

Basic literacy and numeracy: Why it's proving so elusive in India

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For navigating life in today's world, the basic literacy and numeracy abilities are inadequate but critical for further education and learning.

Summary

- *The educational achievement of children is a function of both what happens at school and what the children get, have and experience at home and in their community. Even India's well-resourced schools are failing to meet policy goals. We need fresh approaches.*

This column is an admission of our struggles. We run nine schools, with a total of about 2,700 students. About 20% of our students do not achieve foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) by grade 3, and 6% not even by grade 5.

Earlier, 40% students were not achieving FLN by grade 3; we had to work hard to bring it down to 20%, and we seem to be stuck at this level.

Our goal, as for the entire country's education system, committed under the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP), is that all children must achieve these very basic language and math capacities by grade 3.

Foundational literacy is the capacity to read a couple of very simple paragraphs with comprehension and being able to write a few original simple sentences. Foundational numeracy is recognizing numbers, knowing place value, and being able to do simple operations of two digits, such as addition and subtraction.

For navigating life in today's world, these basic capacities are inadequate but critical because most further education and learning is built upon these. And since we have a system-wide crisis on this issue, we need to focus on solving it as a country.

A description of our schools and their context is necessary to understand what is going on. We run these schools to enable our main work in helping improve the public education system. We ourselves learn from these schools and use them as 'demonstration' models with government school teachers and officials.

Eight of our schools are on the rural periphery of district towns across four states; one is on the periphery of Bangalore. The schools are completely free—no tuition fees, no charges for books, uniforms, the midday meal or anything else.

Over 80% of our students are from socioeconomically disadvantaged and vulnerable families, about 15% from lower middle-class families and about 5% from the middle-class. Since the schools have a good reputation, there is a scramble for admissions.

Our process is designed to admit a demographic profile which roughly mirrors the demography of the local population. All the schools have good campuses, lots of teaching and learning resources, and excellent teams— with competent, hard-working and empathetic teachers, who are systematically supported in their work and professional development.

Simply put, our schools are better resourced and supported than most schools in India, other than the elite ones that make up 1-2% of the total. As a useful comparison, they are resourced much like the Centre's Kendriya Vidyalayas.

So, why are we struggling to achieve these very basic capacities with such a large proportion of our students? Let's be clear: we are not achieving the goal, and it's not that the children are failing.

Almost all these children are from among the 80% who live with disadvantages and face deprivation. In other words, they live in poverty; even within this, a larger proportion are from families in extreme poverty and/or from particularly disadvantaged groups such as Dalits. Since we have strong relationships with our students' families, we understand their circumstances well.

The educational achievement of children is a function of both what happens at school and what the children get, have and experience at home and in their community.

Children living in poverty have less, get less and experience a tougher life. For example, they don't get adequate food or appropriate nutritional content, which affects both their biological development and day-to-day behaviour, including attention. They get significantly less adult care and supervision.

This is not because their families love them any less, but because the adults are away all the time, battling to earn a living. These children also miss school a lot more because they fall ill more, and when they fall ill, they do not get treatment; and even otherwise, when they are healthy, they are often helping the adults with their livelihood.

Poverty and social exclusion cause significant stress and other mental health issues. In short, the deficits and deprivations that children live with affects their educational achievement profoundly.

In the field of school education, there is a reasonable understanding of these underlying sociological and psychological factors, but an inadequate understanding of their curricular and pedagogical implications.

We are able to achieve the grade-3 FLN goal with many of those in poverty, so why can't we do it with the rest?

We are not certain and still looking for answers, but it seems a matter of human variability, for one. For almost all these students, much more time and personal attention is required, which when used skilfully can compensate for some kinds of deficits and deprivations and thus achieve some educational goals.

But the responses of individual children vary, and it appears that whatever time and attention we can devote to them up to grade 3 is still inadequate for the 20%.

That 14% from these 20% achieve FLN by grade 5 is because we get two more years to work with them. The 6% who don't achieve FLN even by grade 5 usually have some disability or are facing some deep disturbances at home.

Despite our resources and expertise, we struggle to achieve FLN goals. Most Indian schools serve similar populations, but are not as well-resourced.

Is it surprising that we are struggling with education across the country? What must be done in the curriculum, in schools and in communities? We will take that up in the next column.