

MOBILISING COMMUNITY FOR BETTER TEACHING AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

Field experiments in rural schools

Rukmini Banerji

Understanding schooling

Everyone understands 'schooling'. Parents want their children to go to school. They find schools, buy books, bags, uniforms, spend their money, invest time to send their children to school. Governments, too, want children to go to school. They build schools, find teachers, provide facilities and spend money so that children can go to school. Going to school is a very visible activity. Everyone knows who is going to school and how many and who is not.¹

In India, like in many other countries, school enrollment levels are high. This outcome is a result of many factors working together. But underlying this phenomenon is the fact that there is a clear definition of schooling that everyone understands and relates to. Parents understand what it meant by 'schooling'. Governments understand what it entails. All agree that 'every child in school' is a good thing. Every year, in every village and city, we count how many children are in school (and how many not in schools). Concrete numbers are available. Different strategies have been tried at different times to bring children to school. A common goal means that everyone in their own way can work towards it. This comprehensive national effort that has been made across India for several decades shows in the visible progress in enrollment and access. By the turn of the last century, the importance of going to school had been firmly established in Indian minds, not just as an elite privilege but as a necessity for all. Schooling is needed for development and for growth, it is a right and it is as an entitlement. Without the opportunity to go to school, we cannot

think of equity. All of these statements do not even need a debate in India any more. From the bottom, from the top and in the middle, India agrees that schooling for all is a must. Even before the Right to Education (RTE) Act was passed by the Indian Parliament in 2009, the proportion of children in the 6–14 age group enrolled in school was above 95 per cent.

Claiming entitlements

There was a big argument going on outside the school gate. Parents, mostly mothers, were arguing with the teachers. This government primary school stood at the edge of a maha-dalit tola in a village in Gaya district in Bihar. I had just spent some time inside with children in the standard four classroom listening to them read. As part of a recent effort with remedial education, several children read aloud, proudly showing off their newly acquired reading skills. In particular, one little girl had impressed me very much. At the beginning of the school year, she could barely read. But now, she was able to tackle an entire story book. The standard four teacher was proud of her accomplishments, too. She told me the story of this girl as she walked me out of the school towards the gate. Hearing the loud voices, we both stopped to figure out what the argument was all about.

Around this time, the government in Bihar had been focusing on raising children's attendance in school. Schools had been told that only those children who attended school for at least 75 per cent of the time would get entitlements like uniform and scholarships. The mothers at the school gate were aggressively vociferous. The head teacher was trying to explain that it was very important for children to attend school regularly. The standard four teacher pointed to a lady in the centre of the fracas. 'That is the mother of the little girl who impressed you,' the teacher murmured. I stepped into the conversation. I asked the mother of the little girl what she was upset about. The mother loudly complained that her child was not getting her due share of school benefits. I said, 'But your child is getting something very valuable from the school. Unlike the uniform or the money that will finish, this one will never finish.' The lady looked at me belligerently. 'What is that?' she demanded and continued, 'The school is useless. They eat up all the money.' Unfazed, I continued, 'Do you know that your daughter has learned to read? And now she can read very well.' The mother looked unimpressed. 'What use is that,' she said and turned back to continue her quarrel with the school.

Moving beyond schooling

Is school only a place for the distribution of benefits? Do the norms outlined in the RTE Act guarantee 'education'? Or does the law only ensure that schooling of a certain type is provided? What 'value' does every year

of schooling add to a child? Since the turn of the last century till well beyond the first decade of the new century, the government in India was focused on increasing access and raising enrollment. The passage of the RTE Act can be seen as one of the last significant milestones of the era that emphasised 'schooling for all'.

It is only towards the end of the UPA government's second term, some policy level shifts finally became visible as evidence for the fact that attention was moving to issues beyond access and inputs in schooling. The first indication of the change in mindset came in 12th Plan document that was passed by all chief ministers in late December 2012. The statements in the education chapter of the 12th Plan clearly put a strong emphasis on the need to improve learning outcomes of students while continuing to expand educational opportunities and strengthen quality. By the time state governments were getting ready to prepare annual work plans (also called AWP in *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*) for the 2014–2015 school year for elementary education, the official guidelines for making these district-level plans included the need to measure children's learning and implement interventions to improve what children are able to do.²

There are clear signs that gears are changing and priorities are shifting. In the elementary education sector, attention is beginning to move beyond schooling to learning at the macro policy level. But what can be done at the ground level?

'Schooling' is visible. Buildings are built. Teachers are hired. Textbooks are procured. All this is very visible. Every morning, children can be seen going to school and every afternoon children are seen returning from school. Midday meal is eaten on a daily basis.³ But 'learning' is far less visible. It happens behind walls and inside classrooms. It happens (or is supposed to happen) when teachers spend time with children. Perhaps, it also happens when children spend time with books and notebooks.⁴ Whether illiterate or educated, parents and family members leave the business of learning to teachers and 'experts' like curriculum designers, textbook developers and examination boards. At best, 'learning' shows up as marks or ranks in a report card or as pass/fail in an exam. But this 'result' cannot be seen daily, it happens after months and years.⁵ It is commonly assumed that if children are going to school, they must be learning. Till now, we have thought of schooling and learning as the same thing. In fact, in many Indian languages, the common word for 'education' is the same as reading and writing.⁶

But, in the last 10 years, evidence is accumulating to show that schooling does not automatically lead to learning. In the economics literature, in many international reports in socio-economic demographic large-scale

surveys, mean years of schooling or years of schooling completed are common indicators to indicate progress of education in a country or level of education of a person. However, there are a growing number of research studies that show that 'years of completed schooling' is not necessarily a good indicator for what a student is able to do in India.

So, as a country, if we not only want 'every child in school' but also 'every child learning well', we need to demystify 'learning'. We need ways to engage people so that learning can become more visible and more understandable. There need to be ways in which ordinary parents, family members and common people can participate, to engage in and understand what learning is and be able to contribute in improving it.

Demystifying 'learning'

I remember a hot summer day, almost 10 years ago, in a village in Sultanpur district in Uttar Pradesh (UP). We were making a village report card.⁷ Before starting work in a village, we always did this exercise. We would go to every household in the village and ask every child if he or she went to school. Ten years ago, even in UP, school enrollment levels were high. In some villages, well over 90 per cent of children between the ages of 6 and 14 were enrolled in school. But for us, it was important to go beyond schooling and try to get a sense of what a child could do: could she or he read or solve simple problems in arithmetic? We used very basic benchmarks for learning – each and every child of elementary school age in the village was asked to read a set of common words and simple paragraphs. In arithmetic, there were numbers to be named and a set of simple arithmetic operations to do.⁸

That morning in the village in Sultanpur, we went to the Pradhan (village headman) to tell him what we were going to do. The Pradhan took a cursory look at us and said, 'Achcha . . . survey hai? Kariye, kariye!' ('Oh . . . it's a survey? Please go ahead'). Accustomed to numerous surveys that were constantly being done by outsiders in the village, he was not even interested in finding out what the survey was about.

We started our work in the village, moving from one hamlet to another, systematically going from one house to the next, talking to parents, interacting with children one on one. Questions like 'do your children go to school' got quick and sometimes disinterested answers. But asking children to read grabbed everyone's attention. Children would flock around the reading tool, peering over the heads of others, wanting to try. Parents would stop working and come to observe. Children who were playing in the fields put on shirts before coming to read. Mothers and fathers called their children back from wherever they were in the village, to be 'tested'. Children came down from trees where they were eating mangoes and

jumped out of the village pond and came to see what was going on. Onlookers and observers would borrow the 'testing tool' from us and start working with children themselves. One elderly grandmother took the paragraphs and sat in a corner sounding out the words to see if she could remember her letters and matras. In hamlet after hamlet, the exercise was suddenly transformed from a 'survey' of collecting data into a hugely engaging exercise. Everyone wanted to immediately know how their children were doing. The aim was to reach every child in the village so that the village report card for schooling and learning was a complete census and a starting point.

The curiosity was immense. What was striking was that many parents did not have any idea of whether their children could read or do arithmetic. This was true of both illiterate and literate parents. Young people who were watching the proceedings with interest came forward to help. While the children read or did arithmetic, the adults would get intensely involved in discussing why the children could or could not do what they were being asked, who was to blame. It was as if two layers of debates and discussions were going on simultaneously – one at the level of the children and another higher up, literally and conceptually, at the height of the adults.

After the home-by-home and child-by-child exercise in a hamlet was done, the 'results' for the hamlet were declared. People waited with bated breath for the 'count'. For example, in a given village, there may be 40 households with 75 children. The 'result' may be: '70 children go to school but only 35 of those who go to school can read or do sums'. Even as results were being digested, there would be intense discussion on how this was not okay and what could be done to improve things.

Stepping back and looking at the unfolding scene, one could see clearly that the actual activity to generate the information was critical for the entire process to unfold. 'Self-discovery' was essential. Someone had to hold a new type of mirror up so that people could see themselves in a new way. Information mattered. It was not just a report or numbers that came from somewhere. It mattered because it was about children that everyone knew and cared about. It mattered because the information that was generated was new. Before this, people had not known to look closely at children's learning and did not know how to look at it in this simple way. It mattered because people had seen the information being generated before their own eyes and often had participated in creating it. The simplicity of the tool and the method enabled people of all types to participate or at least to observe. And it was easy to digest the results – for their own children and for all the children in the neighbourhood. It was straightforward to see the 'result' for individual children and for the aggregate – all at the same time. Whether people were literate or illiterate, it was obvious to all that their own school going children should be able to do these basic tasks.

In a few days, the village report card was ready. We went back to the Pradhan. Without looking up from what he was doing, he asked me where he should sign.

The report card did not need a signature. There was no box or line printed on the survey sheet for signatures. Pradhanji thought this was very odd. He looked up at me and said, 'Usually figures and numbers are collected because we have to send them to the higher ups. And for that I have to put my signature.' I explained that the report card did not go anywhere. It was for the village and it stayed there. I tried to tell him what the report card exercise had found. At the end of my explanation, he said loudly, 'The figures have to be wrong. How can it be that children are going to school and they cannot read?' The numbers and the explanation had upset him; the data went contrary to his perceptions and beliefs about reality in the village.

Now, we had Pradhanji's full attention. There was only one way to settle the issue. Armed with the reading tool, Pradhanji walked through the village. Every child he met was asked to read. By the 10th child, Pradhanji sat down, put his head in his hands and said, 'Yeh to mere izzat ka sawal hai. ('This is a question of my honour'). How can this be the situation with children in my village and I not know about it?' He immediately called for a village meeting. Parents, teachers, children. Everyone was present. A big discussion ensued on what could be done. Engagement and participation were critical activities for realising what the problem was. Now, the problem was visible.

From assessment to action

The entire exercise, now known as the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), was based on hundreds of experiences like the one in the village in Sultanpur.⁹ The purpose of ASER is very similar to the village report cards for schooling and learning. Even in 2005, when the national ASER effort was started, we could see that school enrollment levels were high. The real challenge was to enable everyone to see that there was a new challenge in education – that of children's learning.

The real aim of ASER was to not only influence policy at national or state level, but also to create a mass movement for improving children's learning. The architecture of the ASER effort is an indication of this intent. For every one of the last 10 years in every rural district in India, a local organisation or institution has carried out ASER. Between 560 and 575 districts are reached every year, 15,000 plus villages, over 300,000 households and more than 600,000 children are assessed by approximately 25,000 ASER volunteers. This makes ASER one of the largest, decentralised annual data collection exercises in India.

For several reasons, children are not assessed in school. For one, we do not believe that children's learning or even education is only the responsibility of the school. It is a much larger issue and activity on which many more people must engage. The data collection is done in the village

community and with households so that across the country there can be conversations, discussions and debates as the ones we heard in the village in UP. We saw understanding and awareness, engagement and ownership, all beginning to happen in Sultanpur. We witnessed how the *Pradhan* realised that he had a new challenge on hand. The ultimate objective of ASER was similar – that such catalysing and energising could happen in every district. The participation in ASER would lead to more people having first-hand realisation of the crisis in learning and that this experience would lead them to seek solutions.

Every year in mid-January, the ASER report is released. It contains estimates of basic learning (reading and arithmetic) for a large sample of children aged 5–16.¹⁰ The entire ASER effort for each year takes about 100 days, from design to data release. Thus, the information is for the current school year. Over time, the findings have received a great deal of media attention nationally and in the states. In particular, ASER has brought to the fore the fundamental importance of reading as a skill that is needed early in order for children to make progress through the education system.

While it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what leads to changes in policy, it is fair to say that the relentless public pressure exerted by ASER at many levels is at least one major influence on shift in the central government's policy on children's learning. In addition, over the last 10 years, there have been a host of studies focusing on student achievement and children's learning outcomes. The accumulating evidence from India and abroad, the role of influential researchers in pushing for outcome and evidence-based planning and the Planning Commission and Finance Ministry's own desires to track outlays and outcomes have all contributed to the shift in policy formation.

At the level of the states, even before the central government laid down policies and guidelines for action, some states were already experimenting with what to do to improve learning. From time to time, individuals in leadership positions who could take decisions in the state government tried strategies that attempted to improve learning outcomes on scale. But often the interventions or programmes did not survive when the 'champion' was transferred to out of the leadership post in the education department.

To date, reform efforts targeted at improving learning at the state level have tended to be specific to individuals rather than institutional or systemic. What about at the ground level? Did local action come out of efforts like ASER or others to make a large section of the population aware of the new problem?

Mobilising communities for improving children's learning

Early in 2005, we began working in Jaunpur district in eastern UP. Within Jaunpur, we chose to work in about 300 villages spanning four blocks. We wanted to test whether information makes a difference, does it lead to action. Our plan was to test this question in different ways. In collaboration with J-PAL (a research organisation), we designed the interventions so that the researchers could use the randomised control trial methodology to assess whether we were having any impact.¹¹ Each of the 300 villages was randomly assigned to four groups. In three of the groups, we did a variety of activities. The fourth group was left untouched.

In one group, we would only convene village meetings to discuss the status of education in the village. In the second group, prior to the community meetings, we would initiate the village report card process (like the one in Sultanpur). People in the village would participate and help in making the report cards. Then, in the community meetings, in addition to all the other matters, the findings of the village report card was also discussed. In both these interventions, the finding of solutions and planning any future action was left entirely to the community. In the third intervention, we did all the activities of the first and second interventions, but in addition, we conducted a 'demonstration class'. For a few hours a day, we did activities with children in the village and invited all those who were interested to come and watch. In the village meeting, discussions spanned general topics in education and the findings of the village report card. People also shared what they had seen in the demonstration classes.

In these community meetings, we would put forward a proposal to the village – 'If you want your children's reading and arithmetic to improve and you think that the method we showed you will work, then give us some volunteers and we will train them to work with your children.'

The year 2005 was busy. We spent the first few months getting ready, building a local team and practicing what we had designed. Then, the action began. In village after village, the village meetings were well attended. Given two or three days in a village, even the youngest and least experienced members of our team could mobilise several hundred people. Across the board, it was clear that this was the first time ever in the village that there had been a meeting to discuss education. The natural tendency of the groups was to focus on inputs and entitlements and to blame the school or the Panchayat for not delivering the benefits that people were supposed to get. Initial rounds of talks often tended to be argumentative and aggressive. It was almost as if the entire discourse had to be aimed at the 'other'. We learned from meeting to meeting how to move the tenor from conflict to collaboration or at least to a less confrontational stance. But, even apart from that, it took a great deal of persuasion and convincing to move the discussions away from benefits to the issue

of children's learning. Participation in village report card making was helpful. Like in Sultanpur, the first-hand experience of asking children to read or to do arithmetic opened people's eyes to the nature of the problem in front of them. The most shaken tended to be parents who were sending their children to private schools.

The most interesting part of the whole exercise was the response of the village to the 'demonstration' classes. These were very popular. Many people flocked to watch what was happening. But we noticed that those who came and watched and wanted to work with children were not those who argued loudly in the village meetings. Those that came forward to teach tended to be young and female. They were keen to do something, were happy to work as individuals. Such young people did not speak much in village meetings. They were not interested in bringing together groups or working collectively. In ones and twos and sometimes as a group of three, they wanted to do what they could with children.

In village after village, we trained these volunteers in the Pratham methodology of teaching and they began to teach children in their purvas and tolas (hamlets). These volunteers were truly volunteers – no one was paid and no one received any incentives except appreciation from the village and respect and friendship from the children. Thanks to the community meetings, most people in the village knew who the volunteers were and where they were teaching. Many villages had 2–3 volunteers, but some had even up to till 11 or 12. The volunteer activity seemed to depend not only on the extent of mobilisation we were able to do, but also on the friends' networks among young people, the size of the village and on the extent to which the school teachers or Panchayat could influence the youth. But without fail, at least two to three young people came forward in each village where this intervention was tried and they taught children continuously for a period of three months.¹²

Much later, when the data of the impact evaluation study was analysed, we saw that children's learning improved. But this only happened in the villages where the 'demonstration' model had been used. In all others, where the solution making and implementation had been left to the villagers, there was no difference in the learning outcomes of children or in the way that the school functioned. The large army of youth volunteers that had come forward seemed to be the energy that fuelled the change. It seemed like our efforts were successful in mobilising individuals to take action but not in shaking institutions to work better or in unleashing collective demand for increased accountability.¹³

Lessons for solutions on scale

Over the last 10–15 years, we have learnt a lot about how communities can move from awareness to action.¹⁴ To begin with, the 'first-hand' experience of a problem is critical in setting the stage. The *Pradhanji* in Sultanpur is not unique. There are assumptions in our minds, assumptions that

shape how we perceive the world. These assumptions guide our actions. In the case of schooling and learning, there are several assumptions – ‘schooling must lead to learning’, ‘more is better’, ‘more spending will lead to better results’ and so on. At the level of parents, at the level of the village community and at the macro-policy level, these assumptions have held sway for a long time.

Challenging these assumptions is critical for generating new thoughts and new actions. We have learned that the change in mindsets comes when the person confronts the problem themselves and is compelled to think about it. The *Pradhanji* in Sultanpur was forced to experience for himself the reality of children who were going to school but not able to read. Data, or analysis, reports or evidence (collected by others) are not often compelling enough to change minds. And without a change in thinking, a change in action is not possible. Therefore, we use any opportunity possible for being with children, watching them learning, participating in their efforts to read to do arithmetic, in order rethink old assumption and to learn from the realities around us.¹⁵

Second, the goal of what is to be achieved has to be easy to understand and clearly articulated. For decades, in the field of education, ‘every child in school’ was the goal. It was the same goal at the village level as it was at the national level. Over a period of time, people everywhere came to agree that children need to go to school.¹⁶ Parents and communities understood what this entails. Now, the new challenge is how to bring the issue of learning to the centre of the stage and to demystify what it means. Parents, those who are educated and those who are not, leave it to ‘experts’ to deal with children’s learning.¹⁷

About 12–13 years ago, we came up with a basic set of reading tasks – letters, common everyday words, four connected sentences and a short simple story. Before starting to teach, we sat one-on-one with each child to see what the child could read. The tool helped us to get to know each child, to group children by level for instruction and to facilitate appropriate activities and reading materials for children at each level. Further, the tool and the method of testing enabled parents to see and understand the situation and get ready for what was needed to be done to help children. The highest level of the tool – a story with second grade-level text – also showed parents and teachers what the goal of the reading programme was. The business of ‘learning’ that had seemed complex and opaque was made visible and simple by the basic tool. If reading is the first foundation of learning, then the first set of goals is clear. We need to get children to be able to read a simple story fluently and with understanding.

The third lesson is learning by doing is the best way to move forward. Once the problem was accepted – our children are not learning – it was important to start working at solutions. We learned as we did. Learning by doing has to be carried out in the context from which problem had arisen. The closer the work is to the ground the greater the chances that the solution will take root. In our case, the first one or two generations of strategies did not solve the problem but it paved the path for the journey. Along the way, there needs to be continuous experimenting, tweaking, changing, questioning and making mistakes. These are all essential, interconnected parts of the learning process that lead towards solutions. Figuring out ‘what works’ is not a linear process, but an accumulation of experience and evidence. The more the people that work towards solutions and the more sharing there is of what happened, the more the experience and evidence that accumulates.

We also learned about the power of ‘demonstration’. Once you learned how to solve the problem, you can show others how to do it. Scaffolding and mentoring were good methods to help others to arrive at the same position as yourself. In our work with children, we find that ‘demonstration’ leads to more people to use effective strategies and to move towards solutions as compared to strategies that are based on ‘advocacy’ alone.¹⁸ Like in the Jaunpur example, people needed to see what could be achieved, and then they began to believe that change is possible. Talking and debating alone did not make a difference.

Fourth, in a large country like India, for impact, work is need on scale. The Annual Status of Education Report is an example. A one-time report from some states or districts would have been possible to ignore. But an effort that goes to every district in India every year for 10 consecutive years is impossible to ignore. Year after year, reaching more than half a million children and bringing back information on their status to the country is hard to put aside for long. To reach scale, mechanisms need to be crafted which encourage and make it possible for many people to join and participate. Working on scale requires simple methods and measures. The ASER tool or the *Pratham* methods of teaching are both examples of simple ways to engage people and to enable them to join a larger effort.

But whose school is it anyway?

I sat with a group of village women under a tree in the compound of a government primary school in Madiyahu block in Jaunpur. Most of the women had children who were enrolled in this school. Many of these mothers had

never been to school themselves. We talked about many issues – What kind of education were children getting? Was it good enough? Why was it not better? How had the school been in the past and what was it like now?

At a particular stage in the conversation, I asked, 'Yeh kiska school hai?' ('Whose school is this?'). 'Yeh sarkari school hai' ('This is a government school') was the instant answer. One of them went on to explain that because the school was a government school, it was not good. 'You see,' she said, 'the sarkar should come and see what is happening here – then they will know that their money is getting wasted. Anyway, since it is free, we don't expect much from the government schools anyway.' All the women agreed.

'Where do you think the money for running the school comes from? Who pays the teachers? Who pays for the books, for the building, for the midday meal?' I asked. 'Sarkar se aata hai' ('It comes from the government'). 'Where does the sarkar get money from?' I persisted. One woman looked disparagingly at me, as if I was asking a really silly question. 'Sarkar ke paas paisa hota hai' ('The government has money'), she stated firmly. Those who rule have money, she elaborated.

I tried to counter the woman's statement; 'Sarkar ke paas apne aap se paisa nahi hota hai. Janta sarkar ko paisa deti hai' ('The government does not have money by itself. People give the government money'). My own words rang hollow. I could see that this logic made no sense to the women. They looked incredulous at the thought that people give government money. I kept going, 'Aap aur hum jaise logon se paisa jata hai sarkar ko' ('It is from people like you and me that money goes to the government'). Now, I had the full attention of the entire group of village women. The woman who had spoken earlier stood her ground emphatically. 'I don't give any money to the government.' She looked around at everyone and almost challenged them. 'Hum kyon de sarkar ko hamara paisa?' ('Why should I give my money to the government?'). She looked around and challenged me to answer. I was not able to convince her or her friends.

In my travels a few years ago, I went to Tinsukia. I happened to go to a rural school – a government lower primary school or 'LP' as they call it in Assam. The village was not far from the border between Dibrugarh and Tinsukia. The school was established in 1903 and has stood solidly by the side of the road since then. The school comprised of two long corridors at right angles to each other with classrooms running alongside. The teachers proudly showed me around the school. There were pictures painted on the walls and charts hanging, too. Children were busy working on different tasks in different classes. They seemed to know what they were doing. The classrooms had a ceiling of cane and bamboo; high above this ceiling was the actual roof.

An elderly member of the school management committee told me the history of the school. A few years before 1900, his grandfather donated the land on which the school building now stands. His father studied in this school and so did he and his children. Now, his grandchildren study

there too. Well maintained and well painted, there is not a crack in the wall. The building has survived earthquakes and other calamities. Over time, the Panchayat has contributed in the construction of new classrooms as has the local Member of Parliament. The head mistress proudly said that she does not allow any outsider, whether from the government or elsewhere, to do any construction in the school. Anything that has to be built is funded and supervised by members of the community.

The school had an enrollment of over 250 children – very high for a typical primary school in Assam. In the head mistress's office, there was a board on the wall. On one side, it lists the names of the head master or head mistresses since 1903. On the other side, it names the children who have been awarded scholarships in the district-level standard four scholarship exam. On both sides, there are many names – illustrious head teachers and talented children. This school is well known for children 'doing well'.

A small boy in standard two was concentrating on learning to write. He sounded out each word aloud and then started to write. A teacher looked on fondly. I watched the child struggle and succeed. 'He is doing a great job,' I said to the teacher who was looking on. The teacher looked bashful for a minute and then said, 'I did not know he could write!' Then, in a low voice full of pride, he continued, 'He is my son.'

One of the biggest challenges that we face in our government schools is how to convert the sarkari school into 'my school' or 'our school'. We are citizens, not simply beneficiaries. We are the funders and the owners of the school. And we must behave as such. Only when something belongs to me, do I care. Only when it is mine, do I engage. If I realise that it is my money that funds the school, then I will watch carefully to see how it is being spent and what my children get out of it. Ownership is the key to engagement; holding others responsible or accountable comes later. It is only then that we will be able to give our children the education they deserve.

Notes

- 1 A version of this section of the article was published in *Asking More: The Path to Efficacy*. Eds. Michael Barber and Saad Rizvi. Pearson, 2013. 'From Schooling to Learning: ASER's Journey in India'.
- 2 A later section in this chapter discusses what led to these changes in policy pronouncements.
- 3 For an elaboration of this point, see also 'From Invisible to Visible. 'Being able to see the crisis in learning'. Brookings Institution blog. Brookings Institution. Washington DC, USA. <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/education-plus-development/posts/2014/05/22-india-learning-banerji#.U7QJdWdgFWY>.email.

- 4 Hence, children are perpetually being told to 'go and study'.
- 5 In fact, with the passage of the RTE Act, there may be no examinations till the end of the secondary stage. The current status of continuous comprehensive evaluation makes it difficult for an ordinary parent to understand how a child is 'doing' in school. Earlier, there were class tests, annual examinations whose results would be used in different ways (e.g. DISE – the government data base for every school in India would report percentage of children who passed the standard five exam. But in recent years, this figure, whatever it may signify, has not been reported).
- 6 In Hindi, we refer to *padhai*. In Bangla, it is *podha-shuna* or *lekha-podha*.
- 7 We, in this case, refers to the *Pratham* teams working in rural areas.
- 8 A version of this section of the article has been published earlier in the journal *Learning Curve*.
- 9 See www.asecentre.org for detailed information on ASER and for all reports from 2005 to the present.
- 10 The annual report contains estimates from the district level to the national level.
- 11 See impact evaluations of *Pratham's* work by JPAL (povertyactionlab.org).
- 12 The *Pratham* teaching model was based on the fact that if a child was seven or eight (or older), you did not need more than three months to help the child learn to read fluently. The initial experiments of 'learning to read' could achieve fluency in 45 days, but taking into account holidays and other disruptions in Jaunpur we worked on a cycle of three months.
- 13 Several academic papers have been published on this work. Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo, Rachel Glennerster, Stuti Khemani and Sendhil Mullainathan, 'Can Information Campaigns Raise Awareness Local Participation in Primary Education?' *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. 42, No. 15, 14 April 2007. Also, a paper in *American Economic Journal: 'Economic Policy'* 2010:2:1:1–30. 'Pitfalls of Participatory Programs: Evidence from a Randomized Evaluation in Education in India'.
- 14 'We' refers to *Pratham's* work in rural and urban communities across India.
- 15 Time and again we have seen people within the government also changing their mind once they are actually in the field. Assumptions and mindsets do not change in debates and discussions, but they do when the person sees the actual reality to be different.
- 16 In some contexts and circumstances, teachers will say that parents do not send their children to school. More often than not, when this statement is further explored from the parents' point of view, you find that parents do not feel that the school is adding any 'value' and so it is a waste of time to send their child to that particular school.
- 17 Like teachers, tutors, coaching centres, examinations and so on.
- 18 The belief in learning by doing and in demonstration permeates much of *Pratham's* work, whether in assessment, in community mobilisation or in actual teaching-learning interventions.