

Three milestones in education

“Today there is much more data and evidence about the contours of the learning crisis in India than ever before.” School children at the government higher primary school at Doddakallahalli in Malur, Karnataka. Bhagya Prakash K.

Every year in January, when the [Annual Status of Education Report \(ASER\) is released](#), there is a hue and cry about the status of children’s learning in India. The hand-wringing, debates and discussions die down after some time. But this year’s situation is different. India is in a position right now to think and act differently.

Benefits of RTE

First, this year is historic because the children who are today in Class VIII are the first cohort to benefit from the Right to Education Act, which came into effect in April 2010. With almost all these children not only enrolling in school but completing at least eight years in the education system, we are in an excellent position to think seriously about what eight years of schooling should entail and what it should enable children to do.

36% rural youth can’t name India’s capital, finds survey

Second, there are now two new sources of data available on children’s learning. Last week, ASER 2017 and the district report cards from the National Achievement Survey (NAS) were released. The recently released ASER data is different from the usual survey: it concentrates on the 14-18 age group, which is different from the usual target population. Also, unlike the usual ASER surveys which are carried out in all rural districts of the country, this year the exercise was done only in one or two districts per State. The ASER 2017 “beyond basics” assessment framework explores how youth cope with everyday tasks that involve literacy and numeracy. This is in line with the National Council of Educational Research and Training’s (NCERT) learning outcomes approach where developing connections between mathematical thinking and daily life is stressed. In a departure from usual practice, the NAS reports lay out performance of children by different broad competencies rather than by reference to the syllabus or simply in terms of a score. For example, for Class VIII, the report card gives the proportion of students who can “read textual/non-textual materials with comprehension and identify the details, characters, main idea and sequence of ideas and events while reading” or “solve problems involving large numbers by applying appropriate operations”. Both 2017 exercises, one by the government and the other done by non-governmental organisations, indicate a significant shift in thinking about children’s learning. In their own ways, both point to the importance of considering stage-wise learning outcomes, a move which will contribute towards a much-needed rethinking of class-wise curricular expectations. (In both cases, the information available is of the current school year. Every year ASER releases data in the same school year in which the assessment is conducted. The government has done this with NAS data this year. Again, a laudable move.)

Different methodologies

Both use different methodologies – ASER is a household survey and NAS is a school-based effort. ASER conducts its assessment one-on-one, while NAS is a pen-paper test. ASER is aimed at a representative sample of all children (whether in school and attending or out of school) whereas NAS is a representative sample of children who are enrolled in government or aided schools. Typically, ASER focusses mainly on foundational skills like reading and arithmetic, while NAS looks at a wider variety of skills. In the last 10 years, much has been made of these differences. However, the truth is that they both point to important trends related to children’s learning in India.

They are also the only two sources of data that are repeatedly available (whether periodically in the case of NAS or annually in the case of ASER). Contrary to recent assertions in the media, many researchers have accessed and used ASER data for more detailed analyses than is published in the ASER report. Data being available over time enables analysts to track progress and identify persistent gaps of different kinds.

Third, district-level data are now available. This is significant as within the government's education system, planning focusses on the district as the unit for planning, allocation and implementation. Information on inputs or infrastructure are available annually at the district level. However, until this year, other than the annual ASER data, estimates on children's learning were not available at the district level. One of the reasons for ASER collecting data on a representative sample of children at the district level was to contribute to decisions at that level. The timely release of the NAS district report cards is also a welcome move. Now districts in the same State will have the opportunity of making contextually relevant and appropriate plans to address the needs of their children.

More data to mine

Given these three important milestones, India is in a good position to think of effective new ways of moving beyond universal schooling towards learning for all. Each year, as the Finance Ministry prepares the Budget, it carries out consultations with different groups. Recently, in such a discussion, our suggestion was to have a learning improvement fund that districts can apply to for implementing a results-oriented multi-year learning improvement programme. The annual nature of the planning process in education may have been useful for when inputs had to be provided. But when the focus is moving from "providing schooling" towards "ensuring learning", a multi-year period is needed for implementation.

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Over and above whatever States do, for many years we have seen many instances where the district administration wants to implement serious district-wide learning improvement efforts. But sometimes this energy can be constrained by lack of interest, funds and guidance at the State level. Although there is a provision for innovation funds in the annual work plan guidelines, these are usually not effectively spent. In the upcoming Budget, an amount could be set aside specifically for a learning improvement fund. Financial mechanisms could be worked out to access this Central or State-level special fund so that interested districts could bid for these funds based on a well worked out plan. The mechanism could include provision of know-how and support, external verification of progress, and room for course correction.

Today there is much more data and evidence about the contours of the learning crisis in India than ever before. The time is ripe for timely and effective decentralised action to improve the quality of children's learning outcomes.

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