

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 guarantees elementary schooling to all children in the age group of 6-14 years. When the RTE came into effect in 2010, the percentage of out of school children in the age group of 6-14 was only 3.4%. But, the percentage of out of school children in the age group of 11-14 years was 5.2%, and for girls in this age group it was even higher at 5.7%. By 2016, the percentage of 6-14 years out of school children had come down to 3.1% and that of 11-14 years to 4.6%, with high out of school states like Bihar showing great progress in improving retention in school.

Simultaneously, the government also launched the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) in 2009 to enhance access to secondary education. However, transition rates to secondary schools remain low. In 2016, the percentage of 15-16 year olds who were out of school was 15.3% compared to 16.1% in 2010. Recognizing the importance of secondary and early childhood education, the government is considering increasing the coverage of the RTE Act from 6-14 years to 3-16 years.

All this is well and good, but the current reality is that many young persons do not progress to higher schooling after completing elementary school. More importantly, as ASER has shown over the years, completion of elementary schooling does not guarantee even foundational reading and arithmetic skills. This year ASER 2017 goes "Beyond Basics" and focuses on a wider set of domains for 14-18 year olds - youth who are above the elementary school age on their way to adulthood. These are crucial years in the life of a young person - years when life-changing decisions about career paths are made. The transition from elementary to secondary school happens during these years and if a youth drops out at the end of Std VIII or X it is more than likely that she will not return to complete her studies.

Based on a sample of almost 30,000 youth from 26 rural districts across 24 states, ASER 2017 gives a snapshot of the lives of these young adults: What are they doing? They could be engaged in a variety of activities - studying in a formal education institution; taking a vocational course; preparing for an exam; working or a combination of these activities. What is their ability to do simple everyday tasks like counting money or managing a budget or calculating the discount on something they want to buy? Are they digitally and financially aware? What are their aspirations and do they have role models for the professions they aspire to?

Most 14-18 year olds are in the formal education system - only 14.4% are not currently enrolled in school or college. However, this number varies a lot with age. At age 14, only 5.3% are not enrolled, but by age 17 this percentage quadruples to 20.7% and further increases to 30.2% at age 18. With almost 10% of India's population in this age group these percentages translate into large numbers of youth who are not in the formal education system.

So what are they doing? Are they enrolled in a vocational course? After all formal education is not for everyone and the government is putting a lot of energy into promoting vocational skilling as an alternative to formal schooling. Unfortunately, very few youth seem to be enrolled in vocational training or other short courses. Overall, only about 5.3% youth age 14-18 are enrolled in such courses and among those who are not currently enrolled this percentage is only slightly higher at 6.2%.

¹Director, ASER Centre

If they are not in the formal or informal education system, does this mean that they are working? Yes, indeed, a large proportion of youth who are not studying have joined the labor force - 60.2% of out of school youth said that they were working compared to 38.5% of enrolled youth. Among boys these numbers are 71.6% and 43.4%, respectively. And the transition to work happens fairly quickly - by the time they are 15 years old majority of out of school youth are working. Most of them - 71.8% - work in the farm sector and the rest in the non-farm sector. In comparison, 80.6% youth who are studying and working, work in the farm sector. However, there are two things that differentiate the work of the out of school youth from that of youth who are still studying. First, close to 30% of them work in the non-farm sector; and second 31.2% of them work on someone's else farm/enterprise while only 8.5% of studying youth do so. This seems to suggest that work for these out of school youth is a primary activity. This is also borne out by the fact that 36.8% of them are paid for their work compared to 10% of those who are both studying and working.

Even accounting for work and enrollment in a vocational course, one third of youth who are not currently enrolled in the formal education system are not doing anything. Those who are working are probably doing so in low productivity jobs given their age and education profiles. This does not bode well for the future of these youth. The natural question to ask is why did they discontinue their studies and what can we do to improve retention in school?

About one fourth of the youth said that they had to discontinue their studies because of financial reasons. In addition, 50% of boys who had left school said the reason for doing so was either lack of interest (34%) or because they had failed in school (16%). For girls these numbers are 19% and 17%, respectively. Among girls, the predominant reason for leaving school was family constraints (32.5%). Interestingly, only about 11% of the girls said that distance to school was a contributing factor .

The correlation between socio-economic characteristics and drop out rates is well established. In our sample as well, youth who have dropped out come from more disadvantaged backgrounds. For instance, 37.2% out of school youth live in pukka homes as compared to 54.1% enrolled youths. The difference in the education of their parents is even starker - 70.7% out of school youth have mothers who have never been to school, 46.1% have fathers who have never been to school and 41.8% have both parents with no schooling. The comparable numbers for enrolled youth are 39.2%, 21.8% and 17.3%, respectively. Given these figures, it is surprising that only a fourth of the out of school youth cited financial constraints as the reason for leaving school.

Apart from socio-economic factors, a large proportion of youth also cited "lack of interest" as a reason for leaving school. Why is school not interesting? According to ASER 2016, 27% children in Std VIII are unable to read a Std II level text and 57% are unable to do simple division that is taught in Std IV. These learning deficits are observed across all grades and accumulate with each grade. How is a child who is unable to read and do simple arithmetic supposed to traverse the curriculum of Std VIII that includes algebra, science, and geography? It is easy to blame the teachers, but the brief to the teacher is to complete the curriculum and if she follows the brief she will end up teaching to the top of the class. There is no mechanism within our school system to effectively address the needs of children who have fallen behind. Any help these children get has to come from home. Educated parents can provide supplementary help at home and if they can

afford to send their children to private tutors and/or private school. This is evident from the proliferation of private tutoring centres across the country and rising enrollment in private schools. Therefore, the learning deficits of children who don't have these advantages - affluent and/or educated parents - are not addressed either in school or at home. The problem is further exacerbated by the automatic promotion policy (up to Std VIII) introduced by the RTE Act. When a child is held back in a grade it is an early warning sign to parents as well as teachers that the child needs additional help. In our current system, a child can progress up to Std VIII without anyone figuring out that she needs help.

A recent study done by ASER Centre shows that learning levels in Std VIII are extremely good predictors of transition to secondary school. In the ASER 2017 sample, as well, the learning levels of out of school youth are far below those still in school. For instance, while 81.7% of enrolled youth could read a Std II level text only 44.5% of out of school youth could read a similar text. The difference in math ability is far worse, with only 11% being able to do simple division compared to 48% of enrolled youth. Even after controlling for family background, poor reading and math skills remain significant contributors to the probability of dropping out of school. For instance, consider a 15 year old who doesn't live in a "pukka" home, whose parents haven't been to school, who is not a fluent reader and cannot divide. The probability that this youth will drop out is 33%. Affluence in the form of a "pukka" home reduces this probability to 25%; but having educated parents reduces it to 18%. But far more than affluence and educated parents is the impact of basic foundational skills - the same 15 year old living in a non-pukka home with parents who have never been school, has only a 10% chance of being out of school if he is a reader himself!

But, many of our not currently enrolled youth have already completed elementary schooling. In the ASER 2017 sample, 70% of the youth who were no longer enrolled in formal education had completed 8 or more years of schooling. Even if their foundational reading and math skills are weak, is it the case that they have the competencies to do simple calculations that are involved in every day tasks? Often children/youth can do functional tasks that involve arithmetic operations like addition or subtraction but are unable to do the same calculation when it is presented in an academic form.

ASER 2017 extended the standard foundational ASER assessment to include tasks that a young person would need to do in their daily lives. For instance, there were simple tasks like telling time, adding weights and counting money; there were questions relating to measurement; slightly more advanced tasks included calculating simple percentages (youth were asked to calculate what they would have to pay for a T-shirt that was on sale with a 10% discount); tasks involving reading and understanding instructions; and finally some simple general knowledge questions like identifying the state they live in on a map.

On all competencies, youth who are not currently enrolled do worse than those who are enrolled. This is true even after controlling for years of schooling completed. Consider a simple task like counting money - youth were shown photos of notes and asked to tell the total amount - a task that most people perform on a daily basis. Among youth who had completed 8 or more years of schooling, 60.5% of those who were not currently enrolled could correctly answer the question as compared to 81.5% of currently enrolled. On a slightly more difficult task of calculating a 10% discount on a T-shirt that was on sale, 29.4% of not enrolled youth with 8 or more years of schooling could answer correctly compared to 40.3% of enrolled youth. On

a simple general knowledge question like identifying the map of India, 75.4% of out of school youth could answer correctly versus 91.8% of enrolled youth.

Clearly, there is something about being in school, over and above completion of certain years of schooling that imparts a certain degree of confidence to youth. This is also borne out by the rate of non-response with far more out of school youth remaining quiet when asked to do simple tasks or probed about their aspirations. When asked how far they wanted to study, 43.9% of currently not enrolled replied either "Don't know" or "No further" as compared to 7.9% of enrolled youth. Similarly, when asked about their occupational aspirations, the predominant response was "Don't know" - 34.1%.

These young men and women who have decided to discontinue their education, sometimes for reasons beyond their control, need support - support from their families and communities; support from the education system at large. Without this support they are likely to remain at the margins of society with all their potential going unexploited. Instead of hiding them, we need to shine the spotlight on them and give them opportunities so that they excel in any field they choose to be in. Finally, we need to ensure that many more youth who are in the education system but behind, remain in school and get the skills needed to participate in the country's growth process.