

Outcomes in School Education – Testing Boards

The Compiling and release of the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), 2005 is a landmark event in the evolution of school education in India. Pratham, a reputed civil society organization conducted a nation-wide survey of school-going children in 485 rural districts. 776 small and big groups along with about 10,000 volunteers participated in this massive exercise, and assessed the elementary education outcomes on a large, randomly selected sample of nearly 400,000 children in 9521 villages.

The findings of ASER are revealing, and give us valuable insights into the state of our elementary education. While the information pertains to school children in the 6-14 years age group, it also helps us understand the state of secondary education by revealing the state of the foundation in early schooling. Even more significant, the quality of teachers and their commitment and accountability can be inferred from the quality of outcomes in schools.

The results of ASER-2005 are mixed. There is happy evidence of increased allocations to, and emphasis on, school education through various programmes like Sarva Siksha Abhiyan and Mid-day Meals improving enrollment and retention in schools. 93.4 percent of all children (6-14 years) are at school. There are of course, inter-state variations. But the overall situation has improved. 75.1% of all children are in government schools, and 16.4% are in private schools. About 3% are in madarassas and alternate schools, leaving 6.6%, or 11 million children, out of school. More than half of those out of school were never enrolled.

But the learning levels of the children in schools reveal a far more distressing picture. 34.9% of all school-going children in 7-14 year age group cannot read even a short, easy paragraph (level 1; Std 1 level difficulty), and 51.9% cannot read a simple story (level 2; Std 2 level difficulty). Even in the 11-14 year group, 31% children cannot read the level-2 passage. While private schools fare better than government schools, the difference in outcomes is not high. While over 65 percent of children (Std II-V) in government schools cannot read a level-2 passage, over 52 percent of children in private schools too cannot read! Clearly, the problem transcends the usual analysis of public sector vs private sector debate.

Performance in Arithmetic tasks is equally distressing. Over 41% of children (7-14 years) cannot do a simple two-digit subtraction; over 65% of children cannot divide a three-digit number. Even among the children in 6th and 7th standards, 40% in government schools and over 33% in private schools cannot do a simple division. For a country which prides in its technical manpower pool, proficiency in mathematics and ability to provide back-office services to the world, this is an alarming situation.

Clearly, the children who are either genetically better-endowed, or are fortunate in being born to educated parents or having caring, competent teachers do very

well, and are able to find jobs demanding high productivity. Some of them successfully compete with the best in the world, and bring laurels to India and make us proud. While the best products of our education are a match for the best in the world, the average is appallingly low. That is why, nearly 80% of our gene pool is untapped and the productive potential of the bulk of people is wasted. The results are low productivity, poor skills, and massive unemployment even after several years of schooling, or even college education.

The ASER – 2005 also dispels some other myths. The states traditionally regarded as better-governed are doing as badly as others, or in some respects even worse!

But there is hope. Our society values learning, and parents are willing to pay any price for giving their children a head start. ASER shows that the debate on education is now moving a few notches up, and is focusing on outcomes. A few practical steps can dramatically improve school education.

First, at the very minimum, we need State Testing Boards and a National Testing Board to regularly monitor education outcomes and provide invaluable data.

It is axiomatic in education that what is important is what gets tested! These Testing Boards could adapt the best practices elsewhere to suit our conditions. Standardized assessments practices in the US, France, Germany, Sweden, England, New Zealand, Scotland and Japan offer as excellent models. Our own NCERT has developed both the “National Curriculum Framework”, and “Minimum Levels of Learning”, both of which can form the basis for evolving sensible criterion-referenced assessments across the country. The current examination system is extremely flawed. Pressure on teachers to improve pass percentages often leads to rampant mass-copying. I remember a Chief Minister extolling the virtues of his minister for enhancing the X Std. pass percentage from 26 to 94 in six months, little realizing that these inflated numbers only demonstrate the ingenuity of teachers under pressure, not better outcomes! Testing Boards can first take up random sampling tests and identify the weaknesses in outcomes and facilitate strategic interventions for remedial action. Such a low cost initiative will build pressure on the system to deliver, and sensitize parents and community. Stake-holder empowerment through School Boards, and nation-wide standard tests for university admission can follow.

ASER 2005 has provided an invaluable tool to improve school education. There is nothing more important for enhancing our productivity and giving opportunity to poor children. Will the government act?

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