

# Can we fix the persisting crisis of learning?

Vimala Ramachandran<sup>1</sup>

It is hard to believe that this is the tenth cycle of learning assessments done by Pratham and ASER, and even harder to believe that not much has changed on the ground. The government continues to count inputs and put out numbers of children enrolled in school and completing school, and argue that a lot has changed in Indian schools. Yet, year after year in mid-January there is a wake up call. There have been many more alarm bells – assessments done by NCERT, Educational Initiatives and several smaller studies tell us that our children are not learning. The nagging question is: why is it so difficult to ensure that our children learn?

I was recently part of two studies – one on inclusion and exclusion in schools and classrooms, the other a national study on the working conditions of school teachers. We met with teachers and administrators. We observed schools and classrooms over a one-week period. In most states I asked teachers and teacher union leaders why our children are not learning. I also asked them how many teachers send their own children or grand children to government schools. There was a sense of denial – most teachers and administrators did not agree that children are not learning. But almost all of them said they sent their own children to private schools because they believed that their children would get “better” education there. They had little faith in government schools and the reasons they cited ranged from English medium to excessive non-teaching duties of government school teachers. In a few states teachers said that all kinds of children enrol in government schools to avail of incentives and mid-day meals. A few of them admitted that the classroom is so diverse that it is difficult for teachers to teach so many levels at the same time. The discussion went round in circles and neither the teachers nor administrators and researchers could identify the reasons for poor learning, or what can be done to turn the system around and make it accountable for learning.

This has led to a sense of disquiet, a feeling of helplessness that is all pervading. It is like a group of blind people trying to describe an elephant by touching different parts of the body. Here are some of the issues that were identified:

One, our system expects teachers to teach to the curriculum, finish the syllabus within a time frame – regardless of whether the children in the class are learning or not. Teachers are not able to address the learning needs of every child – as a result they throw up their hands and teach those who are able to keep pace. Two other issues contribute to this – prevalence of multi-grade classrooms across the country and frequent absence of teachers and students. As a result the majority of children fall behind – and become passive spectators in the classroom. As time goes by the cumulative burden of non-learning just accumulates till the children reach a point where they are just unable to comprehend what is going on in class.

Two, there is no school level monitoring of teaching-learning processes and actual teaching time. Almost all the monitoring is confined to inputs – enrolment, mid-day meals, distribution of incentives and so on. Institutions created to provide on-site school level academic support have become data gathering instruments. These institutions are also staffed with people who may not have the skills or the aptitude for on-site teacher capacity building. Post RTE mechanisms like Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) have been reduced to a series of formats that teachers are expected to fill out. In one state I asked the teachers about CCE and several of them said that they just fill out the forms without actually conducting the activities with children. Administrators admit that they follow instructions from above and that they are not educators who can develop systems that can monitor children’s learning. They need help and that too hands-on help to develop an effective monitoring system.

Three, there is a huge social distance between teachers and students in government schools. In the last few decades the middle classes and the not-so-poor have walked out of government schools and prefer to send their children to private schools. Those left behind are poor, migrant wage labourers; the most marginalised social groups and girls from the not-so-poor families. The inclusion / exclusion study that we did clearly brought out the innate prejudices and stereotypes that teachers carry with them into the school. Many of them actually believe that some children cannot learn or that they are not motivated to learn. They blame the family and the community. Most importantly, teachers complain that parents are not able to help their children with their studies. I must hasten to add that the situation in the majority of the low cost private schools may not be very different when it

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<sup>1</sup> Professor, Teacher Management and Development at the National University for Educational Planning and Administration, New Delhi

comes to learning. Yet, there is a perception among government school teachers that their wards and parents do not value education and learning.

Four, educators and pedagogy experts blame rote learning – the practice of memorising information. There is a large body of people in the education field who squarely blame our system of teaching and learning and believe that a more child-centric and experiential learning process could reverse the trend. Several states, starting with Karnataka and Tamil Nadu introduced Activity Based Learning – a method that was pioneered by Rishi Valley Education Centre. While there is considerable evidence showing that this has definitely energised classrooms and enabled children to learn at their own pace, there is still little evidence to show that this has indeed improved learning when the ABL method is adopted on a large scale.

Five, in the wake of Teacher Eligibility Tests (introduced after RTE) and the high proportion of candidates who fail to clear the examination – there are people who argue that subject knowledge is poor among our teachers. They point out that it is the quality of teacher – her/his mastery over subjects, pedagogic skills and aptitude to teach that is perhaps responsible for poor learning. Many of them argue that people enter the teaching profession as a last resort – when they have no other option. They point to the Polish educational reform process and argue that the single most important factor is teacher knowledge and aptitude. However, others argue that teacher salaries have gone up since the fifth and sixth pay commission and it is wrong to say that the teaching profession is less prestigious in terms of salary and working conditions. These people believe that over time more qualified people will enter the profession and that the TET has already made a difference.

Six, there is yet another group of experts who believe that the no-detention policy that ensures children are promoted from one grade to the next is the reason why the school system is not made accountable for the learning of children. Coupled with age-appropriate enrolment, the very essence of schooling is negated when children are pushed up without any guarantee of learning. They argue that the Right to Education is not limited to the right to be enrolled, but to be taught and to learn.

Seven, educational researchers point out that the number of actual teaching days is low and that teachers have many non-teaching duties. Effectively the time a child spends in actual teaching-learning activity is low. Despite a clear policy since 1965 to facilitate sub-region specific school calendar and timings, teachers unions have stalled any move to introduce localised time planning.

Many other problems – big and small – are cited. Some are to do with teachers, others with the supervisory and monitoring systems and still more are about parents and children. The fact is that we, as a society, as an education community and as administrators have become numb and insensitive to the all-pervading learning crisis. There are so many factors that have contributed to this crisis and we really do not know where to start reforming the education system. Surveys like ASER have forced us to confront the problem and acknowledge its seriousness. However, surveys and research studies have not shaken our administrators enough to sit down and see what can be done to overhaul the education system.

Where does one start?

It is time that a diverse group of people – including political leaders and administrators – come together to brainstorm and develop a roadmap for systemic reform. It can be done – provided there is political will, administrative readiness and social pressure. The quality of education is essentially about learning. It is not about brick and mortar or about toilets and water. Infrastructure is perhaps easiest to fix – what is proving difficult is the daily process of teaching and learning, the everyday practice of teachers in the classroom and the cumbersome process of striking a balance between monitoring and support.

Can ASER initiate a nation-wide dialogue? Is this the next big challenge it can address in the coming ten years?