School matters

Wilima Wadhwa[1]

ASER is back after a gap of a year! A lot has happened in the two years since ASER 2014 was released. In particular, there seems to be a general acceptance of the fact that learning levels are low and that something needs to be done about it. The government is in the process of launching a slew of learning assessments across the country; there is even talk about doing a learning census. A new education policy is being drafted after almost three decades. All of these are good developments, and one hopes that they will lead to changes in how teaching and learning happens in classrooms, and get reflected in improved learning outcomes for each successive cohort of children.

Between 2010 and 2013, ASER estimates showed indications of a decline in learning outcomes. What was more worrying was that the decline was primarily observed in government schools - private school learning levels were steady although not improving. In 2014, it seemed that this trend was arrested and learning levels seemed to stabilize. However, with no ASER in 2015, it was difficult to say whether the trend had been reversed. Therefore, ASER 2016 results were eagerly awaited with the hope that this year would give us some good news, especially for government schools. And, indeed there is good news! Learning levels - both reading and arithmetic - are up in government schools. However, there is also some bad news. Overall, this improvement is only seen in lower primary grades and in particular in Std 3. There is no change in learning levels in Std 5 and a slight decline is visible in Std 8.

In Std 3, the proportion of children who can read at least a Std 1 level text has increased from 40.2% in 2014 to 42.5% in 2016 at the all India level, and the proportion of children who can read at Std 2 level has also gone up from 23.6% to 25.2%. These changes seem small, but are significant given our past performance. Given the size of India and the diversity of states, often the all India estimate suffers from an averaging effect and hides the state level variations. For the all India figure to increase means that most states, especially large ones, are moving in the same direction.

The thing to note, though, is that in 2016 this improvement is being driven by learning gains in government schools as opposed to private schools. In Std 3 of government schools, the ability to read a Std 1 level text has increased from 31.8% to 34.8% and the ability to read a Std 2 level text from 17.2% to 19.3%. As always, there is a lot of variation at the state level. States like Punjab, Uttarakhand, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Gujarat have experienced large gains (in excess of 8 percentage points) while states like Andhra Pradesh have seen a decline. However, by and large most states have seen an improvement in learning levels in Std 3 in government schools.

With government schools improving and private schools holding steady, this also means that the gap between government and private schools has narrowed. The superiority of learning outcomes in private schools has long been the subject of debate. While the public perception has always been that private schools provide a better quality education, research has shown that just comparing learning outcomes between government and private schools is not comparing apples with apples. Apart from school and classroom factors, there are many other factors that determine how, and how well, a child learns - her cognitive abilities, her parents' education, and the learning environment in her home are just a few of these. Therefore, attributing the difference in learning outcomes between children enrolled in government schools and those enrolled in private schools to the effect of schools is misleading.

It is well known that children who go to private schools come from relatively affluent backgrounds. They also tend to have more educated parents. This affords them certain advantages that aid learning. These advantages are not available to children who are from less advantaged families and are likely to attend government schools. Once we control for these other factors that affect learning, the gap in reading or math levels between children attending different types of schools narrows significantly. My analysis in the ASER 2014 report had shown that as much as 75% of this difference could be attributed to factors outside the school. In addition, over time the contribution of these "other" factors had increased.[2]

[1] Director, ASER Centre

[2] A similar analysis in the ASER 2009 Report had shown that about two thirds of the difference between government and private school learning levels could be attributed to the child's household characteristics.

These findings had other implications, as well, in view of the trends in enrollment and learning. Between 2006 and 2014 private school enrollment increased steadily from 18.7% to 30.8%. During the same period learning levels either languished or declined in government schools while those in private schools held steady - the gap between them widened. As rural India became more prosperous, parents with means shifted their children to private schools and the pool that government schools were drawing their students from became relatively more disadvantaged.

These trends seem to have been arrested this year. For the first time since 2006, private school enrollment has not increased - in fact, it has fallen marginally from 30.8% in 2014 to 30.5% in 2016. There also seem to be signs of resurgence in government schools. In Std 3, if we look at the proportion of children who can read at Std 1 level, the gap between government and private schools has narrowed by 2.6 percentage points. Even for Std 2 level readers the gap has reduced by 1.9 percentage points.

These numbers may seem disappointing to some and, therefore, not worth reporting. But they are worth unpacking a little bit. Consider the average child in Std 3 in a government school. The probability that this child can read a Std 1 level text is 34.8%, as compared to 59.4% in a private school. However, the likelihood that this child lives in a "pukka" home is only 36% as compared to 65.9% of an average Std 3 private school child. Similarly, the probability that this child has a television at home is 43.5% compared to 64.9% for a Std 3 private school child and the probability that this child has a mother who has some schooling is 48.4% compared to 66.5% for a private school child. How would this child perform if she had some of the advantages that most private school children have?

First, let's give her a pukka home to live in - immediately the probability that she can read increases from 34.8% to 41.7%. Now, let's give her a TV to watch so that she can see what's going on in the outside world - the likelihood of her being a reader increases to 49.9%. If she has a mother who has been to school, the probability that she can read increases even further to 57.4%. Just with these very basic advantages, she is almost at the average private school level. If in addition her mother maybe reads to her from print material available in her home, she outperforms the average private school child with a 62.2% chance of being a reader.

But we already knew this - the importance of household affluence and mother's education for learning outcomes is well established. A private school child with the same characteristics would have even higher learning levels. After all, the above comparison is between an advantaged government school child and an average private school child. How much higher, though? It turns out that a private school child with the same set of advantages would not be doing that much better - the likelihood that such a child is reader is 73.6%. The gap is much less! The average Std 3 private school child outperforms her government school counterpart by 24.6 percentage points while the difference here is only 11.4 percentage points. So when we compare children with similar home environments, the difference between government and private schools narrows significantly. Again, this has been shown by various research studies. The question here is, what is this advantage we are talking about? Does having a pukka home qualify as an advantage? How about a TV? A mother who has been to school and some reading materials in the home? These are all very basic things that many would take for granted.

So is it all about poverty? Would general prosperity make everything, including learning levels in schools, better? Not quite. Consider the case of Odisha and West Bengal as a case in point. Both these states have affluence indicators that are either below or at par with the national average. For instance, in both Odisha and West Bengal, about 23% Std 3 government school children live in pukka homes compared to 36% on average. Yet, learning levels in both these states are above the national average. In Odisha 45.5% children of Std 3 government schools are readers compared to the national average of 34.8%. The corresponding figure for West Bengal is 53.9%. What both these states have is a far larger proportion of mothers who have been to school - in excess of 60%. This correlation between mother's education and children's learning levels, again, is well established; learning support at home is very important in fueling children's progress.

However, while household and parental factors are important and often explain a large proportion of the difference between government and private school learning outcomes, they are not a substitute for what happens in school. Which brings us back to private schools - after all they do perform better than government schools. Should the government just get out of education, and leave it to the private

sector? If that were the case countries would not be spending, or targeting to spend, 6% of their GDP on public education of which school education forms a significant part. Further, in the case of India, even though private schools have higher learning levels as compared to government schools, it is not as if all children in private schools are at grade level - only 38% of children in Std 3 in private schools could read a Std 2 level text in 2016. Even today, 70% of rural children attend government schools; the push towards universal enrollment has resulted in almost all rural habitations having a government primary school within a kilometre. On the other hand only 40% villages had a private school (ASER 2014). Therefore, there isn't much of choice! The public school system must step up and improve the quality of education it provides.

Every year when the ASER Report is released and there is no improvement to report, we are asked what needs to be done to improve learning levels. But, ASER is not designed to answer this question. It is a rapid assessment that shows temperature on the ground. However, because it is done every year, at the same time, and has large sample sizes at the state level, it is able to pick up even small changes at that level. For instance, the Punjab government unleashed a state level intervention to improve learning levels in government primary schools in 2014-15. Even though there was no national ASER in 2015, at the request of the state government the assessment was done in Punjab. And sure enough, the improvement in learning levels was visible in the state estimates.

In the last few years, the focus has clearly shifted from enrollment to learning in education. This is true not just nationally but also internationally - the new Sustainable Development Goals for education are framed in terms of both access and learning outcomes. Nationally, various arms of the government - MHRD, NITI Aayog, state governments - are getting ready to unleash a variety of learning assessments in the country; there is talk about doing away with the automatic promotion policy introduced by the Right to Education (RTE) Act; the government is also looking to define grade wise learning goals. Clearly, something is also happening on the ground because this is the first year since 2010 that we have seen any improvement in learning levels in government schools, albeit small and restricted to lower primary grades. The important thing now is to sustain the momentum so that these small changes multiply and spread across the system.