

Rukmini Banerji

The challenges of basic education in India

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I am in rural Uttar Pradesh – India’s largest state. It is morning. The road from one village to another winds its way through farms and fields. Looking back at the village we have left behind, I can see the low roof of the school in the distance. Schools here have a green stripe running around the building. Looking ahead towards the next village, the local primary school is clearly visible through a group of dwellings. The road we are on is crowded with children going to school. Some are on bicycles and some are walking – all streaming either towards the school we have left behind or the one ahead.

It is hard to find a village in India – even in the remotest parts of the country – where there is no school. Over the last two decades, the provision of schools by the government, especially primary schools, has become almost universal. These schools have basic infrastructure; however small or rudimentary, there will usually be a few classrooms and an open space for a playground. Private schools have mushroomed, too. In rural areas they operate under trees or in simple sheds, and in urban areas in residential buildings. Schools are everywhere, and almost all children are enrolled in a school of some sort.

This is an impressive achievement in a country as vast and diverse as India. Access to school is now recognised as a non-negotiable part of a child’s right to education. It is enshrined in law and is widely accepted in practice. The Right to Education Act that was passed by the Indian parliament in 2009 lays down norms that each school should aim for, the processes to put in place, and the qualifications that teachers should have. Parents, politicians, planners, and policymakers are united in their conviction that all children should be in school. But India’s success in expanding access and extending the reach of education is creating new challenges, as standards struggle to keep up with rising expectations.

India's schools fall short

As enrolment rises and more students complete more years of schooling, aspirations have risen across the board. Running through the many layers of Indian society is the deep faith that education will lead this generation out of poverty, providing better livelihoods and opportunities. But this faith is prompting new questions about the education system. Now that schooling targets have been achieved, and most children are enrolled in school, the question arises: are children learning? What “value is added” with each year that each child spends in school? Does an extra year in school give students more knowledge, skills, and – crucially – opportunities? What needs to be changed to bring outcomes into line with expectations?

Schools are not producing the expected results. New data shows that even after five years of school, only about half of India's children have attained the level in reading or arithmetic expected after two or three years.¹ (There are similar situations in countries such as Pakistan, and parts of East and West Africa.²)

The root causes of this shortfall in learning are embedded in families as well as schools. About 50 percent of rural school-going children in India have mothers with no or very little education, who can provide little active support for learning at home. Further, parents with a low educational level may not be able to see when a child is not progressing, and may lack confidence to communicate with teachers about this. They often assume that schooling will automatically lead to learning, without realising that extra effort may be needed. The rigid structure of India's schools allows children to fall behind – teachers are expected to stick to the curricula and textbooks for each grade, and cannot spare much time to help children who are below that level.

Until recently there was little assessment of students in early grades to identify those who had fallen behind. Nor were there organised or systematic remedial efforts within the school system (government or private) to help them. As a result, basic learning (reading and arithmetic) is generally low even after the completion of the primary school cycle. And, more worryingly, learning trajectories are flat – implying that if a child does not learn basic skills early, they are unlikely to acquire them in later school years. India's Right to Education

1 See Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER) from 2005 to 2014, available at www.asercentre.org. These reports are generated for every rural district in India and capture a snapshot of a representative sample of children (aged three to 16) across the country. On average, the annual ASER survey reaches over 560 districts each year, surveying an average of 650,000 children in more than 16,000 villages in India.

2 See palnetwork.org for details of the Uwezo reports from East Africa and similar citizen-led assessments from other parts of the world. ASER Pakistan provides similar information as the ASER reports from India.

Act guarantees eight years of schooling to each child. But, at the end of these eight years, the foundation on which future skills, further education, or indeed lives are built is still very weak.

India now faces the immense challenge of moving its education policy beyond infrastructure and inputs, enrolments and expenditures to address fundamental questions of vision and implementation. There are many choices to be made and alternatives to be weighed; for example, should India pursue excellence for some at the cost of equal opportunities for all? Should the education system be academically directed, and geared towards the few who will make it to college, or towards preparing the vast majority for their livelihoods? Where do technical and vocational skills fit in? How much space is there for innovation and enterprise in the delivery of this basic service? Should it be centralised or decentralised? How can relevant and affordable education be delivered today while laying the foundations for the education of tomorrow?

Educating the youth boom

What does India want? What does India need? First, without building a strong foundation in the early years of school, students can make little progress later on. India has to ensure that by the time a child finishes five years of schooling they can read and understand basic texts, discuss what they have read, and express their views. They should be able to do basic calculations and tackle basic logic problems. Most importantly, children should be able to ask questions and have confidence in their ability to learn.

Second, if these are to be the top priorities of the education system, then there must be substantial reorganisation of the structure and functioning of schools.

Third, action must be fast and sustained. There is a lot of discussion in India about the potential of the “youth bulge” – the rapidly growing young population – and the opportunity to reap a “demographic dividend”. According to the last census, in 2011, there is a population of roughly 25 million in each single-year age group between five and 16. Today, there are almost 100 million children in grades between three and six. If India does not move fast to ensure that this group gains fundamental skills, they will not be able to contribute much to the economy or to society when they are young people entering the workforce, building families and taking part in their communities.

What India wants is for every child to have a better future and more opportunities than his or her parents. What India needs is the ability to build children's capabilities so that this dream becomes reality in the years ahead.

The school bell can be heard throughout the village. The few stragglers who were still on the way to school begin to run. As children settle into their classrooms and get ready for the school day, we hope that each new lesson will lead them closer to a better life.