

A learning crisis in the developing world

For some time now, we have known that an unacceptably large number of Indian children are attending school but not learning enough. Now, research shows that this is not just an Indian problem but a global epidemic that threatens several low- and middle-income countries across the globe. New estimates from the Unesco Institute for Statistics (UIS) indicate that about 617 million children or six out of every 10 children are not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics.

The numbers are the worst for sub-Saharan Africa where, according to UIS data, about 88% of children are not able to read properly or do simple math by the time they finish middle school. South and central Asia comes a close second, with 81% of children in the region not learning the basic minimum.

In rural India, the latest edition of the “Annual State of Education Report” (Aser) shows that only 47.8% of class V students can read a class II-level text and only 43% of class VIII students can do class V-level arithmetic. In its annual “World Development Report”, released late last month, the World Bank describes this as not just a “learning crisis” but a “moral crisis”—amplifying inequalities between and within nations.

International assessments of literacy and numeracy have consistently shown that students from low-income countries perform worse than those from high-income countries. And this is not just about pitting the extremes. Even top performers from strong middle-income countries are ranked below their rich country peers, and are struggling to catch up. The World Bank report points to Indonesia, which has significantly improved its performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) over the last 10-15 years—and yet, at its 2003-15 rate, will still take another five decades to reach the developed world’s average score for mathematics and another seven decades for reading.

Notably, this learning crisis comes at a time when enrolment levels have increased across the board. India has achieved near-universal enrolment and, globally, the gap between children attending school in developed and developing countries is closing. So, access to education has improved but the quality of education hasn’t. It is tempting to blame this on lack of resources but let’s not forget the success story of post-war South Korea, or of Vietnam and Peru, Malaysia and Tanzania—which have only recently improved learning outcomes.

So why do some systems succeed while others fail? Essentially, because the latter aren’t able to effectively integrate their key elements. The World Bank lists four such elements—students, teachers, school administration and school infrastructure. If any one malfunctions, the entire system is threatened. Fixing the ecosystem means tackling each element individually and collectively.

Let’s start with the students. If children come to school sick or hungry, or if parents aren’t able to care for them, not just after birth but also in the womb, then their learning levels will be adversely affected. Here, early interventions targeting pregnant women, new mothers and their infants can be particularly effective. India’s integrated child development services scheme and the mid-day meal scheme are good examples.

Moving on to teachers, the importance of teachers’ skills and capabilities should require no elaboration. Yet, they receive little attention. Most developing countries struggle to attract the best and the brightest to their schools even when pay is competitive. Teachers, once hired, are given almost no training or professional development support, leaving them ill-equipped in the

classroom. Education systems also rarely offer incentives to improve pedagogical skills, and instead add non-teaching responsibilities. In Ethiopia and Guatemala, only one-third of the total instructional time was used for teaching. In India, teachers from government schools double up as census workers and election officers.

School principals and school managements also suffer from similar problems. A 2015 study by Stanford University's Nicholas Bloom and others on management practices across 1,800 high schools in eight countries, including India, showed that better management produced better educational outcomes, and schools with greater autonomy did especially well (explaining at least in part the success of the UK academies and the US charter schools). Yet, in the developing world, school managements are rarely empowered or incentivized to improve learning outcomes.

In terms of school infrastructure, the relationship between learning levels and learning aids and tools such as laptops and laboratories is often overemphasized. Several studies have shown that similar investments can produce vastly different outcomes, depending on how the investment is utilized. For example, one assessment of Brazil's One Laptop Per Child scheme showed that more than 40% of teachers rarely used the devices in classrooms.

A disproportionate focus on such inputs, and, by extension, inadequate attention towards outcomes, is one of the most important reasons why India's right to education legislation has performed below potential. For there to be a shift in policy and practice, one has to start with assessing outcomes. This is the World Bank's top recommendation for making education systems more effective. The Aser survey has set the ball rolling in India but there's a long way to go. India still rarely participates in any of the international assessments—and when it does, it finds itself at the bottom of the pile.

Assessing, measuring and benchmarking performance is the first step. Ultimately, breaking out of the low learning trap will require concerted action and evidence-based policymaking.

How do you think the Indian education system can improve its learning outcomes? Tell us at [views@livemint.com](https://twitter.com/livemint)

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