Read India - Every Child in School and Learning Well

Helping Primary School Students in India Acquire Basic Reading and Math Skills

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Can innovative, well-designed teaching materials and methods used by government school teachers and complemented by local volunteers be effectively employed in schools plagued by low levels of learning and scaled-up efficiently to improve learning for millions of children in India?

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Field Partners: Pratham, Governments of Bihar and Uttarakhand

Policy Issue

India's deficit in basic education has long been recognized. There has been steady progress in enrollments—including of girls and poorer groups. However, problems of low attendance and unsatisfactory learning remain pervasive. While low levels of basic reading and arithmetic are troubling in and of themselves, they also perpetuate poverty, especially at a time when India is undergoing major structural transformations in the pattern of production and employment.

The ills of India's educational system are felt most acutely by the poor, especially in rural areas, where the vast majority still attend government-run public schools. Pratham, an educational NGO, has produced an Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) since 2005, which involves a short reading and arithmetic test administered to a representative sample of rural children in India. This exercise is carried out in all rural districts in India. Every year since 2005, this report has shown large deficits in basic reading and math capabilities. For example, according to ASER 2008, even in grade 5, only 56% children can read a grade 2 level text. In math, less than 38% of school-going children in grade 5 can correctly solve a division problem.[1]

Context

The Central Government in India initiated a major initiative, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), in 2001 to provide additional resources and support to state-level education systems to push for universal elementary education by 2010. SSA goals are largely focused on improving access and universalizing enrollment. The efforts of the government have resulted in enrollment levels that are well over 90% for children in the 6-14 age group.

Since programs like SSA have been successful in raising enrollment levels, the task of improving learning becomes ever more urgent. In 2007, Pratham launched its nationwide Read India campaign. The aim is to ensure that all children in India are able to read fluently and do basic math confidently. Pratham works with state governments and teachers and also with village governments and communities to catalyze action on this issue. Pratham has been developing new reading materials, training and teaching methods that are designed to be more accessible and effective in current conditions in India's education system. In 2008, at its peak period, the Read India campaign reached close to 20 million children across India. Currently, there is Read India activity in 240 districts in 19 states. In some states, this is in collaboration with the state government.

Description of Intervention

The challenge of systematically evaluating the impact of a program as large and diverse as Read India is immense. J-PAL and Pratham decided to base the impact evaluation of this program over

[1] ASER reports since 2005 are available: www.asercentre.org

several years in Bihar and Uttarakhand where there is government partnership. The current study is based on Read India activities that are taking place in 3 blocks in Paschim Champaran district in Bihar and in 2 blocks of Haridwar and 1 block in Vikasnagar districts in Uttarakhand.

This evaluation examines three major elements: (1) Pratham's training and academic support to government school teachers, (2) Pratham's specially designed learning materials that are used in schools and in the villages, and (3) village volunteers' supplementary effort to support children who need extra help. The training and monitoring is done in collaboration with the state governments. In fact, the materials being used in the second year of the program have been based on inputs from teachers and others in the field. The three interventions are based on combinations of these elements and the study looks at the impact of these on the learning levels of school-going children in primary grades.

The interventions are administered jointly by Pratham and the state government over two school years (2008-2009 and 2009-2010), one of which has already been completed. Three large scale surveys are planned, one baseline, a midline after one school year and an endline survey after two school years. In addition, a special survey of about half the children was undertaken in Bihar to evaluate a summer camp that was implemented at the beginning of the first school year. These surveys are being complemented by ongoing monitoring of the intervention's implementation within the schools. The learning levels will be measured using testing tools that include the ASER testing tools and other instruments that have been specially developed for the project.

A young boy is helped with his homework.

A school monitoring survey instrument was developed for the purpose of tracking implementation in schools, including teacher and student attendance and the use of Read India materials. Surveys of school conditions and teachers interviews are being conducted at the beginning and the end of the evaluation. School conditions may directly influence the effectiveness of the treatment, or proxy the underlying quality of teaching; this will include potential influences on school governance, such as the presence and activity of village education committees.

Focus group discussions with groups of parents, children and teachers will provide a complementary source of information on how the different groups see the learning process and the quality of education.

The intervention being evaluated is a combination of proven Pratham methods and new additions. Pratham has developed a range of additional materials and techniques designed to provide core skills for students in elementary school who can already read. The intervention involves a mixture of these methods, with linked material for basic and more advanced children. The interventions are also designed to build on the already existing close partnership between Pratham and the state government in primary education.

The interventions differ between the two states.

- **Bihar:** There are three interventions and one comparison group in Bihar. In the first intervention, a randomly selected subset of schools receive teacher training, monitoring, academic support and materials. In the catchment area of these schools, Pratham also recruits village volunteers (who are not paid) to assist in providing extra instruction to children who need extra help. The second intervention involves another randomly selected subset of schools where the teachers are given training, monitoring, academic support and materials but there are no volunteers. In the third intervention, the schools only receive materials. All of these are compared to a comparison group, which receives nothing.

- **Uttarakhand**: This intervention differs from the one in Bihar in that there will be no teachers or schools receiving only materials, so that those villages selected to receive the treatment will receive both the materials and teacher training.

Similar to Bihar, in Uttarakhand, of the schools receiving the treatment, about half will also have volunteers. The nature of the volunteer activity also differs between the two states. In Bihar, the volunteers work in the community outside of school hours but in Uttarakhand, volunteers work in the schools during school hours.

The core of the intervention is to bring focus to, and action on children's learning by working in close collaboration with government systems over a sustained period of time. Pratham's work aims to change the government's education policy from the inside, by advocating and demonstrating the use of effective and innovative teaching and learning materials and methods. In addition, Pratham builds in community support to assist school efforts in improving learning.

Results

The Read India evaluation is currently in its final academic year so it is not yet possible to measure the impacts of the intervention. Initial results from the first year are expected soon and J-PAL will present final analysis after the end of the 2009-2010 school year.

Nonetheless, preliminary analysis is available from summer camps that were held in Bihar. In June 2008, the government organized a one month summer camp across the state. Pratham assisted the government in the summer camps in all schools across 18 districts. For the study areas, Pratham and the state government jointly implemented remedial summer camps in all 118 intervention villages. The camps targeted low-performing children in standards 3-5 and aimed to help children who had fallen behind academically to catch up before the regular school year began in July.

Preliminary analysis suggests there was a modest, significant impact on overall reading levels in the villages, but a much larger impact on the subgroup of children that actually attended the camps. This indicates that if the targeting of low-performing students had been more effective, the measured impact of the summer camp on all children would likely have been greater. But given that the summer camps were organized quickly and in one of the poorest states of India, we judge the positive impact of the summer camps to be noteworthy.

Concluding Thoughts

This impact evaluation study is interesting for a variety of reasons. First, although the actual study locations are relatively small, the study attempts to understand the effects of large scale efforts like SSA and Read India. Second, the partnership for the study and the interventions involves a university (MIT), state governments (Bihar and Uttarakhand) and an NGO. Working effectively within a three way partnership has its own challenges but as this study indicates, effective partnerships are possible. Even though results on impacts may not be available, there has been significant learning gleaned from the process of carrying out the interventions. This learning has fed back into the interventions in the second year.

Additional Readings:
(available at www.povertyactionlab.org)

Abhijit Banerjee, Rukmini Banerji, Esther Duflo, Rachel Glennerster, Stuti Khemani: "Pitfalls of Participatory Programs: Evidence from a Randomized Evaluation in Education in India." forthcoming, *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* (see also NBER Working Paper No. 14467).

"Education for Marginalized Children." *J-PAL Policy Briefcase # 2*.