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THE GLOBAL SCOPE OF A LOCAL RESPONSE: *SCHOOL-IN-A-BOX* AND THE *RIVER* METHODOLOGY

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ABSTRACT. Using a minimal set of materials and an innovative methodology, a community-based multi-grade education program, popularly known as "School-in-a-Box," has over the last two decades spread to tens of thousands of schools in vastly diverse contexts in India and other countries in the world. My paper will use the *School-in-a-Box* model to explore the re-envisioning and design of learning environments. I suggest that the challenge confronting us, as educators, is not primarily a shortage of economic resources but is rather a demand upon our imagination to radically re-envision learning environments. This is an invitation to think of "school-outside-the-box." In sum, I claim that the central issue in education is not one of equal access to predetermined learning opportunities and assessments but a set of dynamic concerns about the nature of learning: for whom, with what objectives and in what context.

Keywords:

1. Introduction and Local Setting

A one-room schoolhouse of mud and clay with a thatched roof sits just at the outskirts of a South Indian village. Inside the school, five groups of four or five children of varied ages sit cross-legged and work intensely with sets of colored cards. Each group's composition changes according to the student's autonomy, peer support, or extent of the teacher's role in a particular task. What is striking about this classroom is neither the setting nor even its unusual configuration. Most striking is that all the children in the room are involved in whatever it is that they are doing. The teacher is likewise fully involved as she moves amongst the groups of students. Looking beyond the school's walls, the parents – in fact, everyone in the

surrounding community – in some way or another are involved in the life of the school. Involvement seems contagious and perhaps unavoidable even to the casual observer.

This school started with a box of materials and a plan. The box contains nothing more than a minimal set of materials: activity cards, some rubber letters, and basic writing materials. The plan has two parts, a sequence of actions for founding a school and the arrangement of a curriculum into a learning ladder. Taken together the materials and accompanying plan are popularly known as *School-in-a-Box.* Twenty years after the first such school began in rural Andhra Pradesh, this educational program is spreading like wildfire to the neighboring states and into other countries. Today there are over 37,000 schools in Tamil Nadu, and over 19,000 schools in Karnataka. The program has spread into Nepal, Ceylon, Pakistan, Ethiopia and Germany. In total, over 120,000 schools, 120,000 teachers and the education of 7.9 million children have been organized by *School-in-a-Box* and *RIVER*[1] (Rao, P. Y. A and Rao, R. A. 2006).

Improved child and adult literacy rates, elementary school attendance and completion rates, caste and gender equity, achievement levels in post-elementary school government examinations, and even socio-economic indicators, etc. from governmental and non-governmental organizations, point to the reach and positive effects of this educational program (Rao, P. Y. A and Rao, R. A. 2006). More remarkable than the possibility of "success" according to such conventional measures, is that this program consistently invites the full involvement of the community in the education of its children and adults across multiple and varied cultural contexts.

2. Complexity of the Indian Context

The landscape of educational practices in the Indian subcontinent is extremely complex and diverse. This is due to the myriad influences that have layered the history of its educational systems, its multifarious languages and cultural contexts, and the variety of practitioners and participants involved in these varied contexts of education.

Layering of Indian Educational Systems

The earliest records of educational institutions in India are of the Gurukula system - which entailed a "disciple-master" relationship between pupil and teacher (Kubchandani, 1981). The etymology of the word "Guru" suggests that the "master"/"teacher" in this system of tutelage was considered to be the person who dispelled ignorance and darkness or pointed to knowledge and wisdom. Historical accounts and vestigial practices extant today suggest that the Gurukula system: (i) was not an institution that was

typically organized around written documents (eg. mission statements, articles of association, curricula, syllabi, timetables, lesson plans, etc.), (ii) involved a complexity of power relations and hierarchical structures (involving considerations of caste/class and gender), which had implications in terms of the access that they provided to oral and textual learning opportunities, (iii) was a form of apprenticeship for life skills (iv) provided a form of education that involved the development of multiple competencies: proficiency in music, religious studies, art appreciation, martial arts, mathematical proficiency, etc. Apart from the survival value of acquiring these life skills, this multiplicity of domains of learning point to a notion of education as intended towards creating a well-rounded character (akin to the western notion of the renaissance person). Literacy and numeracy were essential, but not outstanding, components of the numerous learning activities and skills acquired in the course of such an education.

With the introduction of Islam to the Indian subcontinent, the Gurukula system was reinforced by an Islamic counterpart in the Madrasseh system. Both institutions provided education primarily for priestly and ruling classes with a religious orientation. The instruction in these systems was therefore primarily in Sanskrit and Arabic-Persian respectively. An education involving an emphasis on the 3Rs, with a more secular orientation, that was accessible to the merchant and administrative classes, became available through the Paathshaala and the Maktab institutions (Kubchandani, 1981). These systems were owned and run by the local communities that they served and educational practices within these systems were in the vernacular languages.

The impact of British colonialism on these systems of education and their educational practices was profound and unprecedented. In order to better understand this, it is noteworthy that the British school systems (and the school systems in the west in general) have a distinct feature; these schools "are quintessentially literate institutions" (Olson, 2008, p. 283). As Olson points out this is because these institutions: (i) are organized by written documents (eg. mission statements, articles of association, curricula, syllabi, timetables, lesson plans, etc.), (ii) provide training for other literate institutions (college preparation, professional preparation for companies and services, etc.), (iii) are mass institutions for the widespread dissemination of literacy (iv) they provide special cognitive competencies (specific to literacy), etc. Such a conception of learning embedded within literate educational practices, entailed a significant departure from the Gurukula system and other pre-colonial institutions, and a profound change in the socio-cultural context within which learning and education were situated.

Thomas Macaulay the architect of educational reform in India is often cited to highlight the enormity of the impact of colonial education policy in India. In his infamous minute of 1835, Macaulay wrote that he had *"*never found one among them [Orientalists] who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (Macaulay, 1835). Furthermore, he went on to add that, "It is, no exaggeration to say, that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England." As a result of such imperialist ideologies traditional educational practices, except those that were located within the institutional framework of formal education through the colonial model of schooling, were "de-recognized" (Daswani, 2001). In terms of its impact on conceptions of learning, post-colonial bilingual education has now come to be referred to as the Macaulayism in Indian Educational policy. The original aims of the policy were articulated by Macaulay himself:

> We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population (Macaulay, 1835).

It would not be an overstatement to suggest that such a conception involves a top-down, hierarchical imposition of a colonial educational ideology upon its impacted recipients. Clearly such a conception, and its attendant educational systems and practices are an antithesis of the community involvement mentioned in the introduction.

From the 1920s even the Indian nationalist movements and their member participants assimilated the educational practices of institutions of the colonial period. Post-colonial Indian schools, at least the government schools, were often a means to provide access and mobility for careers in bureaucratic institutions that were the legacy of colonialism. However, in stark contrast and in reaction to colonial educational policy the nationalist movements ushered in a revival of primary education in the local vernacular languages (Kubchandani, 1981). Educational policy changes and modern schooling in India continues to be animated by latent and emergent linguistic sentiments contending over according English, Hindi and regional languages differing priorities in the educational systems.

The rapidly changing socio-economic terrain of modern India, the recent Right to Education Act (RTE, 2009), and the development of institutions of higher learning and private schools alongside the central or state government public schools, are factors that add complexity and continue to layer the educational systems of modern India.

Linguistic and Cultural Diversity

Notwithstanding academic contentions regarding language and linguistic boundaries, the linguistic diversity of the Indian subcontinent is stunning in terms of the sheer number of languages and linguistic practices. The Indian constitution has 19 scheduled languages. There are 1652 mother tongues, 16 major languages used for education, administration, legislation, etc. Linguistic analysis suggests that there are anywhere between 96 and 105 languages in India (Daswani, 2001). These multifarious languages are themselves situated within a diversity of socio-cultural practices and contexts. The linguistic repertoire employed by the Indian people could involve code switching and/or code mixing and/or different degrees of proficiency in employing a variety of linguistic and learning activities in differing communicative domains (eg. home, school, work place, a specific social milieu, etc.). For example a priest may have a relatively high proficiency in Sanskrit used in his work in the temple but a low proficiency in the regional language with which to negotiate the domains of everyday transactions and commerce (Daswani, 2001). It is evident then that "India is not multilingual only because of the multiplicity of languages spoken by the Indian people. It is multilingual because Indian society is a plural society characterized by multiple cultures, religions, languages, identities, and socio-cultural practices, which co-exist and influence each other" (Daswani, 2001, p. 287).

Rather than limit or eliminate the diversity of culture and language any local response entails education as a culturally embedded and generative practice that nourishes and generates cultural growth.

3. *School-in-a-Box* and *RIVER* as a Local Response

Local Challenges

It is this layering of the Indian educational systems, and diversity of linguistic and cultural contexts that form the background for several longstanding and systematic local challenges for education and schooling that are reflected most starkly in the rural areas of India. Given the plurality of contexts, de-contexualized curricula and textbooks that are not responsive to local challenges or relevant to the daily experiences of the

children, result in low motivation levels, low enrolment rates (particularly amongst girls), high student dropout rates, and teacher absenteeism (Rao, P. Y. A and Rao, R. A. 2006). The economic context, particularly in remote villages, is most often one of acute shortage of funds. This implies limited material resources, inadequate teaching and learning materials, and poorly equipped classrooms. Social deterrents in local communities and in the lives of the children pose challenges for school attendance and often result in academic failure (i.e. poverty, illness, use of children for labor, cultural and religious events etc. prevent students from attending school) (Rao, P. Y. A and Rao, R. A. 2006). Due to these factors and in particular the disparities in school attendance, a conventionally organized school and classroom becomes a sorting house for the success of a few students and the failure of a majority of students.

Given the diversity of contexts and the nature of the challenges outlined above, conventional educational responses continue to create an overall scenario of a disengaged populace and a de-contexualized and devalued education, and a local culture and community of people that is neither flourishing and re-generating nor assimilating into and succeeding in a mainstream culture. Education and schooling in this context is most often perceived as achievable only by the implementation of expensive programs and the imposition of broad de-contextualized ideologies handed down from the economically developed world.

The School-in-a-Box and RIVER Response

School-in-a-Box and its accompanying *RIVER* methodology attempts to comprehensively address the above difficulties in designing a locally responsive multilevel, multi grade, school and curriculum (that is embedded in the cultural context within which it emerges) with the active participation of local stakeholders.

Organization of School and Local Involvement

The very founding of these schools begins with involving the local community in establishing an enriched village commons on which the school is built (Rao, P. Y. A and Rao, R. A. 2006). The local community donates land and labor to create a green public space and to provide fuel and fodder for household needs and agricultural work. The school and the green public space on which it is built becomes a context for adult education and environmental sustainability programs and practices. Typically in Indian rural communities, women are most often the primary care givers, and as such they are primary stakeholders in the education of their children. Given this context, Mother's Committees are established to monitor the progress of children, manage mid-day meals, organize health

camps, and function at the forefront of decision making in running the school. Mothers' and grandmothers' stories in the local dialect are incorporated into the language component of the curriculum. Traditional folk arts of the local region are revived and fostered through puppet-shows, dance and music, and educational activities such as mathematics *melas* (festivals) that involve the entire village community are organized annually. Skills such as reading and math are applied to real needs of the children's family and community (e.g. the selling of vegetables or other family produced goods at the local market; the reading of newspapers and business documents; etc.) Curriculum materials are made in the local language and use local references. In this manner, the educational and cultural reach of the program extends to the entire village community (Rao, P. Y. A and Rao, R. A. 2006).

Curriculum as a Ladder for Learning

The *RIVER* methodology's design of the *School-in-a-Box* curriculum scales down the learning activities in each class into meaningful sequences of concrete and manageable units. Each unit is composed of five types of activities: Introductory, Reinforcement, Evaluation (refer Formative assessment in Bransford et al., pp. 140–143), Remedial, and Enrichment. Work cards supported by learning aids are designed as the basic educational material in the box. Multiple "activities"/"tasks" are collated into units called "milestones." The milestones are in turn organized in an ascending order, beginning with the first rung of the learning ladder and ending with the topmost rung to signify the end of a class. The learning process is viewed as a continuum and visually represented in a "Ladder of Learning" which is also used to track the student's progress on the learning continuum. Location in and engagement with the learning continuum can be conceptualized using a Vygotskian pedagogy based on the "Zone of Proximal Development" (Daniels, 2001, pp. 56–59) and articulated in greater detail in terms of Valsiner's (1998) "Zone of Free Movement" and "Zone of Promoted Action" (Daniels, 2001, p. 62). The entire curriculum is divided into three components Language, Mathematics and Environmental Studies (Rao, P. Y. A and Rao, R. A. 2006).

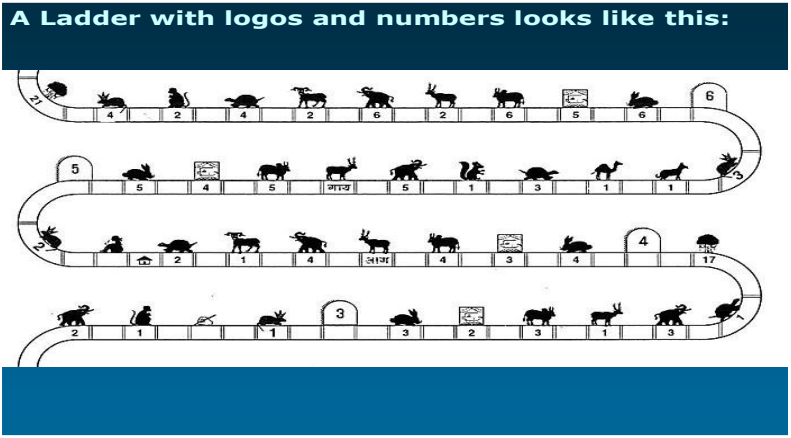

Diagram I

Advances in the learning sciences argue that "The model of a child as an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge provided by the teacher must be replaced" (Bransford et al., p. 19). Thus education does not involve the mere transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the taught but rather what Bransford et al (pp. 10, 12 80, 182, 218) call "active learning" (2000) on the part of the student. In this conception, learning is achieved by engaging the student in exploring the subject matter through a series of tasks in an inquiry-based curriculum wherein the student (and often the teacher as well) is urged to uncover new ground through mediated activity (Cole, 2001). The organization of the *RIVER* curriculum as a learning ladder of activities embedded in the local context provides the basis for this uncovering of new ground through mediated activity.

Classroom Organization as Dynamic Zones of Interaction

The classroom organization of the *RIVER* methodology for implementing *School-in-a-Box* involves work in dynamic vertical groups that are divided according to the level of the teacher's role and the student's autonomy in a particular task/ learning activity. There are five such "learning" groups in each classroom: (1) Partially teacher-supported: The teacher initiates the students into these activities/tasks and then lets them work on their own (eg. making pictures, introducing words, completing sentences, sorting letters, etc). (2) Completely teacher supported: The teacher intervenes when new concepts are introduced, when work is to be evaluated, or when a student needs special attention. For example, in identifying words in a song, tracing the rubber letters, writing, situational stories, etc. (3) Partially peer-supported: Students initiate or support each other, working largely on

their own (eg. playing sight and sound games, threading cards, matching words and pictures, etc). (4) Completely peer-supported: Students teach and learn from each other using picture words, abstract words, and other related activities. (5) Self-learning: Students practice reading and writing and test their own abilities using cards containing evaluation materials. (Rao, P. Y. A and Rao, R. A. 2006). This component of learning involves the students' "acquisition of semiotic tools of self-regulation, self-planning, self-monitoring, self-checking, and self-evaluating" (Daniels, 2001, p. 100).

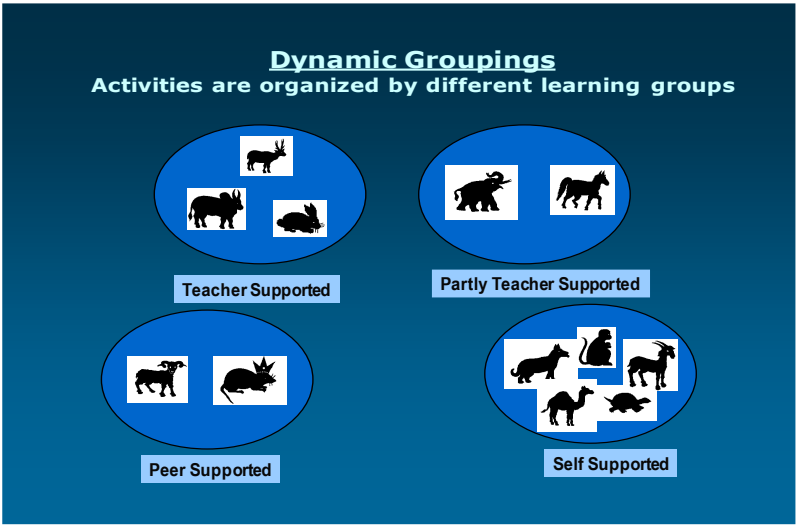

Diagram II

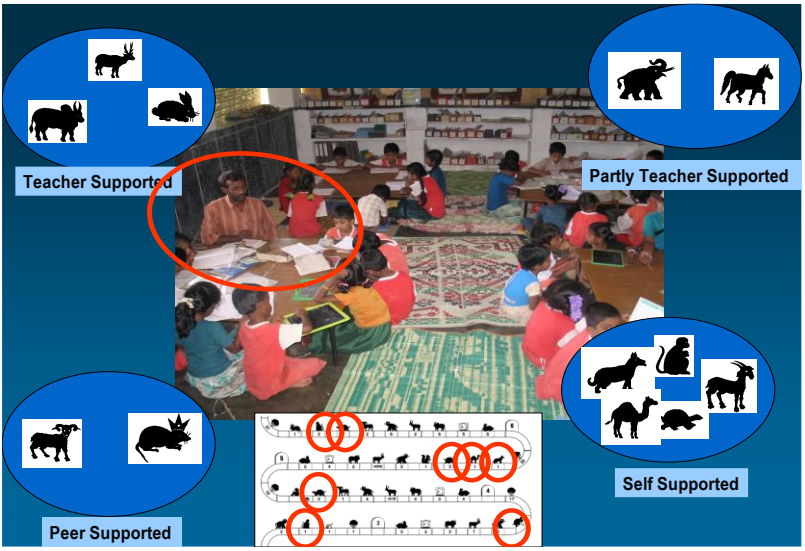

Diagram III

The specific challenges for primary education in rural India are addressed by the *RIVER* methodology's organization of the classroom and by the content and design of its *School-in-a-Box* curriculum. The shortage of funds in rural education is addressed by the minimal resource requirements of the community-built one-room schoolhouse and its curriculum. The activities and tasks of the curriculum provide resources for learning within and outside classroom settings. Social deterrents (i.e. poverty, illness, use of children for labor, cultural and religious events, etc.) are directly addressed by the curriculum (e.g. children who are absent from school can re-enter their learning ladder without "falling behind" or "failing their class" and an older student need not stay at home to provide care for her younger sibling who can be brought to the mixed age classroom). The curriculum is embedded in the local environment and created with the active participation of parents and teachers thus reducing teacher and student absenteeism and drop out rates.

Thus the organization of the classroom and the learning ladder of *School-in-a-Box* are together a direct response to the cultural background particular to the individual learner and local community they provide an individualized learning trajectory for every learner, while simultaneously enabling peer support and teacher facilitation.

4. The Underlying Educational Vision

The *School-in-a-Box* and *RIVER* response to the cultural context of the local challenges is informed and animated by the educational philosophy of J. Krishnamurti (1895–1986). While it is not within the scope of this paper to fully discuss this educational philosophy a sketch of some features are relevant to its thesis.

Education as Non-ideological

"Ideals have no place in education for they prevent the comprehension of the present…. When we are working together for an ideal…. The *what should be* becomes more important than the *what is*…." (Krishnamurti, 1953, p. 22). This suggests that educational practices do not require the imposition of static ideals or external principles and standards, on changing contexts and individuals within them. Instead educational practices need to be attentive, sensitive, pliable, and in constant engagement with the dynamic and changing ground reality of local contexts.

The implication of such a view is that educational programs and the learners interacting with them are charged with the responsibility of constant involvement and engagement so that they do not become mechanical learners and obdurate individuals within brittle educational systems. This involves a sustained and ongoing dialogue amongst the teachers, the students, the parents, the administrators, even neighbors and all the stakeholders of the larger community of learners. The responsiveness and pliability *School-in-a-Box* and *RIVER* call for in their learning environments, requires a self-scrutiny, sensitivity, and awareness by the individual learner, the teacher, and the system itself, which mirror the same "comprehension of the present" which Krishnamurti calls for. This affords both the individual and the local community the opportunity for sustained involvement in educational practice and the life of the school.

Education as Cultural Transformation

As shown earlier, the history of Indian educational systems is multilayered and its educational practices need to be understood within their larger cultural context. However, learning and education are not merely located and forged within static historical and cultural contexts (for more on situations and contexts see Cole, 2001, pp. 131–137). In so far as culture is dynamic and in so far as learning involves a meta-cognition of the scope and limits of the learner's cultural grammar (the basic components and assumptions of the learner's thinking that are shaped by her cultural environment) – learning also transforms culture. Culturally informed education that heightens such meta-cognition may be seen to generate what

Bruner (1996) calls a "counter-culture" (pp. 77–78). An educational vision that notes the cultural situatedness of learning while maintaining its transformational role will be used as a point of departure in discussing the global scope of the local response provided by *School-in-a-Box*.

In emphasizing access to learning and providing quick-fix solutions for the "efficient learning" of knowledge and skills that are merely directed towards short-term individual financial gains and upward mobility in the job market, Krishnamurti suggests that modern education has strayed away from its moorings of producing integrated human beings. "The purpose of education is not to produce mere scholars, technicians and job hunters, but integrated men and women" (Krishnamurti, 1953, p. 15). Preparing the student to find a livelihood in a complex and competitive society is certainly an important part of education but it must go hand in with the broader and deeper aims of learning to meet the complex challenges of life and culture. Meenakshi Thapan (2001) points out that

> The emphasis on the socio-economic development of society has so far included the rhetoric of a holistic approach to education…. In practice, however, the scenario for elementary and secondary education in India is rather bleak…. It is in this context that Krishnamurti's engagement with education is of paramount significance, namely his emphasis on the relationship between education and society in terms of the transformational potential of education. This aspect of Krishnamurti's teachings is the cornerstone of his educational thought and can make a significant contribution to evolving a sensible policy that concerns itself with change through 'right' education.

To view education as transformative, and hence generative, rather than as a means of providing equal access and opportunities to predetermined aims, that are themselves framed primarily in socio-economic terms, de-commodifies education. In such a conception, de-commodified education is free to emerge and flourish – not merely in the global educational market place but in alternative domains and in the rich and myriad cultural contexts within which it is situated (i.e. an education that is transferable, and of universal value has global scope precisely because of its local responsiveness).

5. Conclusion

In sum, *School-in-a-Box* and the accompanying *RIVER* methodology instantiate a local response by "co-creating a culturally embedded and culturally generative learning environment." It is this local responsiveness that makes for its enormous potential and global scope. The expression "co-creating" proposes that one way to understand this responsiveness is that it generates educational practices that require and sustain the active involvement of its various stakeholders (students, teachers, parents and the members of the larger community). A corollary to this local responsiveness and community involvement is a view of empowerment not merely at the end, but at the very outset of an educational process. Such an involvement of the stakeholders can only be generated when it is integral to the curriculum and the creation and running of the school at large. The phrase "culturally embedded" advocates that education needs to be responsive and sensitive to the local context in which it emerges. This embeddedness needs to be instantiated in an individualized learning program, the organization of the classroom, the content of the curriculum and the process by which it is navigated and in the life of the school as a whole. The term "culturally generative" is intended to capture my interest in the possibility that a local response as exemplified by the *School-in-a-Box* and *RIVER* may play a more broadly educative role in sustaining, transforming and creating cultural practices. Such a framing affords the possibility of looking at *School-in-a-Box* and *RIVER* simultaneously as an educational and cultural phenomenon of local significance and global import.

NOTE

1. *School-in-a-Box* and the *RIVER* methodology are aimed at providing a contextualized and decentralized educational program. Thapan (2006) chronicles the development of the program: "In the last twenty years, RVEC [Rishi Valley Education Center] has created a multi-grade, multi-level program for elementary education called *School-in-a-Box*" (p. xxv). The kit of materials was designed by *RIVER* (Rishi Valley Institute of Educational Resources) for use with the *RIVER* methodology with features such as: a learning ladder, activity cards, a classroom organized into interactional learning zones, and a curriculum design (with three primary components: language, mathematics and environmental studies) involving local stakeholders and local cultural practices. *School-in-a-Box* also continues to be funded and developed independent of or in collaboration with *RIVER* by UNICEF, UNESCO, local governmental agencies and other institutions for producing resource packs and other projects not necessarily informed by the original philosophy and *RIVER* methodology. In this sense, *School-in-a-Box* and *RIVER* function as an "open source" educational program. For more information on the

School-in-a-Box materials and the accompanying *RIVER* methodology see Rao Y. A.P. and A.P.R. (2006) and Thapan, M. (2006).

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