

In a recent visit to rural schools in Ajmer district, the children sitting in the last couple of rows were in a world of their own, as back-benchers often are. They paid little attention to the teacher, rarely participated in group recitations or volunteered an answer to a question, and were never once called upon by the teacher. In general they were wholly out of sync with the teacher-led, recitation-dominated activity taking place in the class – which was largely with the participation of the first two or three rows of students.

What was heart breaking was the fact that almost every one of these students in the back was *working*. They were quiet and serious. Some copied English words while the rest of the class was copying from the Hindi textbook. Others copied from the maths textbook while the rest of the class was copying word meanings from the blackboard. Almost without exception, they engaged with one or other academic task throughout the class – but not the ones everyone else was engaged in. There was no doubt that they were trying to learn. And without exception, they were ignored by the teacher from beginning to end.

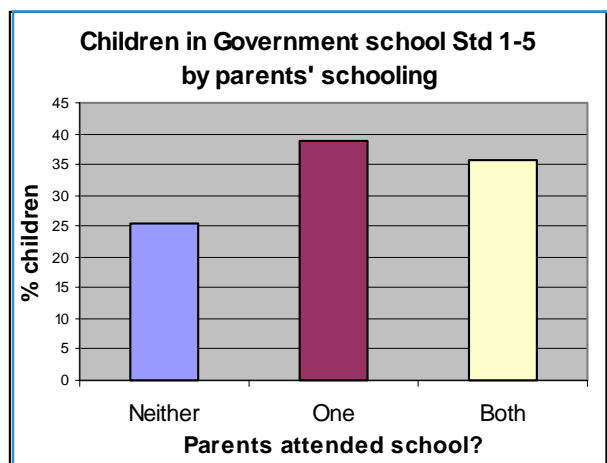
Who were these students? In conversation with their teachers, we learnt that they were the children who weren't keeping up academically, though it wasn't always clear whether sitting at the back was a cause or a consequence of poor academic performance.

The teachers laid the blame for poor learning outcomes unequivocally at the door of the children's homes. Practically every teacher we spoke to told us without the least awkwardness, let alone embarrassment, *Ye bachhe to ghar mein padhai bilkul karte hi nahin hain... to phir kaise seekhenge?* Despite the huge investments in the elementary education sector over the last decade and the considerable expansion in infrastructure and enrollment, schools often behave as though ensuring that children *learn* is the responsibility of parents rather than teachers. And indeed, in many households, we observed families putting great effort into providing academic support, such as sending children to paid tuition classes and getting older siblings to help younger ones.

But there are many households which are not in a position to provide support for children's learning.

This year for the first time ASER recorded the schooling level of both parents of children in the sampled households. These data reveal that a quarter of all children studying in Stds 1-5 in government schools are first generation students. In these households parents are ill equipped to support or even monitor their children's educational progress, and usually assume that if their children are going to school, then they must be learning.

In many such homes the adults have no idea that their school-going children are unable to read, write, or do simple arithmetic. Five years of ASER have produced countless stories of adults in rural households reacting with shock and disbelief at the evidence – generated before their very eyes - of how little their children have learnt despite two, three, four or five years of schooling. Even when they know differently, parents often feel that their responsibility ends with sending their children to school. A mother we met in Ajmer labeled “Deepak sir”, her son's teacher, as corrupt and *badmaash*. But she felt that since she herself is illiterate, there isn't much she can do about it: *hum keval school bhej sakte hain*. After that he is the teacher's responsibility.



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Obviously when neither parents nor, very often, teachers are even aware of what individual children have or haven't learnt, let alone able or willing to do something about it, then it is those students most in need of support who fail to get it. A breakdown of ASER 2009 data on learning outcomes by parents' schooling demonstrates that first generation students are indeed at a disadvantage in terms of learning: among a population of children who are learning far below grade level on average, first generation students do even worse than others. The teachers in Ajmer, and in many other schools around the country, were quite correct.

How is this situation to be changed?

As has often been pointed out, the Right to Education bill is alarmingly vague on the subject of learning outcomes and how they are to be assessed, specifying only that teachers must *regularly assess the learning level of each child, ... provide supplementary instruction needed by the child, ... (and) regularly apprise every parent/guardian about the progress of learning and development of his child/ward studying in the school.* In addition, it is the responsibility of the "competent academic authority" to *conduct learner evaluation in a continuous and comprehensive manner such that it tests the child's understanding and ability to apply knowledge rather than rote learning.*

While the RTE bill places both generation and control of information on learning outcomes squarely in the hands of teachers and "competent authorities", real accountability requires that parents and other stakeholders be able to evaluate learning outcomes independently. It is here that ASER-like tools can potentially play a huge role, by providing even illiterate parents with an immediate, simple means of understanding whether their children have mastered some basic competencies. It is possible to imagine that a copy of an ASER or ASER like tool in the hands of every parent and SMC member in a village might begin to alter the power dynamic between teachers and less educated parents, and catalyze actions that lead to learning outcomes quite different from those reported in ASER 2009.

A far more difficult but increasingly urgent task is the development of similar tools for higher level competencies. More urgent because with external examinations soon to be abolished throughout the elementary cycle, methods and metrics for conducting the continuous and comprehensive evaluation required under RTE on scale need to be generated. More difficult because designing tools that measure higher level competencies in ways that, ASER like, are quick to use and simple to understand presents a much greater challenge.<sup>1</sup>

But as the example of the Ajmer mother illustrates, and the experience of five years of ASER proves, providing information is only a first step. Across India, children are learning no better in 2009 than they did in 2005. Structuring actions that ensure that the buck stops passing is the challenge before us.



<sup>1</sup> With support from Unicef and UNESCO, ASER Centre is currently administering a first set of higher level tools aiming to capture grade level competencies in reading, comprehension, and arithmetic for Std II and Std IV to about 20,000 students in five states of the country.