

ASER lessons: Fix early learning in govt schools at a big disadvantage

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The 2019 report focuses on 'Early Years' (ages 4-8) since these are critical to later-stage learning.(Representative image)

The wide gap between the learning levels of students in government schools and those in private schools has become something of a leitmotif of the Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER). The 2019 report focuses on 'Early Years' (ages 4-8) since these are critical to later-stage learning. Experts argue cognitive development in the pre-school years is key to learning outcomes in school, and, thus, children entering schools early—the Right to Education law and the new National Education Policy both set 6 years as the age when a child should enter formal schooling (Standard I)—will be at a disadvantage compared to those who did so at the appropriate age.

Indeed, Early Years points at the same, with older children in the same class demonstrating sharper cognitive abilities, and, consequently, higher learning outcomes. So, with a much higher population of 4&5-year-olds in standard I in government schools (26.1%) compared with private

schools (15.7%)—largely because of the lack of affordable and accessible pre-primary institutions—it can be argued, the feedstock in government schools sets them up for the disparity in learning levels. A Praja Foundation report shows that despite a 44% increase in per student spending by the Delhi government in school education in FY19, the dropout rates have remained more or less unchanged. The report talks of how, of the 3.11 lakh students enrolled in Std 9 in government schools in Delhi, 55% didn't reach Std 10, and of those that did, 25% had dropped out by Std 12. While there are many factors behind such high-dropouts—reading RTE's 'no detention till Std 8' with the poor learning levels at the primary level shows why many students simply may not be able to cope with the curriculum at the secondary and senior secondary levels—the pipeline problem perhaps starts at the foundational level.

ASER 2019 shows how poor the quality of education in government schools is even at the foundational levels. While only 6.7% of government school students in Std I who were aged 4-5 could correctly do early language tasks, this figure was 24.1% for private schools. Similarly, only 16.5% of 4&5-year-olds in Std I in government schools could demonstrate early numeracy competency, compared with 35.3% in private schools. In cognitive skills, too, government institutions lagged their private peers by six to 18 percentage points when performance of 5-year-olds was compared.

The problem is two-fold. India has one of the largest pre-school care programmes in the world—the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), but it remains primarily focussed on nutrition/healthcare/immunisation, with early learning often neglected at the anganwadis. Moreover, as the report notes, the approach to this is quite flawed, with content knowledge and instruction being the preferred method when research shows that play-based activities geared towards building memory, reasoning, and problem-solving abilities have a much larger impact on building the foundation for later learning. India needs to aggressively bolster its early education programme—in FY20, the Centre budgeted \$3.9 billion for the umbrella ICDS programme while in 2017, China was spending nearly \$19 billion on just early childhood education. With spending on foundational learning high, China had rational school education spends with far better results than India—in 2017, nearly 99% of its primary school students got promoted to the secondary level and 95% of the students in the junior secondary level got promoted to the senior secondary level. That, among other factors, also likely freed up money for its government to focus on higher education and R&D in the manner it has in the last decade or so.

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