Every year since 2005, ASER has reported on the schooling status and the ability to do basic reading and arithmetic tasks for children in the 5-16 age group in rural India. After ten years of producing an annual report, in 2016, ASER switched to an alternate-year cycle where this “basic” ASER is conducted every other year (2016, 2018, and next in 2020); and in alternate years ASER focuses on a different aspect of children’s schooling and learning.

In 2017, ASER ‘Beyond Basics’ focused on the abilities, experiences, and aspirations of youth in the 14-18 age group. In 2019, ASER aims to shine the spotlight on the early years, reporting on the schooling status as well as on a range of important developmental indicators for young children in the age group 4-8.

Why an ‘Early Years’ ASER?

The early years, defined globally as age 0-8, is known to be the most important stage of cognitive, motor, social and emotional development in the human life cycle. A large body of worldwide research demonstrates that exposure to enabling environments and access to appropriate inputs during these years is fundamental to ensuring that children have a firm foundation on which to build, both in school and in life.

In India, as in many low and middle income countries, there is little evidence on scale with respect to whether young children have access to pre-primary facilities and whether they are acquiring the foundational skills and abilities that are key to subsequent success in school and beyond. Further, parents, families, community members and others are not always clear about the different kinds of abilities that can help young children cope with the demands both of academic learning and of everyday life. Child development experts know that breadth of skills and experiences is critically important in the early years and that exposing young children to formal academic content too early is often counterproductive; but many other adults responsible for children’s welfare – parents and policy makers alike – do not. Given the rising aspirations for educational success, parents often put their children into school well before they are developmentally “ready”.

Most of the available instruments for assessing young children’s abilities are designed to be administered in institutional settings, by trained professionals, in order to inform experts. However, in order to ensure that the needs and abilities of young children move into the centre of current debates on educational policy and practice in India, the evidence needs to speak to and be understood by a much wider set of actors – parents as well as policy makers, practitioners as well as people at large.
Young children in India – policy and practice

In the Indian context, although most states allow entry to Grade 1 at age 5, the Right to Education Act 2009 recommends preschool education for the age group 4-6 and mandates elementary school education for children in the age group of 6-14. ASER data from 2018 shows that enrollment patterns for children in the age group 3-8 do not always follow these policy prescriptions. For example, across rural India, 10% children aged 7 and 4% children aged 8 are still enrolled in Anganwadi or pre-primary classes, while 10% children aged 4 and 34% children aged 5 are already attending primary school. Similar findings have been reported in the India Early Childhood Education Impact (IECEI) study, conducted in Assam, Rajasthan and Telangana by Ambedkar University Delhi and ASER Centre. What this means is that significant proportions of young children in India are exposed to educational environments that are inappropriate given their age.

While we thus have some information on what children in this age group are doing, not much evidence is available on scale with respect to what they are learning. For the past 15 years ASER has measured foundational reading and arithmetic skills for children in the 5-16 age group. These data show that even in early primary grades, large proportions of children do not have the language and numeracy skills required to keep up with the expectations of their grade level textbooks. Many of these issues begin before children even enter school: the IECEI study highlighted major deficiencies in children’s school readiness, even when they had attended ICDS Anganwadi Centres or private preschools. In recent years, India has developed important schemes, policies and frameworks that respond to this situation, such as the National Early Childhood Care and Education (NECCE) policy (2013); the National Early Childhood Care and Education Curriculum Framework (2014); and the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan framework (2018), which for the first time brings the pre-primary stage under the same umbrella as all other levels of schooling. Most recently Chapter 1 of the draft New Education Policy 2019 underlines the importance of early childhood education and provides guidelines for making pre-primary education compulsory for children aged 3-6.

What is the ‘Early Years’ ASER?

Given this context, the time is ripe for a national level survey that will broaden and contribute to these ongoing discussions with concrete evidence of what our young children can and cannot do. The ‘Early Years’ ASER will collect data on the schooling or preschooling status of children in the age group 4-8 and will, in addition, explore selected competencies that international research has identified as important predictors of future success. These competencies can be categorized in four domains: early language acquisition, early numeracy skills, cognitive abilities, and social and emotional learning.

ASER 2019 will retain core elements of the ASER architecture: it will be a sample based household survey, conducted by local volunteers, using simple and easy to administer tools and formats. Because this is a new target group, the survey will be conducted in one rural district per state rather than nationwide. As with every ASER, the overall objective of the Early Years ASER is to highlight the kinds of abilities that our young children need to build; to generate evidence on scale on the extent to which they are able to do so; and to develop ways of discussing these issues with people across the country – all of these in order to ultimately enable evidence to be translated into action.