The gap years

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There is a strange gap in India involving young people in the age group fourteen to eighteen. The Right to Education (RTE) Act guarantees free and compulsory education up to the age of fourteen. The Juvenile Justice Act 2000 for the care and protection of children (Section 26) prohibits the employment of children below the age of eighteen. So, what do we know about this age group? As a country how are we dealing with those who are over fourteen but still below eighteen? What do we expect of them?

The Census of India 2011 indicates that there are anywhere from 20 to 25 million persons in each single year age in this bracket. Rough calculations suggest that the population in the fourteen to eighteen age group is close to 100 million. From DISE report cards we know that the size of the cohort enrolled in Std. VIII is increasing each year (from 11.3 million in 2004-05 to 21.4 million in 2013-14).[2] In most states, more children are staying in school till Std. VIII.[3]

Moving into secondary school, we can see that a growing number of young people are appearing for board exams each year. For example, in Bihar in 2004, half a million students took the Std. X Bihar state board exams (66% passed). By 2014, this number had gone up to 1.34 million (with a pass percentage of 73%). Another example, in Maharashtra in 2012, 1.49 million students took the board exam (81% passed). In 2014, this number had increased to 1.55 million (with a pass percentage of 88%). The change over ten years in this regard is massive and significant for a variety of reasons. These trends are the natural outcome of the big push for universalizing elementary education. An increasing number of young people are moving through the education system and completing more years of schooling.

What does "moving through the education system" entail? Much of the focus of the last ten years of ASER has been on children in primary school and on their ability to read and do basic arithmetic - the fundamental building blocks of learning. This decade long ASER data set can help shine a spotlight at the point of exit from the compulsory stage of the education system, i.e. Std. VIII. Some interesting facts emerge from this data. The proportion of children currently not enrolled in school (age 11-14) has dropped from 9% (in 2006) to less than 5% (in 2014). But for older children (age 15-16), the same figure started out much higher (21.2% in 2006) and has decreased much less over time (16.6% in 2014).[4]

The ASER measurement of reading is a very basic one. ASER 2014 numbers suggest that even today about a quarter of all children enrolled in Std VIII have difficulty reading a simple text at the Std II level of difficulty, and close to half still cannot do a division problem.[5] For 15-16 year olds, the comparison of basic reading and math levels for those who are in school and those who are not currently enrolled is quite stark. For the currently enrolled, the percentage of those who can read at Std II level (or higher) is almost 85%. But of those who are also 15-16 years old but not currently in school, only 36% can read a Std II level text. In math, 50% of those still in school can do division (and more); but barely 10% of those who are not in school can do so.

Underlying the ASER data, there are at least two interrelated trends that are even more worrying. First, the basic ability of Std VIII children in 2014 seems to be lower than that of children who were in Std VIII in 2008 or 2009 (Figure 1). Second, if we track different cohorts of children moving through the education system (from Std V to Std VIII) across different years we see that the learning trajectories are very flat. This means that if you did not

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[2] See state report cards from the District Information System for Education (DISE) for different years, available at www.dise.in. The numbers vary considerably from state to state. During the period 2004-05 to 2013-14, enrolment in Std. VIII increased from 1.46 million to 1.93 million in Maharashtra and from 1.10 to 1.24 million in Tamil Nadu. But in states such as Bihar and Rajasthan, the increase was massive. During the same period, Std. VIII enrolment increased from 0.53 million to 1.93 million in Bihar and from 0.82 million to 1.26 million in Rajasthan.

[3] Using DISE data to construct artificial cohorts for all India numbers, we can see that in 2005-06, there were 21.

3 million children in Std. V. In 2008-09, the size of the cohort in Std. VIII was 15.1 million (a "survival" rate of 71%). The same exercise for the cohort that moved from Std. V in 2010-11 (24.7 million) to Std. VIII in 2013-14 (21.4 million) shows a "survival" rate of 87%.

[4] The ASER figures for girls in the age group 15-16 who are currently not enrolled in school has dropped from 22.6% (ASER 2006) to 17.3% (ASER 2014).

[5] In several other ongoing studies being conducted by ASER Centre focused on middle and secondary schools, we find that there is a section of children who cannot read fluently and hence have difficulty doing pen and paper tests. These studies are being carried out in Nalanda in Bihar, Satara in Maharashtra, Hardoi in UP and in Sambalpur in Odisha. More details are available on asercentre.org.

learn the basic skills by Std V, chances are low that you will pick up these skills in later years (Figure 2).[6] So despite an increase in the number of years spent in school, basic capabilities as measured by the ability to read and to do arithmetic remain stagnant, at least for some children.

Figure 1: Std VIII over time: % Children who can do division ASER 2008-2013: All India (rural)

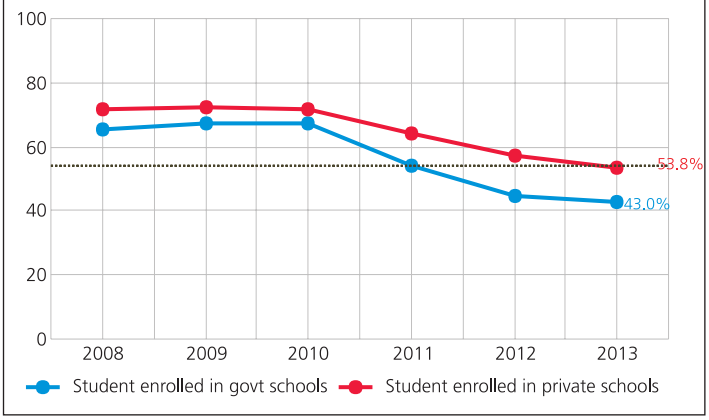
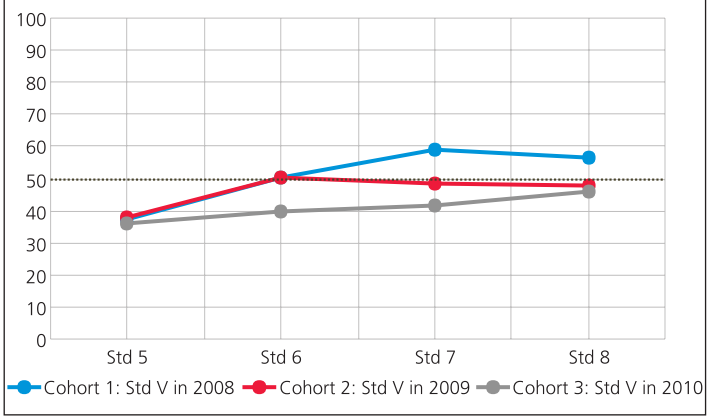


Figure 2: Different cohorts moving through Std V-Std VIII stage: % Children who can do division ASER 2008-2013: All India (rural)



Several recent studies on student achievement in India provide more substance and depth to our understanding of where children are as they complete Std VIII.[7] In summarizing the key findings from these studies, it would be fair to say that overall many students are able to do tasks that are based on rote learning and textbook content. But the ability to apply knowledge or skills to different contexts is much weaker. These weaknesses are at least in part due to the fact that teaching-learning practices in Indian classrooms do not focus much on activities that enable students to learn how to express opinions, solve problems or develop independent critical thinking skills.

The main driving force in Indian secondary schools seems to be successful performance in examinations rather than any other learning outcomes. There is growing evidence that large numbers of children, especially in the eastern part of the country are seeking help from outside school sources to supplement "learning" especially in upper primary grades. The massive coaching industry in the secondary sector is thriving and visible everywhere – and all of these efforts are geared to ensure and reinforce successful exam taking.

What happens if you leave school before getting to the Std X board exam stage? Or if you leave after Std VIII? Can you get back into the mainstream education system and resume studying? The simple answer is no. There are open schooling opportunities available but if one of the reasons behind your leaving school was that you were struggling with academic content, then having to cope with it alone in an open school setting hardly solves your problem. Second chance programs are few and far between and are also geared towards exam taking, with very few that link to further learning opportunities beyond the terminal stage of examinations.

What if children in this age group wish to start working? There are educational and age requirements for entry into most vocational skilling programs. Job placements are not possible before age eighteen. In any case, very few skilling programs ensure work placements and hardly any can promise permanent entry into jobs in the organized sector. The reality of India is that the vast majority of the population works in the unorganized sector.[8] That is where most young people will end up as well. However hardly any research has examined what kind of knowledge or skills help improve productive capacity in the unorganized sector. Further, the entire architecture of the education system assumes that with sufficient years of schooling and appropriate certifications via examinations along the way, young people will enter the organized employment sector. The fact that the reality is really quite different does not seem to have made any dent either on how school education is organized or on how educational and occupational aspirations of students and parents are formed.

[6] Economists Lant Pritchett and Karthik Muralidharan have made this point using data from their studies as well.

[7] National Achievement Survey (Cycle 3) Std VIII report indicates that in reading comprehension, children did better on the "locate information" tasks as compared to the tasks that involved interpreting, inferring or evaluating. In math, data handling questions were easier to do than those which involved ratios, proportions or mensuration. Several studies done by ASER Centre/Pratham (www.asercentre.org) and Educational Initiatives come to very similar conclusions. See http://www.ei-india.com/lsa-projects/.

[8] According to the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector, "the total employment in the Indian economy in 2004-05 was 456 million of which 393.2 million was in the informal sector. Of these unorganized sector workers, agriculture accounted for 251.7 million and the rest 141.5 million are in the non-agricultural sector." See http://nceuis.nic.in/Challege_in_Employment_in_Development_in%20India.pdf

As a country we were quick to dismiss our encounter with the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment). But perhaps we threw the baby out along with the bath water. OECD countries use student performance in PISA assessments to understand how well prepared (or not) fifteen year olds are for the world of work and for life after school. It is true that the assessment tasks in the PISA tests may be closer to the kinds of curriculum and pedagogy common in schools in European and other developed countries. It is also true that most students in such countries will move into jobs in the organized sector. We can decide that the PISA framework is not appropriate for us. But have we given serious thought to the skills and knowledge that our young people are going to need to negotiate the life that lies ahead of them?

So here is where we are. We have close to 100 million young people who neither "fit" easily into the education system, nor are they prepared adequately for the world beyond. Simply universalizing the provision of secondary schooling does not address the challenge we have on hand. Simply providing inputs and building infrastructure to channel children into the next stage of education is not sufficient for what young people need. In primary school, we have seen that the age-grade structure of curriculum and teaching leaves many children without even the basics. We know that the methods we use in our schools are not effective for teaching children how to apply what they know to what they see. Our children can do tasks that involve rote learning but cannot apply themselves in new and different contexts. For both secondary schooling and skilling, we should not simply construct institutions or design systems that are unable to deliver what we want.

But what is it that we really want for our young people? What knowledge and what skills do we think our young people must have to face the world as they leave school? What is it that the country needs to do to ensure that every young person has the opportunity to fully explore their capability to learn and to realize their full productive capacity? Why is there no national debate on this critical question? When will we think about where we want our young people to end up, and work backwards to ensure that our children are well prepared to take advantage of the opportunities that are available?

Perhaps it is on this gap that the next version of ASER should shine the spotlight.