), raincoats / pullovers, and sanitary napkins) that were handed over to them by the project team.97% girls from Shravasti; 94% from Vizag; and 82% from Nashik said that the notebooks and stationery materials helped them study even during the lockdown, which might have been a challenge if they were bereft of these materials.

CA's, through their visits, engaged with all stakeholders in constructive ways. They were quick to identify challenges faced by the girls and depending on the case, use a mix of counselling and intervention-based approaches to help address the issue. A major contribution of the CA's was in advising parents not to pull out their daughters from school. Even if parents perceived online classes to be a waste of time and thought that the girls should be helping in household work, the CA's told parents to be patient and to not deny their daughters the opportunity to continue their education.

In many places the CA was like a family member. She also guided them on COVID-19 related protocols, provided succour, comfort and guidance during sickness and death. Girls admitted that during the intense phase of the pandemic, their interactions with the CAs were the only conversations that they had with someone from the outside world. It was through the CAs that they learnt about what was happening outside.

EdTech Platform: Mindspark Learning Software via Digital Tablets

In partnership with Educational Initiatives, Project Nanhi Kali has invested in translating and contextualising the Mindspark learning software to meet the project's geographical and programmatic requirements. The Mindspark platform mitigates geographical barriers (lack of access to study material due to remote locations of some of the villages and blocks, lack of qualified tutors and sparse internet connectivity) related to learning and ensures that every girl receives access to the personalised adaptive learning software, helping her learn with understanding. This EdTech platform was integrated into the project in a phased manner during the assessment year i.e. 2020-21.

- o **Access to Mindspark platform:** Majority of the girls across the three locations had access to Mindspark platform (93% in Shravasti; 96% in Vizag; and 84% in Nashik). This was quite significant for the girls given their socio-economic background and that many were using tabs for the first time in their lives (96% in Shravasti; 96% in Vizag; and 61% in Nashik). Given its flexibility and user friendliness, almost all girls (99%) from Shravasti and Vizag, and 98% from Nashik said they were able to use the Mindspark platform with ease.

- o **Impact on learning:** The platform enabled the girls to continue their learning in a number of ways, which helped them understand subjects easily and revisit portions if they so wished at any point in the learning journey.

Importance & relevance of Nanhi Kali

The focused approach adopted by the project impacted all aspects of learning i.e. access, environment and quality content. Majority of the girls from all the three sites (91% in Shravasti; 80% in Vizag; and 89% in Nashik) acknowledged that without the Nanhi Kali project, they wouldn't have been able to learn anything during the first year of COVID-19, while 43% girls expressed that there would have been a significant gap in their learning levels. More than half the girls (56%) expressed the possibility of discontinuing their education in the absence of the Nanhi Kali project while 16% feared that their parents would have gotten them married.

Overall, the findings of the study suggested that the project had played a crucial role in the lives of the girls. It enabled them not just to access quality content but encouraged them to participate in extra-curricular activities. It also equipped them with appropriate life skills and empowered them to take their life decisions. It ensured that none of the girls who had enrolled were left out from accessing learning materials/ resources required for study and successfully bridged the digital gender divide. Had it not been for the Nanhi Kali project, many of the girls would have dropped-out of school/ discontinued from their formal education. The academic centres emerged as key hubs that supplement formal schooling activities. The role of CAs was quintessential as they turn into key pillars of support, taking the benefits of the project to every girl.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Conclusion

This study has sought to understand how the project activities have made a sustained difference in the lives of the girls who were enrolled in the project. In other words, the study has analysed, where and how the focused approach on girl's education has contributed to the learning and overall development of girl children.

- **Role of CAs and a successful teaching methodology adopted by Project Nanhi Kali**

Undoubtedly, the CAs have played a major role in the lives of girls. Their personal touch and involvement with the girls and their families has been instrumental in the success of the project. The teaching methodology was appreciated and considered to be of high quality. The girls expressed that they found learning at the Nanhi Kali Academic Support Centres more impactful than what was taught in their schools.

- **Ensuring reduced school drop-out rate amongst girls in the wake of COVID-19**

The most important outcome of the project was curtailing of the number of dropouts amongst girl students despite the COVID-19 outbreak. The havoc played by the pandemic, with families struggling with illness, loss of jobs, lives, and financial hardships, was coupled with there being no routine for the children. Working from home, studying through mobile phones, managing poor internet connectivity, losing contact with friends and other related issues had deep impact on the entire family's outlook towards life. Nanhi Kali's continued education interventions kept the girls engaged and in a positive frame of mind.

- **Bridging the digital divide through an EdTech platform**

The Nanhi Kali EdTech platform proved to be a critical enabler for the success of the project. Through the platform, it was ensured that all the girls irrespective of the constraints of their geographical location, have access to quality educational material. It also increased digital literacy as girls were taught how to use tablets.

- **Focus on extra-curricular activities in order to ensure holistic development**

The Nanhi Kali project focused not just on improving the academic performance of the girls but creating opportunities for them so that they can hone their creative skills. In addition, it also provided a platform to them to dabble in sports and arts/craft activities. Given that each student has unique attributes and talents, ample opportunity was provided for them to showcase those skills and derive their sense of self-worth from them. As indicated by the girls, these opportunities have helped them improve their subject skills and also make them more confident and happier. Therefore, the project must continue to provide these opportunities for girls and augment it with basic trainings focused on the next level of learning that could relate to software and information technology, communication etc.

Many girls admitted that without the project and the promise of some continuity in their learning, they would have had to discontinue their education. The combination or hybrid approach adopted by the project proved to be a saviour. As part of this, the girls could access the learning material either through online mode or home visits by CAs and/or attend classes in the community centres. The project ensured that even the ones without access to mobile phones could avail of learning materials.

The school kits have also been an important component that have encouraged girls to continue their education and aided them in completing their formal schooling. The CAs bridged many a gap between students, teachers, families and community leaders to ensure that there is greater support for the education of the girl child.

Recommendations

Seek approvals for IX class registration fee in advance (specifically in UP): Since the Right to Education (RTE) Act is applicable till Class VIII, both availability and accessibility to schools with classes above secondary level of education is a matter of concern. Under the RTE Act, education up till Class VIII is provided free of cost in government schools. However, for admissions in Class IX, children have to pay a registration fee (at least in the state of Uttar Pradesh). For financially disadvantaged parents of girls enrolled in Nanhi Kali, this acts as a disincentive. While approvals for paying this registration fees were sought from donors eventually, since this was not an inherent part of the structure, it led to delays in admissions of girls by months affecting their learning levels. Hence, covering for registration fees of Class IX admissions was recommended to be a part of the project in order to ensure all Nanhi Kalis effectively complete their 10 years of schooling.

Ensure separate batches for Class IX- X girls: Since, by law, children cannot be failed up till Class VIII, it is for the first time in Class IX when the Nanhi Kalis have to actually give exams, wherein they could possibly not be promoted to next year. Also, reportedly, learning levels of these girls is already not up to the mark and they need special attention in order to ensure they are able to pass their Class IX and subsequently Class X examination. Additionally, schools with Class IX and X are usually situated far away from villages. Travelling back to the ASC centre near their school takes time and girls lose about an hour of their classes. Hence, having ASC centres in their own schools or batches an hour later in the schools near their villages would be more efficient and helpful for the girls.

Update English content of Mindspark to suit the needs of students: While all the girls found Mindspark to be an extremely helpful tool of learning, it was difficult for them to understand how the app taught English language. Inference based on qualitative interactions with multiple stakeholders was that most girls could not understand the instructions being given in English as it is a foreign language for them; to learn basic words, the meaning of those words needs to be explained in their mother tongue. Even some of the CAs found it difficult to follow the English instructions.