

GOALS AND FOCUS

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In 2005, we started measuring the impact of the 2% cess the UPA-I government levied on Indian citizens in order to improve the status of elementary education with a promise of outcomes over outlays. Looking at India as a whole, the story of increasing enrollment continues although now we are in the last mile of the hardest to reach children in rural and urban areas. ASER has not been able to do a similar survey of urban areas but in general it is apparent that the smaller cities of India that are growing day by day remain neglected.

Is the child who enrolled in Std 1 in 2006, and who has reached Std 5 today, in a better position than his or her counterpart who was in Std 5 in 2006? Those in power, who pride themselves in having made huge allocations for education, those who decide policies based on which the education system runs, and those of us who attempt to improve education from outside the system must ask ourselves this question.

In 2010, the chances that a child is not enrolled in a school are much lower than in 2005 although for girls above 11 much more needs to be done in some parts of the country. However, the impact of five years of schooling on the child

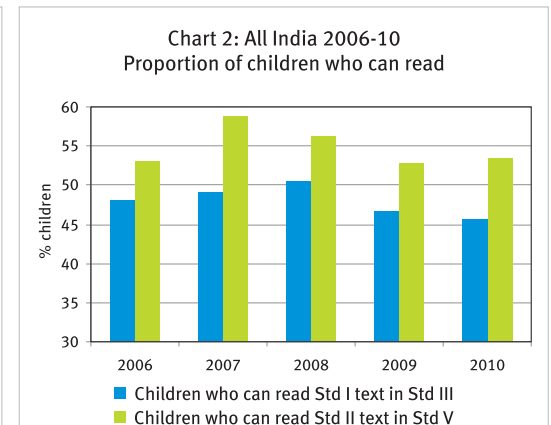
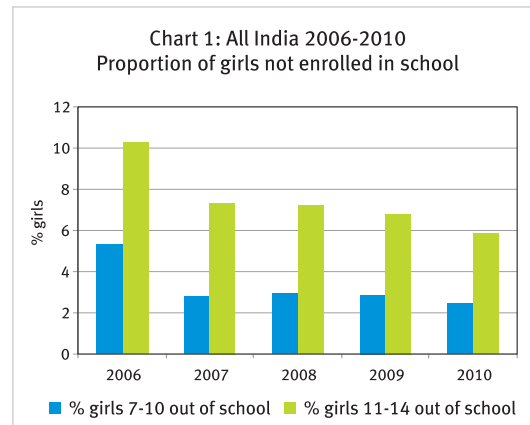
who entered Std 1 in 2005 is not much different from that on the child who entered Std 1 in 2001. If anything, the ability to read seems to have dropped a couple of notches over the five year span.

There are several problems that plague our education system. Depending upon their bent of mind, people see one aspect of the problem as more important than another. We feel that attainment of basic arithmetic and reading-writing- comprehension- expression competencies at an early age is a goal that needs to be urgently addressed on a mass scale in order to have a better base for improvement at higher levels. This is something that can be done parallel to all other efforts and need not wait for the whole world to change. Indeed, delays in this matter will be extremely harmful as the demographic advantage turns into a major threat to social and political stability.

Once upon a time we talked of excessive population growth in India and now we are told we have a demographic advantage over the rest of the world in our young population. But, our political leadership and our education establishment could be accused of feeling no sense of urgency in addressing some glaring issues of education and learning. As things stand, more than half of the children in Std 5 will be incapable of completing even elementary education except by blind promotion without regard to the actual learning levels they attain. This is exactly what the government has done. All children will be promoted up to Std 8 automatically.

In principle, not keeping back a child is a good idea so that the child is not humiliated, but simultaneously failing to ensure that she learns at least basic competencies early enough is guaranteeing her lifelong humiliation. Unless education policy focuses clearly on achievement of basic literacy and numeracy in our schools at an early stage, more inputs will not lead to improvements in learning, at least for the masses. Unfortunately, the Right to Education Act is not helpful in this matter. There is a need to institute a policy that clearly outlines the learning outcomes that must be achieved by the end of Std 2, Std 5, and Std 8 in order to give substance to the right to education. The problems faced by the poor in urban and rural areas in education need to be defined clearly and not clubbed with what the middle and upper classes face in their education. There is a clear need for targeted action while we talk of equity of access and quality for all.

The acknowledgement that the quality of learning is poor and must be improved has slowly gathered momentum over the last five years. ASER and Pratham can take some credit for creating this environment. However, one powerful thought endorsed by the education establishment is to make the process of learning joyful, starting at Std 1-2 and building up to higher levels. Changing classroom dynamics to make them more child-centric and tilting the power balance away from an all-powerful teacher standing in front of a passive class seems to be uppermost in the minds of administrators and educationists. The policy is to introduce and enhance constructivism in classrooms, certainly a laudable objective in a society that is mostly feudal in its human relations. Educationally, it is a very fundamental change from the past of teacher-led rote learning. The State intervenes on behalf of the child to suppress the feudal tendencies of the teacher and transforms her into a learning manager. How strong is the governmental



machinery, which is being relied upon, to bring about such a change in different parts of the country? Does such a cultural change alone guarantee better learning, the way it is implemented?

The most talked about model of this approach is the Activity Based Learning program of Tamil Nadu, which has been scaled up across the state for the last three academic years. It is said that the classroom has been transformed as a result of the intervention and there is no reason to broadly doubt this claim. This in itself is a huge achievement for the state. Having acknowledged this, the question we ask is, are more children learning basic competencies as a result of this intervention? Although it is not said anywhere on record, we understand that the leaders of this program believe that ASER and Pratham are somehow out to run the program down. We have no interest in doing so. In fact, several years ago, eminent educationists who also lead the ASER effort in Tamil Nadu evaluated a small number of ABL schools in Chennai that had used the methodology since well before it was scaled up across the state. While noting the positive effect of the child-centric process in the classroom, these educationists noted in a report submitted to the government that several measures are needed to ensure that all children learn their basics. The government evidently did not encourage further engagement on the subject with these eminent people.

One of the problems with our state-run programs is that they are not sufficiently evaluated to be able to learn from them. There is no constant third party observation or research linked to program design and objectives. In an important experiment in scale, such as in Tamil Nadu, one would have expected considerable research to be available.

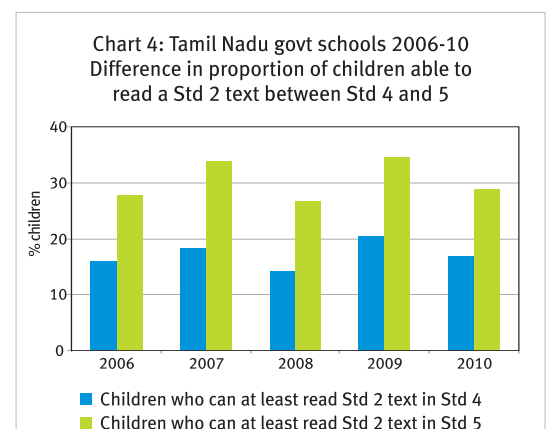
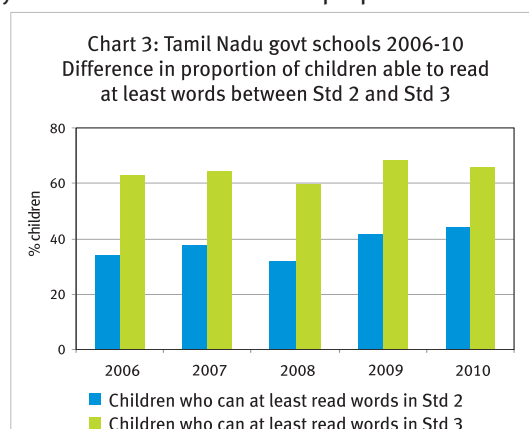
There is one state-wide evaluation by SchoolScape that documented in detail the changes in the classroom in 2007-08 and measured progress of children in Std 2 and 4 between June and April of the same academic year.¹ Over one year they found a large and significant jump in learning. This was apparently taken as proof of the success of ABL in improving learning levels along with changes in teachers and classrooms processes. No other evaluations or studies since then are available at least in the public domain.

Comparison of studies that use different methods and different tools is not usually possible. But one important observation by Schoolscape on learning levels can be compared with ASER results.

The SchoolScape study shows an improvement of about 20-30 percentage points over one academic year among Std II and Std IV children. In other words they measured the learning levels before applying the ABL treatment and then again at the end of the academic year to note the change. But what they did not do is measure the improvement in similar classes without applying the ABL method. Would there be a jump in learning levels over one academic year if there was no ABL?

ASER measures learning levels of children in each class year after year at the same time of the year. When a study is repeated with same methods and tools, it is possible to say how precise the measurements are and whether changes are taking place over time. ASER has used the same survey and assessment method every year for the last six years, which means that we have measured both before and after ABL started. So, it is possible to see the learning levels of different cohorts every year and to see whether one cohort is doing better than another as it goes from one class to the next.

Chart 3 shows that there is always a substantial difference in proportion of children who can read at least words or more in Std 3 as compared to Std 2. This improvement occurs over one year as children complete Std 2 and go to Std 3. A glance at Chart 3 indicates that this increase in proportion of children being able to read at least words is about 25 percentage points. This difference is evident both in 2006 and 2007, before ABL went to scale, and in subsequent years. There is therefore reason to believe then that if Schoolscape had evaluated classes without the ABL intervention, they would have seen an improvement in learning similar to if not identical to those with ABL intervention.



This is not to say that ABL has made no difference at all to learning levels. As Chart 3 shows, over the years, the proportion of word readers in Std 2 has increased from 34% (in 2006, pre-ABL), to 44% (post ABL in 2010). This points to an increasingly productive Std 1 classroom process, resulting in more children being able to read words in Std 2. But, in contrast, the increase at Std 3 level over the same period is just about 3 percentage points. It seems that the gain in word reading ability is not built upon after Std 2. In fact, since 2006, the proportion of children who cannot even read words has stayed about constant at 38-40 percent in Std 3. As the

¹ <http://www.educationforallindia.com/evaluation-of-activity-based-learning-of-tamil-nadu.pdf>

cohort moves higher with an expectation of reading at higher levels, more children lag behind because large numbers are apparently not able to make a transition to higher level reading.

Chart 4 for Std 4 and 5 shows the proportion of children able to read a Std 2 text. The text used to assess reading ability is comparable to one in the Std 2 language textbook of the state. We see that the proportion of children who have attained this competency by Std 4 has been recorded as fluctuating between 16 and 20 percent and the same for Std 5 has fluctuated between 27 and 35 percent.

These data lead to two simple conclusions. First, both before ABL and after, there is an 11-15 percentage point increase in the proportion of readers of Std 2 text as they go from Std 4 to 5. This is consistent with what Schoolscape has noted for 2007-08 although absolute numbers may differ because of difference in methodology and tools. Second, the proportion of non-readers of Std 2 text is not observed to have decreased consistently, year on year, either at Std 4 or at Std 5. There are about 65-70% children who cannot read a Std 2 language text as per the ASER methodology. There could be an argument over absolute numbers, but the annual repeated measurement clearly shows that there is no relative improvement in Std 4 and 5 in the post ABL years.

The situation in arithmetic is identical. There is no evidence of actual improvement of the productivity of the classroom process in improving achievement levels of children as a result of ABL either in Std 1-2, or Std 4-5.

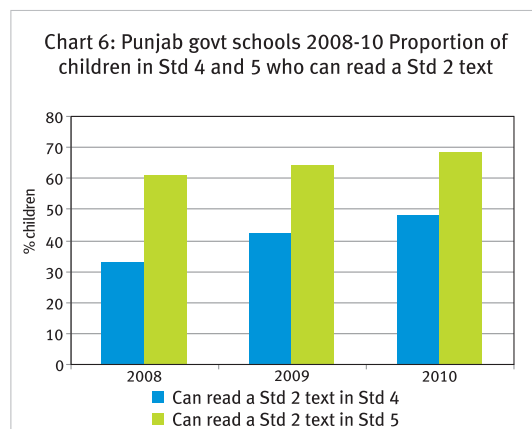
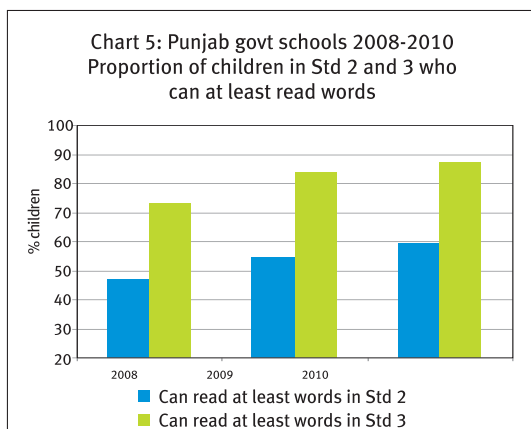
Is it possible that the same socio-economic profile of children who were not able to acquire basic literacy – numeracy before ABL was introduced, are not able to take advantage of the ABL method? If so, why?

The Tamil Nadu government and the promoters of the laudable aspects of the ABL program need to take a careful look at why the ABL process is not leading to more children reading more fluently or learning their numeracy better. Some simple measures to improve reading ability and arithmetic ability can be added, as the evaluators associated with ASER in Tamil Nadu had suggested. It is not too late to take corrective measures. But to do this, an open mind is needed.

In contrast to the case of Tamil Nadu, Punjab has consistently shown improvement in reading and math abilities over 2008-2010. Punjab has been working on *Purrho Punjab* for the last three years in collaboration with Pratham. It is possible that we will be accused of running down other efforts while promoting something we have ourselves been involved in. Unlike the case of Tamil Nadu, the Punjab government leadership has not documented its efforts. It has not as yet attracted the attention of the more vocal bilateral and multilaterals who seem to want to promote good programs. It would be a folly not to note the progress Punjab has achieved over the last few years.

Although a prosperous state, few people outside the state are aware of the impact of the violent 80's and 90's on Punjab. The schooling system too was in disarray except to continue in inertial motion like many other states of the country. With the change in government in 2007, a remarkable officer known for his effectiveness in various departments was placed at the helm of SSA with complete backing from his superiors and a mandate to improve the system. In collaboration with Pratham he set up learning goals to be achieved under the *Purrho Punjab* program. The fact that better educated young teachers could be appointed helped but the key was the focus on learning through simple activities (although not labeled 'activity based') and grouping of children according to their ability levels. Another feature of the program was the new cluster-level leadership that was created from among teachers rather than relying on the academic support personnel and structures that had neither the history nor the potential for delivering results. This cluster leadership, motivated to achieve goals, went from school to school to help their peers. In addition, monitoring was improved by appointing community youth to visit schools regularly. After some initial hiccups and doubts, the persistence of the leadership paid dividends. The steady and consistent improvement in learning is evident and it was not achieved by rote learning but through focused activities in the class.

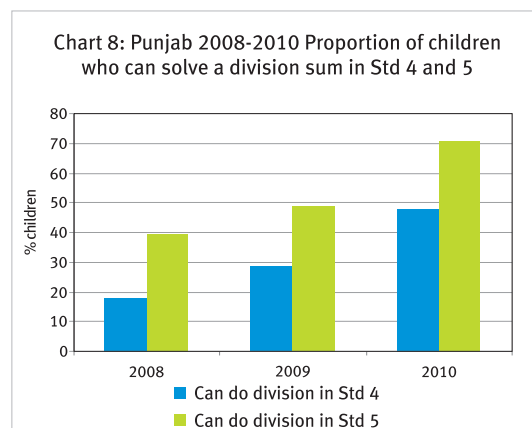
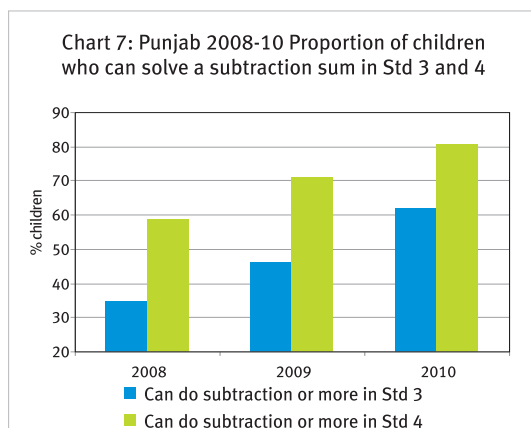
The chart for Std 2 and 3 shows that the proportion of children, in sequential cohorts, who can read at least words has improved year after year. The consistent increase in Std 2 indicates that Std 1 has become more and more effective every year. The fact that Std 3 numbers too are rising indicate that Std 2 builds on the gains of the previous year. Similarly, the chart for Std 4 and 5 indicate that the



ability to read Std 2 texts has been growing as the children enter Std 4 and this gain is further built upon so that the levels for Std 5 also show a steady increase. As the proportions reach 70-90% the annual gain is bound to slow down but the important part is that the proportion of children who cannot read has decreased year after year so far.

Punjab also focused on arithmetic and ASER surveys have noted big changes.

Children who can solve subtraction with borrowing, a relatively complex operation, can also solve addition with carry over. They understand how to deal with place value of the number. Similarly, those who can solve a three digit by one digit division sum can normally solve a multiplication problem. For both, knowing place values is key. In Punjab, these two competencies are observed to have increased dramatically considering that



the rest of the country has shown no change in arithmetic ability. The learning of these abilities requires substantial assistance from the teacher and also activities of counting, saying, reading, and writing of numbers in addition to understanding place values and formal writing of the sums. The *Purrho Punjab* program focused on all these and the result has been positive. It is clear that this is not the end of learning math and some mathematically inclined people will shake their heads about this not being real math. The important part is that substantial improvement in a feared subject has been achieved. This has to be built upon.

Another feature of *Purrho Punjab* is that the strategy employed was not just to start at Std 1-2 but to implement it for all primary classes. Build the understanding of numbers, quantities, and place value in the early years, and focus on operations in the later years as the curriculum prescribes.

Punjab will do well to continue, strengthen, and improve further along this road of fixing learning goals to achieve. There is much more to learning than reading and much more to math than simple operations. It is hoped that the advantage of the last four years will not be lost.

Several other states have initiated programs to improve learning. Barring Himachal, Kerala, and Maharashtra no other state has yet reached high learning levels that are almost constant. Several states are making fresh attempts but these have not yet shown significant improvement. Some states seem to be losing their advantage and yet others just have not got their act together as years go by.

The lessons of the last five-six years are plain and simple. These are not new at all. There is ample evidence for those who want to see.

- Focus works. Tamil Nadu and Karnataka have achieved the transformation of classrooms at lower levels by focusing single-mindedly on that objective. Punjab has achieved improvement in learning through focused activities. There was evidence of similar achievement in Chhattisgarh that seems to be eroding fast, suggesting a lack of focus on measurable learning outcomes. Bihar focused single-mindedly on enrollment and achieved spectacular results, although children's poor attendance in schools, which was not a matter of focus, has not changed much.
- A strong and consistent leadership is needed to bring about change. States that persist with a focus do not change leadership that works. Often the problem is that such leadership may not always be open to changing or adopting new strategies to improve their work further. It is inevitable to start with a strong centralized leadership. But it is important, as many have pointed out, to create a strong block, cluster, local, school level leadership that understands the goals to be achieved and is seriously committed to them. This is an area where reforms are needed.

Of course, much more can be done but let the 'best' not be the enemy of the 'good'. Whether we look at it from the point of view of the need for a rapidly growing economy to have a skilled and educated work force, or whether see it as a matter of the right to education of each child, there is a need for an evident sense of urgency.

Unless there is a focus on improving measurable learning outcomes, they do not change. Losing focus can lead to rapid deterioration. There is no hope that we will be able to meet the expectations of demographic dividends if we try to do hocus pocus with education and as the Vice President of India remarked on *Shiksha Divas*, Nov 11, 2010, there is a danger that the right to education will remain no more than a right to school.