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## COUNTERPOINT

# Teaching At The Right Level: The Government's New Education Policy Must Include Solutions To Teach Students Basics

By GAUTAM PATEL | 27 May 2016



TIM GRAHAM/GETTY IMAGES

In 2014, although over 96 percent of Indian children between the ages of 6 and 14 were enrolled in school, 52 percent of fifth-standard children could not read at the grade level, and 75 percent of those studying in third standard could not solve a two-digit subtraction problem.



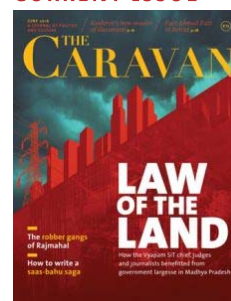
In January 2016, the non-governmental organisation, Pratham Education Foundation and the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), which is headquartered at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, launched a scale-up program in Anantapur, a district in Andhra Pradesh that has the lowest learning levels in the state. The test, which was organised in conjunction with the state government, was conducted between January and April. It aimed to assess the efficacy of a simple approach to improve children's learning levels in language and mathematics: Teaching at the Right Level, or TaRL. (Disclosure: I am a senior policy manager at J-PAL).

In 1600 schools in 32 *mandals*—zones—in Anantapur, about 52,000 students from grades three, four and five were grouped according to their reading and comprehension learning-level after a quick assessment, regardless of their age, for two hours during the school day. The children were then given exercises to help them improve and move on to the next proficiency level. For instance, students who could not yet recognise letters would play games with letter-cards. Those who could read words used

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mind-maps to move to forming sentences, and those who could already do the latter were given storymaking exercises. In mathematics, once the students could recognise numbers they were taught core concepts—such as place value—to be able to comprehend and complete basic operations such as addition and subtraction. After 55 days, the school teachers again measured the progress of their students with a tool for quick assessment. The assessment was verified by trained students from local colleges, who conducted an external examination independently. The results were promising. The number of children who could read increased from 43 percent at the start of the programme to 57 percent by its end; 54 percent of the children could now do long division, instead of the 33 percent that could do it earlier. The three sub-districts (mandals) that had the lowest performance at the beginning of the programme showed some of the highest gains in the learning-levels—an indication that the technique was working well at the lowest proficiency grades. A similar operation was conducted in Gujarat between January and March of this year, covering one full district called Sabarkantha and blocks of three other districts. Across 2,000 schools for 54,000 children, the program yielded similar results. The number of children unable to read letters came down by half, from 3,400 to about 1,200; about 31,000 students could now read stories compared to the earlier 22,000; and the number of children who could do basic addition went up from about 70 percent to almost 92 percent.

On 16 May, the union human resources development minister Smriti Irani announced that the central government would be unveiling its New Education Policy in the next few weeks. The policy is expected to contain crucial recommendations for higher and primary education in the country. These may include the establishment of research parks through the Indian Institutes of Technology, and the digitisation of textbooks, which will be available through mobile applications along with a web portal for teaching across the curriculum. Among other things, the policy will affect reform for over 1.1 million government primary and upper-primary schools, impacting over 133 million children in standards one to five.

But the status of primary education in India is far from satisfactory. In 2014, although over 96 percent of Indian children between the ages of 6 and 14 were enrolled in school, 52 percent of fifth-standard children could not read at the grade level, and 75 percent of those studying in third standard could not solve a two-digit subtraction problem. Many children in the country are first-generation learners—they do not have support systems at home that help them hone what they learn, or provide a watchful eye to correct their mistakes. In this context, the results observed with TaRL scale-ups in Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat could act as a lighthouse for the recommendations of the centre's New Education Policy.

In the rural schools I frequently visit in Gujarat, school bags are unexpectedly light or missing. Textbooks are missing—some, because they've been sold off in bulk as recycling material for money, and perhaps because around half of the children in rural schools can't read simple paragraphs or a story. Instead of chalks, pencils or slates, what I've seen appearing with most regularity among the students is the steel thali for the midday meals. This paucity of essentials is reflected in the underwhelming state of these classroom, with missing teachers and missing children. According to an estimate from 2011, as many as 25 percent of the teachers in rural schools were absent on a given visit. Among students, the figure was even higher at 30 percent. Last year, it was estimated that there were around 500,000 vacancies for the posts of sanctioned teachers.

That primary education's most widespread problem is the persistently low reading and comprehension levels of our students, can no longer be contested. In 2006, an assessment conducted by Educational Initiatives, an education consultancy firm, of over 30,000 children at some of India's top schools in five metropolitan cities, used questions from the TIMSS test—Trends in International Mathematics and Science Studies, a series of international assessment of science and math capability in students. The test found that the performance of children on questions based on problem solving, general observation and day-to-day language use was not up to mark. In 2014, the ASER Centre, a survey and education evaluation centre under the Pratham network, conducted a survey, which showed that in Gujarat, only half of the students in the fifth standard could read a story. As recently as this week Gujarat's chief minister, Anandiben Patel spoke to over 4,000 educationists and expressed her dissatisfaction over the release of the findings of the sixth assessment of the quality of education by Gunotsav, a government accountability program for the quality of primary education in the state. According to the assessment, the annual improvement in learning achievement for 2015 at the primary level was marginal—and for classes six to eight, the annual improvement was found to be negligible.

This is where the TaRL model comes in. Classrooms typically have children with a wide range of learning levels. They are all asked to look at the same page of the same textbook, irrespective of how well they can manage the basics of reading and maths. In the TaRL approach, the children are first quickly assessed, with a simple testing tool for language and for mathematics, and then re-grouped so that the teacher targets different learning activities at groups of children who are at the same level of learning. This approach helps the students progress systematically over the duration of the programme.

Impact evaluations of the model have also been encouraging. Randomised evaluations of the intervention have exhibited that it works in different contexts across the country, and testing variations in implementation has honed in on what works best. Between 2003 and 2014, J-PAL rigorously assessed variations of this model across India, six times. In the Haryana randomised evaluation with 400 government schools, 34 percent of children could read, at the beginning of the programme. This figure moved up to 53 percent by the end of the programme. In the Balsakhi tutorial program, which was conducted between 2001 and 2003 in Gujarat, paid community instructors taught children with TaRL for two hours per day. The average test scores of the children increased by 0.14

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standard deviations in the first year (the standard deviation can be seen as the expected difference between the score of a randomly chosen student compared to the average score of the group). Similar results were observed in evaluations during which the teachers were specifically focussed on implementing the programme. In 2008, at a one month summer camp in Bihar, for five days a week, government teachers taught their students using TaRL for two hours everyday. The overall test scores of children increased by 0.11 standard deviations.

In an editorial in *The Indian Express*, that was published in 2015, Rukmini Banerji, the CEO of Pratham, and Esther Duflo, my colleague from J-PAL, argued that grouping children according to their age or grade may not be a solution for poor educational outcomes. They noted that in the J-PAL evaluation conducted across 484 schools in Uttar Pradesh, volunteers and the staff at Pratham conducted classes for reading and arithmetic in bursts of 10 or 20 days. These camps were held for a total of 50 days during the school year that commenced in 2013. Upon completion of the programme, and by the end of the school year, the number of students who could read a story jumped from 15 percent to 48 percent for students in the participating schools, compared to 24 per cent for students in schools that did not have the TaRL learning camps. “In an environment where regular school seems to be completely failing the children,” Banerji and Duflo wrote, “just 50 days brought them to the level of the children in Haryana.”

The TaRL model doesn't have the excitement or visibility of policy interventions such as digital learning. It goes against a familiar convention in education that teachers need more “hardware” items—books, benches, materials—to teach better. Over the last few years, India has seen sharp increases in such inputs and in government expenditure on schools. But in typical classrooms, with children of a wide range of learning abilities and varied starting points, this business-as-usual approach has not helped them progress to the next learning level. J-PAL has evaluated the impact of inputs such as textbooks, libraries and improving the teacher-student ratio. The gains were not comparable to the benefits that TaRL's soft changes in pedagogy accrued. What we have found, is that an interactive teacher who supports their students, and a simple, tailorable teaching methodology consistently helps the children.

The visibility of low learning levels across India has driven a range of experiments and innovations by governments and NGOs. Now, the urgency is not to devise new ways to teach well, but to recognise what has worked from the plethora of approaches. The TaRL model to ensure children learn is as simple as these sentences lay out. It doesn't require an intensive training, or a costly tool kit. Nor does it mandate a high-level qualification for the master trainers. The programme gives students what they need first: the basics. The government's New Education Policy will make a lasting difference only if it is able to include such simple, cost-effective solutions, which can be scaled up to make an impact on the millions of children at the primary level who are ready for a better way to learn the basics.

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#### KEYWORDS

education, Policy, reading

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#### READER'S COMMENTS

2 THOUGHTS ON “TEACHING AT THE RIGHT LEVEL: THE GOVERNMENT'S NEW EDUCATION POLICY MUST INCLUDE SOLUTIONS TO TEACH STUDENTS BASICS”

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**Tara**

May 28, 2016 at 7:20 pm

**Gautam Patel**

June 3, 2016 at 10:40 pm

Has the programme been sustained in Haryana?  
 what were the numbers of schools and/or pupil who were part of the experiment in Gujarat and Bihar?  
 There are children with different learning abilities in every classroom in every country, how do they deal this?  
 what is the proof that this the J-pal pratham experiment is "cost-effective solution" when it is taken to scale?  
 Dear Tara, it is good to see your questions. The programme was not continued in Haryana for a number of reasons, however the Government of Gujarat is moving to the 3rd year, and in Andhra Pradesh the 2nd year. In Gujarat this year around 54,000 children were covered, and in Andhra Pradesh 52,000 children. In the next year of scale-up we should see these numbers of children multiplied.

Yes, classrooms do have children with a wide range of abilities and the TaRL methodology deals with this by grouping children by their learning-level across classes III, IV and V, to solve the problem, and allow teaching to be at the right level for the children.

The TaRL methodology is cost-effective as the resources required include a kit of teaching and learning material of around Rs.1000-2000 per school (for one school year), the teacher training is integrated as part of regular training, and the mentoring support structure is already in place in some states (the Cluster Resource Centre Coordinators in Gujarat, or Cluster Resource Persons in Jharkhand, etc). We're keen see to further integration of the evidence-based elements of the model with existing systems of government, as this will allow scale-up to reach state-wide, where as a resource-intense model would be costly to reach to the millions of children in India that need a pedagogy approach that guarantees they learn the basics soon.

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