



Averting a learning crisis in India

Lessons from practice and research

The problem

India boasts near universal enrolment in elementary schools (Classes 1 to 8), a fundamental right for children who are 6 to 14 years old. Despite the progress on enrolment, there is a major crisis. Half of Indian children in Class 3 are only able to read Class 1 level text¹. The picture remains bleak as children move up the classes. Just three out of every four children in Class 8 are able to read Class 2 text.

Until recently this problem had not received the attention it deserves. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 allows children to be promoted from one class to the next despite not attaining the learning level for their age. An amendment to the Act in August 2017 scrapped the policy of automatic promotion. Now, children in Classes 5 to 8 who do not attain the right learning level can be held back. Teachers, who are in short supply, are expected to deliver extra classes to these students to improve their learning. Unless steps are taken to improve the availability and capacity of teachers to teach effectively, the purpose of the amendment will not be achieved.

Kusuma's model

Since 2015 Kusuma's secondary school readiness model has addressed the issue of low learning levels amongst students. The governments of Uttar Pradesh and Odisha now use this model in more than 1,000 schools, reaching 75,000 children.

The 69-day programme helps Class 9 students attain the learning level for their age in English, Mathematics, Science, Environmental Studies, Hindi and Odia. The programme has three phases delivered by teachers who are first trained in good teaching practices. Assessments at the start identify students who will benefit. The first phase builds understanding of basic concepts in the subjects. It consists of four hours of remedial teaching every day over 18 days. The second phase develops the capacity of students to apply concepts and consists of two hours of teaching each day for 45 days. The last phase prepares students for Class 9 examinations and consists of 13 hours of teaching over six

days. An assessment at the end tests the improvements made by students. The head teacher and school governing committee monitors the progress of students. A bespoke implementation guide, and teaching and learning materials have been developed for the programme.



Students from Government Higher Secondary School Jamo, Hardoi using student learning resources. Photo: Kusuma Foundation

An evaluation by the London School of Economics in June 2017 analysed assessment scores for students at the start and end of the programme in 50 schools in Hardoi and Sambalpur. The research found large gains in test scores on average. The highest gains were recorded for language – 13 percentage points for Hindi and 9 percentage points for Odia and the lowest gains were recorded in Science in Sambalpur (1.2 percentage points) and Environmental Studies in Hardoi (3 percentage points). The study also established a positive correlation between test score gains and participation in the programme.

¹ The Annual State of Education Report 2016

Transforming education for a whole generation

Kusuma's experience of supporting the Uttar Pradesh and Odisha State governments has identified lessons for improving education outcomes:

Investing in teachers is critical

Teacher availability, capacities and accountability are critical for improving student learning. Systematic analysis of teacher vacancies, urgent teacher recruitment and improvements in teacher professional development can address these gaps. Assessment of students using standardised methods would enable teachers to tailor their teaching based on student needs.

Enhancing funding allocations

Central Government grants for State remediation programmes only cater for a small percentage of students. Our experience shows that almost 70% of students in Class 9 need additional support. The budget for these programmes should be based on student assessments. Measures must be taken to expand government funding for students in government-aided and community schools, and perhaps even private schools that are currently outside the ambit of government funding.

Start in the early Classes

While promising gains were made by Class 9 students who participated in our programme, students should not have to wait that long. Research shows that poor learning is a strong predictor of student drop out prior to secondary school. Therefore, improvements in teaching, assessment and additional support must begin as early as Class 5 or even Class 3.

Teaching and content must be tailored to student needs

Teaching methods and content currently do not address the gaps in student learning. Unless these change, many students will be left behind. Teachers must be trained to use contemporary and effective practices tailored to student needs and learning levels. Teaching and learning guides, in addition to text books, must be readily and widely available.

Student participation is vital

The evidence from our programme establishes a clear link between student participation and improvements in learning. School governing committees, parent-teacher associations and parents have an important role to ensure students attend school.

Kusuma and ASER Centre highlight issues of access, transition and learning

Two roundtables on "Access, Transition and Learning in Secondary Education" were held on 5 September in Bhubaneswar and 11 October 2017 in Lucknow, facilitated by Kusuma and the ASER Center. Findings of a two-year study by the ASER Centre on the factors that influence children's transition from elementary to secondary school were discussed. Participants included the Education Secretary, directors of education departments in the two States and staff from Kusuma and the ASER Center. Availability of schools at elementary and post elementary stage, student learning outcomes at the end of elementary school (Class 8) and a year later (Class 9), and patterns of transition were the focus of the study.

The key findings were:

- The provision of schools declined considerably at the secondary level, particularly government schools
- One in every ten sampled students dropped out after elementary school, and those who remained did not always progress to Class 9
- Prior student learning outcomes are a good predictor of the continuation of learning
- Gender, marital status, household and school characteristics influence the transition to secondary school
- Children entering secondary school lack critical abilities in language and arithmetic to cope with curriculum

The key recommendations include increasing the number of secondary schools and targeting additional support for students through programmes such as the Kusuma remedial programme.

A National conference will be hosted by Kusuma and the ASER Center in January 2018 to further discuss practice and research on access, learning and transition. Practitioners, researchers, policy makers, education experts and government education officials will be invited.

Save the date

National Conference on Access, Learning and Transition

Thursday, 25 January 2018

Sheraton Hotel, District Centre, Saket

New Delhi, Delhi 110017