

Piloted but dropped, Part 2: the School Observation Format

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A tool for school observation – on the lines of the ASER school observation format – was conceptualized as part of the ‘Beyond Basics’ package. Instead of primary and upper primary schools, the idea was to visit secondary and higher secondary government schools since these are more relevant to our target age group.

Fundamental aspects of the ASER tool were retained in their original form, while some were upgraded to suit the objectives of the survey. While norms laid down in the RTE Act provided the framework for the ASER school observation, in this exercise, elements from RMSA (Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan) were added to fit the format to secondary and senior secondary schools.

Two rounds of piloting were done, each with a different version of the survey format – the first version in Himachal Pradesh and the second one in Uttar Pradesh, Manipur, Karnataka, Gujarat and Maharashtra.

The issues

Villages often don't have schools offering secondary grades

The first issue was that of sampling. Unlike primary schools, secondary and higher secondary schools are not to be found in every village. The RMSA target is to have a secondary school within a 5 km radius and a higher secondary school in a 7 km radius of every habitation. If the sampled village did not have a secondary school, it would be difficult to identify the nearest such school and visit it, given the logistical constraints of the ASER survey architecture.

Many different types of schools

At the post elementary stage, many states have a high proportion of private aided schools (schools with private management but receiving government grants) as compared to government schools. Due to this stratification, indicators that are relevant for one type of school may not be relevant for other types of school and additionally, the sample size for each of these types of schools becomes smaller. This makes it all the more difficult to collect and present reliable data. Besides this, the variation in grades offered in these schools was enormous: we visited schools that had grades 1-10, 1-12, 5-10, 5-12, 6-10, 6-12, 8-10, 8-12, 9-10 and 9-12. They were also diverse in terms of whether they were co-ed schools, girls' schools, boys' schools or ran separate shifts for boys and girls. To design a single format that would work for all of these kinds of schools was a difficult task.

The 'usual' ASER school indicators weren't always feasible or relevant

A number of indicators that are part of the primary school visit during the 'normal' ASER failed to collect reliable data when used for secondary and higher secondary schools:

- Students' and Teachers' attendance: Since there are far fewer secondary schools than primary schools, average enrolment was much higher, which made the task of recording students' attendance based on physical headcount difficult to do reliably. Similarly, the size of these

schools and the need for specialized teachers means that there are many more teachers as well. Hence, it wasn't feasible to reliably capture teachers' attendance either.

- Teachers' posts: We tried to capture the number of sanctioned and vacant teacher posts for Std 9-10 and 11-12 respectively. However, this information was either not readily available or not divulged by school authorities.
- Classroom observation: The ASER classroom observation focuses on where classes are sitting (in a classroom, in a verandah, outside) and whether they are multigrade. However, in secondary schools higher grades were rarely found in multigrade classrooms, nor were they usually found to be sitting anywhere other than classrooms. These indicators were thus not relevant for secondary schools.
- We tried to find out if School Management and Development Committees envisaged under the RMSA were set up in these school, however, since in some schools committees were being referred to as PTA and other names, the respondents' answers were not reliable for lack of clarity.

Some interesting learnings

Some components of the school observation format did help us gain useful insights – for example, the section about school results. For example,

- Many of the schools where we piloted the format had a very low percentage of students passing Std 10 and 12, whereas the results for Std 9 and 11 were close to 100%.
- Class-wise enrollment information was easily collected and revealed the gender aspect of govt. school enrolment in higher grades – in many areas, more girls were found enrolled in higher grades in government schools as compared to boys (since boys are more likely to be sent to private schools for higher grades).
- We asked about streams available in Std 11 and 12, with the aim of mapping students' access to the stream of their choice. It was observed that commerce stream was the least available stream. However, different streams are offered in different states.

The decision

In the end, we concluded that the ASER architecture is not an appropriate mechanism for generating relevant, useful, actionable data about secondary and higher secondary schools that adds to what is already available. DISE already collects and makes available information on many of the indicators that we were trying to collect data on. The value-addition of the ASER approach is that it is observation-based, but many of the observation-based questions ASER typically asks were either irrelevant to higher classes or not feasible to conduct. In addition, many important aspects of secondary schooling are difficult to capture using this kind of survey-based data collection. This includes the differences in secondary school systems at district/state level that cause different opportunities to exist for students, the differences in funding of schools, etc. For e.g., In some areas, vocational courses relevant to respective regional contexts are being offered in a few govt. schools in specific districts and funds are accordingly provided, there is no uniformity in subject streams that are offered by schools since these decisions are delegated to school level, and other such variations.

The School Observation component of the ASER 'Beyond Basics' was therefore dropped from the final package.