

An exploration of why children are learning little in classrooms

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Why are children not learning what they should in school? A massive proportion of our children do not learn basic reading and writing, and mathematics, or do so very inadequately. The country accepts that our education system is failing on this count; the National Education Policy 2020 has candidly confronted this issue.

Let's keep our question sharply and narrowly focused on the matter of basic language and math, leaving aside all other learning expectations, and explore this question from the very basics.

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If children are not learning, what is happening inside the classroom must be insufficient and/or ineffective. In any classroom, you have children and a teacher. So, the reasons for ineffectiveness in the classroom must have to do with the children and the teacher. As a start, let's just focus on the children. Since we are talking about basic language and math, we are talking about children between the ages of 6 and 11.

What all might cause them not to learn? Consider four possibilities.

First, perhaps some children just don't have the capacity to learn. We know this is not true. All children have the capacity to learn, and certainly for basic language and math. A small proportion of children with disabilities may not have these basic capacities, and we must address their needs specifically, but no one makes the preposterous claim that the failure of learning in Indian schools is because of children with such disabilities. So, the basic learning failure in Indian schools cannot be attributed to some innate problem within children.

Second, perhaps children just don't want to learn. This is absolutely true in many ways. Most children don't want to sit down and learn how to read, write or do math. They want to play and have fun. This doesn't mean that they are not learning. Children are learning with bewildering speed all the time. About the world around them, about people, about themselves, and more. Children are incredibly curious. Led by curiosity and with experience, they can absorb and build knowledge like a dry sponge soaking water. This very strong innate disposition of children energizes them to do all kind of things and experience the world, instead of sitting down to learn how to read and write or do math.

Third, perhaps with so many children in a class, they disturb and distract one another. This is true, as a corollary of children not wanting to learn language and math but do other things that interest them—including social interactions, with their friends (and antagonists).

Fourth, perhaps there are other things that stop children from learning that are from outside the classroom. A child is so hungry that she cannot concentrate. Another has a home environment where she is working all the time and is left exhausted. Perhaps she is not able to come to school regularly because of chores at home and so has no idea what's going on while in class. Much could be added to this list, all emerging from poverty, which creates these many kinds of obstacles to learning in the classroom.

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Children from well-to-do families don't have these obstacles. And it should also not escape us that this 'lack of basic learning' is a phenomenon found overwhelmingly with children from homes in poverty or near-poverty, rarely with children from affluent or comfortable families. Some children are tormented by extremely abusive home environments, though this has nothing to do with poverty and is such a tiny sliver of the overall proportion of those who don't learn that, like the matter of children with mental disabilities, it is not an explanation for the phenomenon we are exploring.

What are the implications of these four things? The first three points have implications for teachers and teaching.

All teachers must understand and act with the conviction that all children can learn. Wrong-headed ideas such as "children of the poor are dull and can never learn" powers a vicious cycle of lack of engagement and commitment, and thus develops into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Harnessing the innate curiosity of children to learn what is part of their curriculum, managing their attention suitably and methodically, and making things interesting and relatable to them are some of the

most important capacities of a teacher. The nature of children is what it is and that's not an obstacle to learning. In fact, it can be the greatest energizer of learning if managed appropriately and effectively. Including social interactions among children in class.

Obstacles arising from poverty have implications for the teacher, the school and the larger system. These cannot be completely addressed by even the ideal teacher and ideal teaching in a classroom. However, teachers do have a key role to play. They must understand the specific obstacles that each child faces and bring empathy and sensitivity to the child in the classroom. But the bigger role is of public systems: making sure that hunger is not a problem, that there is adequate resourcing in the school, that communities are involved, and so on. We must do our utmost, even if we know that we're not about to eliminate poverty in the near future.

We will discuss reasons associated with teachers for children's lack of learning in the next column, and then some more aspects, before we conclude.

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