

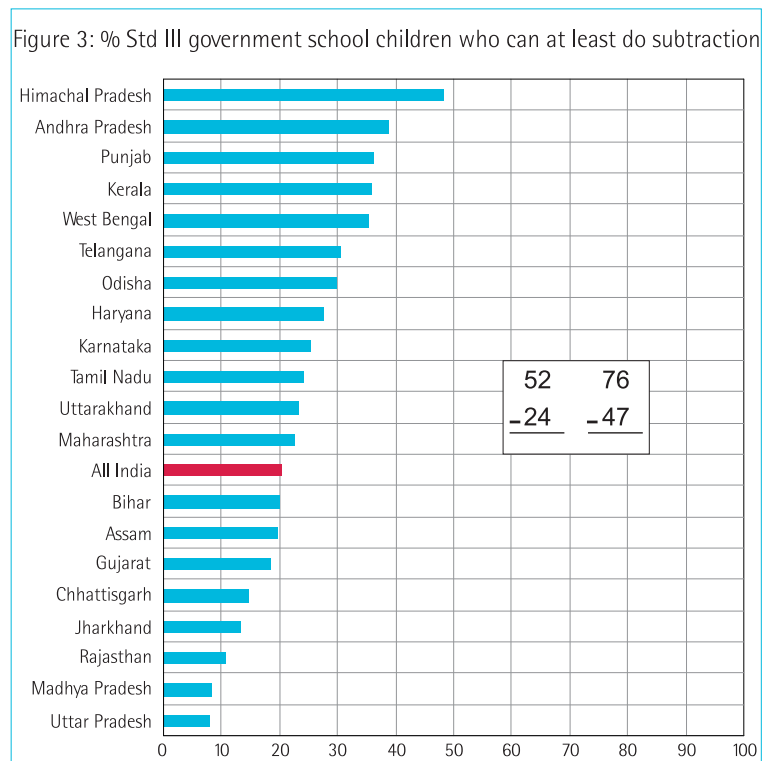
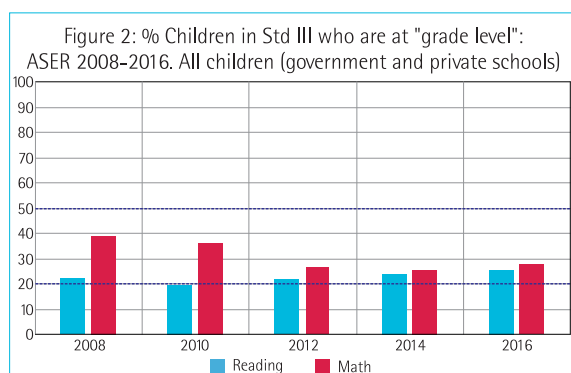
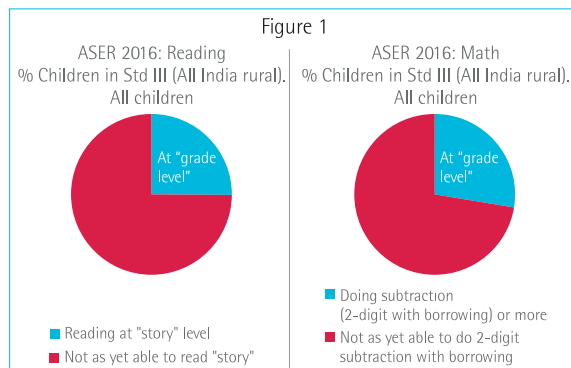
Teaching "toppers" or learning for all?

Rukmini Banerji¹

The meeting had been going on for almost an hour. One round of tea had come and gone and another round was starting. We were sitting around a long table - senior state level government officials from the education department and us. The focus was on student achievement data; some figures were from ASER and other findings were from recent research studies. We moved slowly through the presentation. As each PowerPoint slide came on the screen, there were many viewpoints to be aired and interpretations to be shared. At one point, the seniormost officer present said, "Yes, everyone knows that half the children in Std V cannot do what is expected of them in Std II. But tell me how many children in our schools are at grade level?"

There is a quick and intuitive answer to this question based on ASER data. Let's look at Std III. The highest reading task in ASER is an eight-ten line "story". The text for the "story" is like the texts found in Std II language textbooks of that state. Therefore, if a child is at "story" level and is currently studying in Std III, we can safely assume that the child is at "grade level", at least for reading. Similarly, for math, in most states children are expected to be able to do two-digit by two-digit subtraction sums with borrowing by Std II. Therefore, if a child can do such tasks in Std III, we can say that he or she can deal with what is expected of her in that grade.

With these "grade level" definitions in mind, let us look at what ASER says. Data for the current school year, from ASER 2016, suggests that today just about one in four children in Std III in an average rural school is at "grade" level in reading and in math (Figure 1). Nationally, this picture does not seem to have changed very much over the last decade, although there has been a slight increase between 2014 and 2016 (Figure 2).



But when we look at different states, we can see wide variations. Figure 3 gives the state-wise status for math for Std III children in government schools in 2016. The "grade level" situation (whether children can cope with what is expected of them) ranges from 50% in Himachal Pradesh to less than 10% in Uttar Pradesh.

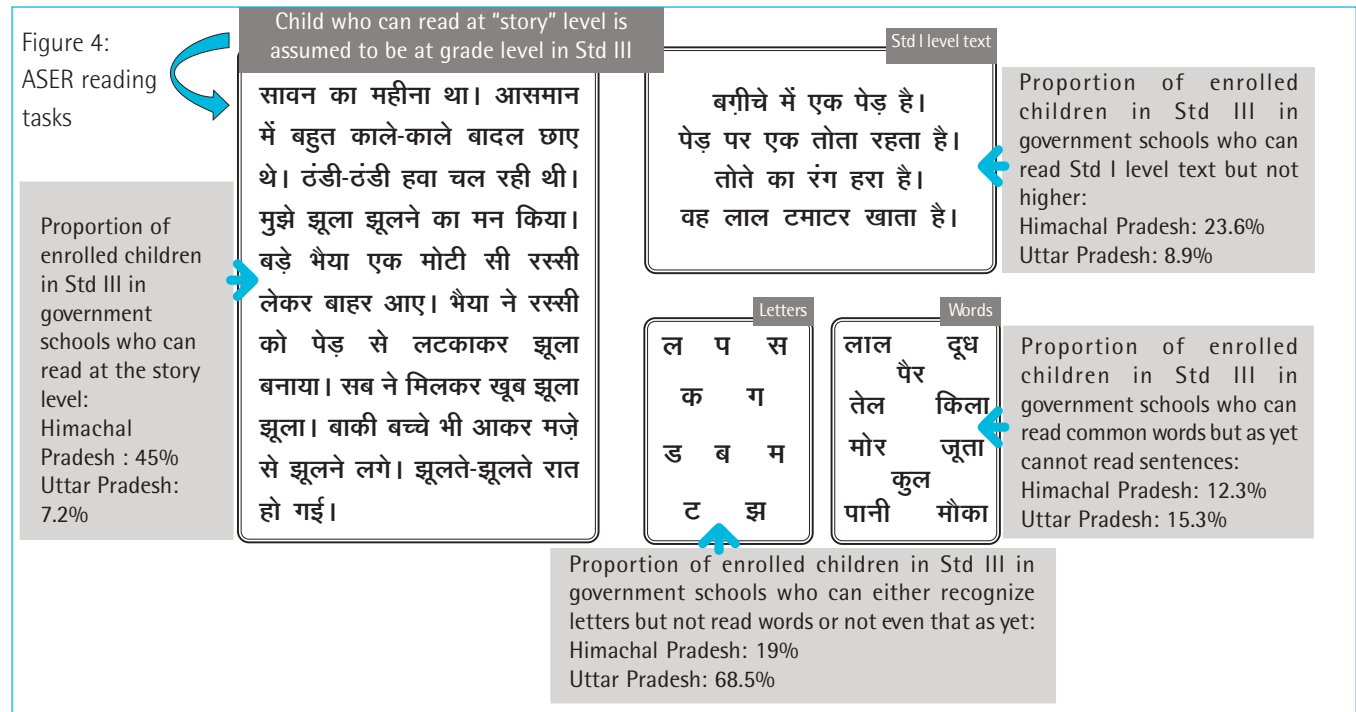
¹ Chief Executive Officer, Pratham Education Foundation

What are the implications of these trends? What factors influence them?

Close your eyes and visualize a typical Std III classroom. What does it look like? What happens there on a normal day? If you peek through an open window, you will see children, on benches or on the floor, sitting in rows looking towards the blackboard in the front of the class. The teacher is standing, facing the children. She is using the textbook prescribed for Std III. Children also have the textbook, open on the page that the teacher is using. The teacher talks about what is in the chapter that she is teaching. From time to time, she writes on the blackboard and sometimes she asks questions. Almost always, the textbook is the main anchor for the teaching-learning activity in the classroom.²

A set of assumptions underlies what we see in our typical primary school classroom. It is assumed that for each year that a child spends in school, some "value" is "added" to the child's basic capabilities. Textbooks are created with this progression in mind. Thus, when a child reaches Std III and has to deal with the Std III textbooks, the expectation is that the child has "completed" Std II and so is ready with the prerequisite knowledge, capabilities and skills that are needed to cope with the Std III curriculum.

The reality is quite different. Data from ASER clearly shows that there are many children who are not at all ready for what is expected of them in their current grade. Let us take the states that are at two ends of the learning spectrum - Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh (Figure 4). Using "story" level as the criterion for being at "grade level" in Std III, we can see that in Himachal Pradesh close to half of all children in Std III are at grade level. But the picture is very different in Uttar Pradesh, where less than 10% of children in Std III in an average Std III classroom can read simple text fluently. The distribution of reading levels for the other children is also distinctly different. In Himachal Pradesh, only 20% of children are still struggling to recognize letters whereas that figure for Uttar Pradesh is overwhelmingly large at 68%. The data imply that for Std III in Uttar Pradesh's government schools, approximately seven out of ten children cannot even read simple everyday words in Hindi.



² Over the last ten years, researchers at ASER Centre have been involved with three studies of teachers and teaching. Led by Prof. Geeta Kingdon, the first study, SchoolTELLS, studied a sample of government and private primary schools in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in 2007-08 (Banerji & Kingdon 2009. Addressing School Quality. Some policy pointers from rural North India. Policy Brief. No. 5. RECOUP. Research Consortium on Educational Outcomes and Poverty). The second, "Inside Primary Schools" followed a cohort of children through two school years in Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Assam and Andhra Pradesh (Inside Primary Schools, www.asercentre.org). A total of close to 1000 schools were part of the study. The most recent project focused on 400 schools in four districts in Bihar. In each of these studies, repeat observations of classroom teaching were carried out. Each of these studies finds that teaching is almost entirely anchored by textbook content and that most teaching practices are based on "chalk and talk". (Banerji & Wadhwa et al (2016), Teacher Performance in Bihar. Implications for Education. Directions in Human Development. World Bank Group Publications. World Bank, Washington DC USA. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/23637>)

Let us return to the classroom we were visualizing earlier. How appropriate is it to use Std III textbook to anchor the teaching? Who in the classroom benefits? In Himachal Pradesh, half the class is fine; roughly another 25% can read simple text and so perhaps they too can follow and participate, even if it is a bit of a struggle. So about three quarters of all children can cope with what is going on in the class. In Himachal Pradesh, teaching from the textbook may be fine, although there too the outcomes will improve if additional attention is paid to the children who need more scaffolding and support.

But in Uttar Pradesh the current approach of using the grade level textbook is leaving practically everyone far behind. Three quarters of the children cannot even read words. If we really want children to have a real opportunity to learn then we must start from where they are. Without solid foundational skills, no one can move ahead. Barely 7% children (less than one in ten) in Std III in an average government school in Uttar Pradesh can cope with what the teacher is doing in class. Clearly the strategy for teaching in Uttar Pradesh needs to be completely rethought and totally redesigned. If the objective is to enable most children to make progress, then it is essential to go back to the drawing board in terms of learning goals, content and curriculum, pace and sequence of activities, realistic timelines and implementable methods. In many ways, Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh are at two ends of a spectrum; the rest of India's states are somewhere in between. The reality of each state and the track record of what has been achieved in recent years has to be considered in planning for the future.

Children not learning has deeper implications for the entire ecosystem of education. Think about the teachers. Many work hard and do their job of "completing the syllabus". Yet, more often than not, they do not see their children making adequate progress. This makes them disheartened. Think about the parents. Parents work hard to send their children to school. Often these are people who have not had much schooling themselves but have high hopes about the benefits and opportunities that schooling will bring to their children. When children don't make progress, parents are disappointed - with schools, with teachers and often with their children. Think about children. They go to class but many cannot understand or relate to what the teacher wants them to do. Children become disinterested with school and disengaged from the process of teaching and learning.³ Low learning levels depress the whole ecosystem. We seem to have designed a system in which the assumption is that all children will progress to the next level. When this does not happen, everyone blames others. And we are stuck in a vicious cycle of high expectations and low capability to meet them.

Back to the meeting in the secretariat. The empty tea cups from the second round of snacks were being cleared along with the leftover crumbs from the biscuits and samosas. The PowerPoint presentation was almost done. After almost two hours, debates and discussions were also winding down. In wrapping up, the senior officer summarized the day's interactions and exchanges and then continued thinking aloud. "Right now, based on what you are telling me, we have about 20% of our children in Std III at grade level. What would you want the figure to be?" he wanted to know. I remained silent for a while. The answer was obvious to me. I wondered what was in his mind. What did he want for his state? A few students who could excel? Or a majority who became capable of moving ahead? Priorities would determine the path forward.

My immediate answer to the officer was that our responsibility should be to ensure that most children in Std III are able to cope with what is expected of them in Std III. Clearly, teaching to the "top of the class" is not an approach that reaps results in our context. In most states, the top of the class is like the tip of the iceberg; it is small and gets slimmer as children move through the school system. With not much visible change in children's learning trajectories in the last ten years, "business as usual" is not a strategy that is likely to work in getting us out of this low equilibrium or "big stuck".⁴ "More of the same" - an input oriented approach will certainly bring more facilities to the schools but will not improve reading or arithmetic. Technocratic or managerial solutions which put a priority on monitoring teachers and school functioning may improve attendance but will not improve learning levels.⁵

³ Interestingly, the attendance of children in a government primary school in Himachal Pradesh is almost 87% on an average day whereas that in Uttar Pradesh, the same number is close to 56%. While it is hard to disentangle cause and effect, there is a strong link between children's progress and their attendance and participation in school.

⁴ This term is attributed to the economist Lant Pritchett of Harvard University.

⁵ Using recent data on schooling and learning, a large part of Lant Pritchett's recent book "The Rebirth of Education" lays out in detail why these strategies are not likely to work.

To improve children's learning, we must take a hard look at our priorities and at our realities. We then need to think concretely of what we want to achieve. Is it excellence for a few or opportunity for all? If our real goal is opportunity for all, then we need to seriously consider how to do things differently. There are several parts to meeting this challenge. First is to think about what constitutes "grade level" expectations. What are these expectations based on? Common sense suggests that grade level expectations should be based on content and skills that most teachers can enable most children to acquire. As teachers become more capable and children become more able, what is expected at different grade levels could change. Second, to enable most children to learn, the fundamental principle is to begin where children are and to aim for achievable goals. In this framework of action, the priority is to teach children, not simply teach the curriculum or complete the syllabus. As the first goal post is reached, the confidence to aim for the next goal post and the capability and motivation to reach it is much stronger.

There are well studied and researched examples in India that show that substantial and significant changes in children's basic learning are possible. For example, regardless of grade and age, starting from where children are and using appropriate activities and materials for each level, has proved to be a very effective method. Pratham's teaching-learning approach which is called CAMaL (Combined Activities for Maximized Learning), also referred to as "teaching-at-the-right level", has been rigorously evaluated and found to be very effective in significantly and substantially raising basic reading and arithmetic levels. This change can happen in a period of just 30 to 50 days of instruction, working 2-3 hours a day with children from Std 3 to 5.⁶ Even in a state like Uttar Pradesh, where children's learning levels are very low, independent evaluations of Pratham's work have shown that huge jumps in children's learning can happen.⁷ There may be other home grown models on scale, as well, that have strong evidence of enabling children to learn. The key behind any such effort is the strong desire and the deep belief that all children can learn if we are able to provide the right opportunities and appropriate support. The most effective pathway emerges with continuous experimentation and openness to evidence.

On the face of it, India is close to "schooling for all". But our journey towards "learning for all" is yet to begin. Many parents and policy makers still believe that schooling leads to learning. More than ten years of data shows that the issue of learning needs urgent and direct attention. World renowned researchers (like Banerjee and Duflo as well as Pritchett) have strongly argued along these same lines using recent data from India.

Evidence strongly indicates that by the third year in school (well before they have spent even 1000 days in the education system), children's future is sealed. The equity and growth implications of teaching only to the "top of the class" are frightening; they are camouflaged by the outward signs and symbols of universal schooling. If "learning for all" is not given top most priority, if clear and achievable goals are not set, if teachers and parents are not supported in their efforts to help children learn, we will lose all the potential benefits of bringing every child to school. For a bright and hopeful future, whether as individuals, as families or even as a country, we must aim for "every child in school **and** learning well."

⁶ For details about Pratham's teaching-learning approach, see Banerji and Chavan (2016) "Improving literacy and math instruction at scale in India's primary schools: The case of Pratham's Read India program". *Journal of Educational Change*. 17(4), 433-475. November. <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10833-016-9285-5e>. Also, see Banerji (2015), How Do Systems Respond to Disruptive Pedagogic Innovations? The Case of Pratham in Bihar. RISE Working Paper Series. RISE-WP-15/002 October 2015 http://www.riseprogramme.org/sites/www.riseprogramme.org/files/151026_BanerjiWP.pdf For impact evaluations of Pratham's work by JPAL, see Banerjee et al (2016). From Proof of Concept to Scalable Policies: Challenges and Solutions, with an Application. NBER Working Paper 22931. Issued in December 2016. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w22931>. Also, Banerjee et al (2016) "Mainstreaming an Effective Intervention: Evidence from Randomized Evaluations of "Teaching at the Right Level" in India". NBER Working Paper No. 22746. October 2016. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w22746?sy=746>.

⁷ Details in the papers listed above.