

## So, just what does this mean?

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As with any other exercise carried out on a large scale, the assumptions and results of ASER 2006 will be questioned by many - what was the methodology used, why one type of measurement and not any other, the competence of participants to actually measure learning, how does one account for non-cognitive development, and so on. However, the indisputable fact that remains at the end of the day is that ASER has the potential to become a strong citizen's initiative involving people and non-governmental organisations of many differing philosophies and hues. Any process that creates excitement among ordinary citizens and helps them to feel like a part of the process of educating their children deserves all the support that it can get. Most of us have long agreed that any significant improvement to the educational system will be brought about only when we all get involved; in what may be a unique example of the power of civil society in independent India, ASER could take on the role of being the catalyst that we - and the education system - so desperately need.

That said, like its predecessor in 2005, ASER 2006 throws up several interesting facts. To start with, enrolments in schools have remained nearly steady - at the national level, nearly 93.2% of children in the 6-14 year age group in rural India attend school, as compared to 93.4% reported by ASER 2005. Looked at the other way around, only 6% of 6-year olds are not in school, which would certainly seem to be cause for celebration - these are certainly figures that compare well internationally, and even with developed countries. As one would expect though, this aggregated figure conceals several vital facts like regional variations or age - inappropriate enrolments. Many of the children who are in school do not actually belong there - far too many are younger than they should be, and far too many have not completed school at the right time.

As you will read elsewhere in this report, the high numbers of children enrolled in school before the age of six years imply that we need to start focusing on this age group too - there is clearly a need to provide facilities that meet the learning needs of younger children, and to do so quickly. UNESCO's Global Monitoring Report (GMR) 2007, which was around the theme of early childhood care and education, acknowledges that this process has begun in India, noting that the government has recently renewed its commitment to universalising the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme in view of "...its positive, if uneven, impact on children's survival, growth and development"<sup>2</sup>. Referring to studies in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, the GMR reiterates the impact of early childhood education by pointing out that even an undernourished ICDS child attains higher developmental scores than a well-nourished non-ICDS one<sup>3</sup>.

In 2003, the Government of India noted that nationally ICDS covered about 20% of the eligible population of 3-6 year olds<sup>4</sup>. The National Institute of Urban Affairs<sup>5</sup> estimated that even though no less than 20 percent of the total urban population lived in slums (with up to 40% in the case of metros), only 8% of ICDS projects were located in urban areas, and not always in the slums or most needy areas. Although these figures have changed in the intervening years, universalising ICDS will necessitate significant up-scaling to cover more 3-6 year olds and children in urban areas. Even their most ardent supporters will admit that both ICDS and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan suffer from an overwhelmingly rural bias - their structures and processes are designed to suit rural situations and are often not relevant to the needs of the urban poor - so this may be an opportunity to ensure that urban areas receive the attention that is their due.

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<sup>2</sup> *Strong Foundations: Early Childhood Care and Education—EFA Global Monitoring Report*, UNESCO Paris, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Early Childhood Care and Education—An Overview*, Ministry of HRD, Government of India, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> *Process and Outcome Documentation of ECD in Urban Disadvantaged Areas*, Mina Swaminathan, National Institute of Urban Affairs 1998, Mimeo.

At the other end of the scale, as many as 21% children are no longer in school by the age of 15-16 years, while those who are may actually be trying to complete the lower grades. At first glance, this figure may not appear comparable with the drop out rates reported by Government for the elementary stage. Yet when one looks at the figures of children out of school from age 11 onwards, they re-emphasise the fact that more than half the children who enrol in Grade 1 drop out before completing Grade 8. Notwithstanding the very great efforts that have been made in recent years then, the process of retaining the child once she comes to school has not improved significantly.

Since ASER 2006 shows that the process of entry to school actually begins before the official school going age of six years (with nearly 85% 5-year olds are enrolled in Balwadis, Anganwadis, government or private schools), it would be hard to believe that public interest in sending children to school has not been stimulated adequately; the reasons why children do not stay in school are what should be engaging our attention now. Greater attention will have to be paid to those factors that result in pushing children out-inadequate infrastructure, insensitive teachers, and uninteresting (or irrelevant) curricula. Perhaps the time has come for the focus of our *abhiyan* to shift.

Researchers have long known that educated mothers are more likely to send their children to school and to have healthier and better educated children. UNICEF's State of the World's Children Report 2007, released recently, also highlights the correlation between educated mothers and their children. ASER 2006 confirms that children of mothers who have not been to school are five times as likely to be out of school. The survey notes the impact of mothers' schooling on the learning of children also, pointing out that 6-8 year olds of mothers who have not been to school are three times as likely not to be able to read the alphabet than children of mothers who have at least completed Grade 5.

These would seem to be powerful arguments in favour of increasing the coverage and quality of adult literacy programmes (instead of closing them down as has been suggested in some quarters), and targeting their efforts on women, particularly young mothers, in recognition of the fact that an educated mother serves as a multiplier when it comes to educating her children. As we take steps to improve the quality of education in the schoolroom, educating the mothers of enrolled (and out of school) children could lead to surprisingly valuable results in terms of the enrolment and learning of our children.

When one looks at the numbers of children who cannot either read/comprehend simple passages or complete simple divisions at the upper end of the primary cycle, it is clear that we need to be seriously concerned about reaching these children. For them, as well as for those who have completely missed the chance to go to school, it may be time for us to consider second chances - perhaps an accelerated learning programme that allows them to complete the elementary cycle in four years instead of the usual eight, with an emphasis on reading, comprehension and simple arithmetic. Or maybe just a short two-year programme that enables acquisition of upper primary competencies for children in the 12-16 year age group. Whatever the strategy, planning for these children is imperative before it becomes too late.

In recent years, there has been much discussion about the age profile of the Indian population, with great emphasis on its youth. But while this significant proportion of young people represents an emerging market for business, it is frightening to think of many of them reaching maturity without acquiring the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. We owe it to our children to make sure that this never happens.