

Motivation, action and impact

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Every year as we bring out ASER there are plenty of people who point out that things don't seem to change or get better. The government of India and various state governments too agree that while enrollment is approaching near 100%, the quality of education leaves much to be desired. ASER only measures quality of education at the very basic level of being able to read simple text and being able to solve simple math tasks. The national and state curricula go way beyond that. Experts want holistic education. Ordinary parents may not understand all these debates and may not have a clear idea of what good quality of education is, but there is no doubt that they are in search of a good education for their children. The interplay of these different perspectives results in the change, or the lack of it, that we see reflected in ASER.

Around the turn of the last century, or even a decade before that, the need for education began to turn into a demand as the Indian economy started revving up and the connection between education and jobs became real. To the economists and other policy-makers looking at the country from Delhi, the term 'demographic dividend' became popular. This too connected education with economy and products of education with jobs, unlike in previous years when education was more a matter of social justice and nation-building. It should have been apparent that the larger goals of education were going to be in conflict with the immediate gains parents were looking for. What has unfolded over a dozen years is possibly the result of this conflict. Understanding it may help us think about how to shape future developments in education.

The first ASER of 2005 was quite shocking. It was the first time we quantified the poor quality of learning in Indian schools and for the first time reported that only about 51% children in government schools in Std 5 could read a Std 2 text. As a first report although people found it alarming, it did not lead to an uproar and it did not galvanize policy-makers, leaders and administrators into action to urgently correct this situation. Some states did respond but other government-led initiatives led to actions in other directions such as the formulation of the National Curriculum Framework with its philosophy of constructivism. As ASER 2006, 2007 and 2008 reported basically the same facts without any change in learning levels, our report was in danger of becoming boringly repetitive. The basic facts were noted but it did not seem that anyone was in a hurry to ensure that all children learned to read and do basic math at the primary stage as a preparation for higher levels of learning. There was clearly no motivation beyond the ordinary on part of the governments, therefore there was no action, and hence no impact.

At this stage UPA II took charge and as one of its first actions passed the Right to Education Act in 2009. This law was consistent with the thinking of the past six decades. Hence, it focused on inputs and failed to address the immediate challenges of quality. The Act came into force in April 2010, and in less than two years, the proportion of children attending rural private schools jumped from 21.5% to 28.1%. Why did this massive exodus from government schools happen just after passage of an Act that was meant to ensure free and compulsory education? We may never fully understand. But there was clearly a gap between governmental thinking and parental demand.

There was something else. ASER 2010, published six months after the enforcement of the RTE Act, showed that only 50.7% of India's government school children could read a Std 2 level text. That figure had been steady for nearly three years. Within two years after that, ASER 2012 reported this number to have dropped further to 41.7%. The Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India did not take ASER report seriously and instead claimed at that time that the learning levels had gone up. However, it has recently come out with its own report that clearly states that the learning levels had indeed dropped over that period.

These two big changes happened simultaneously. They were not anticipated at all. After the passage of RTE Act, children should have flocked to government schools and learning levels should have gone up. The exact opposite happened. Why did children in so many states move to private schools? Did that move have something to do with the dropping of learning levels in government schools? Again, we may never know but this simultaneous occurrence of two phenomena on such a massive scale cannot be a simple coincidence.

Clearly, the demand and motivation among the people was quite different from what the government was attempting. The government could not sell its vision and plan to the population.

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The declining learning levels after the enforcement of RTE was linked by many critics with the formalization of the automatic promotion policy in the Act. More recently, as a new education policy came up for discussion, the demand that "children must be failed if they do not learn" started making the rounds. We may be seeing the beginning of a major error in the opposite direction.

The prevalent age-grade system expects the child to learn the prescribed content within that year. Naturally, the 'fail them' brigade would expect those who do not learn to stay back until they do. Experience shows that keeping children back in the same grade does not help learning. It is simply a punitive action that humiliates the child. So, we want the children to learn before moving up the age-grade ladder, but do not want to keep the child back. How is this to be accomplished?

Perhaps we should replace the rigid age-grade system with a flexible stage-age group system which will give all children opportunity to learn skills over 2-3 years.

Thanks to the universal schooling achieved over the last decade and more, there are very few older children who have never been enrolled in schools. Most children are entering schools at the age of 5 or 6 and increasingly staying in school well past Std 8 or the age of 14. Also, a large number of schools in India are not only multi-level but also multi-grade. It should be possible to organize children into different learning groups of mixed ages that they feel comfortable with rather than rigid 'standards' and 'classes' organized by age. We need to define learning outcomes by stages and assess children whenever they are ready. In today's age, it should be possible to assess children multiple times to enable them to improve their performance at their convenience, without the fear of failing.

Just as the 'promote all' policy was followed blindly without ensuring that children learned the basics properly, there is a good chance that the enthusiasm for 'fail them' will overshadow proper attention to children's learning. Either way, neither policy works unless children's learning is ensured.

Unfortunately we do not have cases of planned and sustained improvement of learning levels in government systems over the last ten years. ASER has seen some cases when learning levels improved somewhat, only to go down again as a key officer was moved or a policy was changed. This lack of sustained change or improvement suggests that there was neither underlying large scale demand from parents nor motivation of the government to drive change.

When such demand exists in society its impact is unmistakable. At the turn of the last century the fact that the 'need' for education was rapidly changing into 'demand' for education could be felt. This demand has been growing. It is this demand that has led to over 96% enrollment in schools. It is this demand that is leading to the growth of private schools and it is this unmet demand that is causing frustration among adolescents and youth whose aspirations are growing day by day.

One of the key features of this demand for education is related to learning English. It is not just the parents but also the children who want to learn English. The parents may want children to learn English because it is felt that English can get them good jobs and a secure future. The children may want it for other reasons, such as identity and a sense of dignity.

Is math in demand? No. Is reading in their mother tongue in demand? It does not appear to be. Is writing well in demand? Not at all. English? Yes, of course. Various state governments have responded to this demand by starting English learning from the first year in school even if there is no qualified teacher. But private schools are probably responding to this demand better.

ASER started assessing ability to read English in 2007. A couple of years later we also started checking if the children understood what they were reading. The table below shows interesting data from states which have a high proportion of students in private schools.

The data show that with the exception of UP, in all these states: a) private school enrollment in Std 5 is increasing, b) proportion of children in private schools who can read English sentences is increasing (except in Uttarakhand), and c) proportion of children in government schools who can read English sentences is increasing slowly but consistently.

	% Std 5 children ENROLLED in private schools			% Children in Std 5 who can read English sentences					
				Private schools			Government schools		
	2012	2014	2016	2012	2014	2016	2012	2014	2016
Uttar Pradesh	50.8	51.7	51.3	26.6	34.7	31.9	4.4	7.0	4.8
Rajasthan	42.1	40.0	42.0	27.8	30.4	35.0	5.1	5.4	9.4
Haryana	45.0	52.2	54.8	71.1	74.8	75.0	17.3	23.6	29.4
Uttarakhand	34.3	36.3	44.4	55.1	64.2	58.6	16.9	13.8	22.8
Punjab	42.3	45.5	51.6	72.3	77.9	83.2	36.9	29.7	34.0
Himachal Pradesh	27.8	34.8	40.2	79.3	81.5	91.0	45.5	38.8	44.0
Madhya Pradesh	15.5	20.4	23.7	27.3	30.0	35.9	4.8	4.3	5.6
Chhattisgarh	10.6	17.9	20.3	24.7	31.0	43.4	5.0	6.2	9.5
Maharashtra	43.6	41.0	43.4	26.9	31.7	34.8	16.7	14.6	22.7
Tamil Nadu	28.2	33.0	34.2	43.8	52.4	58.3	17.7	24.2	26.4
Kerala	58.7	56.2	54.1	70.0	81.5	77.7	52.4	51.4	57.4

Data for reading in mother tongue or solving math in Std 5 in these states do not show such consistent improvement for either government or private schools. But, clearly English reading does. Why is this the case?

At least two factors need to be in place in order to achieve consistent improvement. First, there has to be a strong demand from parents and possibly strong parental support for children's learning. Second, the human capital- the teachers- are probably also getting better at teaching English. A possible third factor could be the introduction of one or two years of pre-school that prepares children for primary school.

There is little doubt that there is a demand for education as reflected by the growing percentage of children in private schools, and also by the improving percentage of English readers in these schools. This demand may be more selective than we like, as we can see improvement in English but not in reading and math, the other two skills/sectors that we assess. School education cannot only be driven by popular demand. But it cannot ignore what popular demand is saying either. The skill will lie in creating demand and motivation for learning beyond what is needed for a job.

It appears to me that the age-grade system needs to be changed to a stage-group arrangement and we need to take a second look at what we mean by curriculum and syllabus. We need to rethink a number of things. For example, should we be teaching language the old fashioned way? Or, should we be more communication focused? In the area of math: Does everyone know how to use calculators and spreadsheets? This is not to say that we should not teach algebra but perhaps we need to ask ourselves whether everyone needs to study algebra at the same age or if this is something that can be studied when students are interested.

The digital age is almost here and its hallmark is non-linearity. This means that the economic efficiency that age-grade textbooks and syllabi provided in the past is no longer the best solution. Helping children create their own syllabi should be much more easily possible. Digital devices allow access to content without barriers, but our schools and education system is linear and full of barriers.

The short and selective history traced in this article says that we need to be aware of the conflict between the nature of the demand and the thinking of the government. This conflict has to be managed better. Measurements such as ASER can be helpful in understanding and managing this conflict.