



Thinking differently about 'access'

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I clearly remember the moment when I realized that I could read. I must have been five years old. I was at home, sitting on the floor with a storybook, reading a story one word at a time. And suddenly (this is how I remember it, at least) - I was reading whole sentences from beginning to end, without stopping. I could read!

It wasn't until many years later that I looked back and thought about this amazing moment, and everything that it signified. Obviously, it was the

outcome of a process that had started years before. My mother would read to us regularly at bedtime. I was always surrounded by story books. My father was a journalist, and our home was full of print materials of all sorts. The printed word was a basic, taken-for-granted element of the fabric of our home.

But this is true for very few children in India. In 2012, volunteers for the Annual Status of

Education Report visited over 3.3 lakh households in 567 of India's 585 rural districts. These comprised all sorts of households – some more affluent, some less so; some with children, some without; some with children studying in government schools, others where they were in private schools. Across the country, on average, ASER 2012 found that just two out of every ten households had any sort of print materials other than school textbooks. 'Inside Primary Schools', a separate study of 30,000 students across five states conducted by ASER Centre during 2009-11, suggests that children studying in government schools in rural India often come from homes that are even poorer with respect to the availability of literacy materials.

Returning to the story of the moment I discovered that I could read, equally important was what happened immediately afterwards. I remember running to my mother, excited – I can read! I can read! My mother was delighted, and her response confirmed and strengthened my belief that I had achieved something important. So did my brother's reaction, in a completely different way. Three years older than me, he was not impressed: so I could read, so what? From his perspective as an eight year old, learning how to read was a normal, ordinary part of everyday life. To me, his response signified that I had now joined the ranks of the older children, leaving the babies who couldn't read behind.

So what does my home life as a five year old have to do with access to schooling?

In India (and elsewhere in the world), we have thought a lot about access. We look at things like: what is the distance to the nearest school? If it is far away, is transport available from home to school? Is the journey safe for young children, for girls? Does the school have a ramp? In other words, we usually think about 'access' in terms of enabling children to bridge the physical distance between home and school.

But often access to learning is far more difficult. Of course children learn both inside and outside school. But for many children the formal,

academic content of the school curriculum is very distant from anything they experience outside of the boundary walls of the school. Across rural India, ASER figures show that 60% of children in school today have mothers who have not themselves been to school. They have few if any print materials at home, they cannot read bedtime stories to their children, they may never have talked to a school teacher, and perhaps they do not know that telling children stories is also important for children's language development.

It is time to think differently about access, and realise that for many children bridging the distance between home and school requires much more than just a physical journey. And in the early grades at least, schools environments that enable learning are those that help children bridge this gap. These kinds of bridges are far more complex than simply constructing a building or a road, because they require understanding where children are today and helping them grow in ways that are neither visible nor easily measurable.

How good are our schools at providing these sorts of bridges? The available evidence suggests that we have a very long way to go. Here are three examples.

The first example has to do with language of instruction. Many children, often those from socially backward communities, have a different language background (in terms of dialects, vocabulary, syntax). For such children, there are many bridges that need to be crossed. Not only are they coming to school – a new thing for them and their families, but often they have to learn a whole new language as well in order to properly inhabit the new world into which they have arrived. For a young child, the school is a formal place: there are rules about the use of time and for how interactions between people must be carried out. These rules and behaviours are different from those at home or in the community. Similarly, there is a formal "school" language and style of expression which is different from how the child speaks and interacts outside school.

The 'Inside Primary Schools' study found that when the home language and school language were the same, children were far more likely to attend school regularly and do better on simple assessments in both language and math. The school environment was automatically less alien and more enabling.

The second example has to do with the content that is taught. One of the first tasks that children are given in school is to master the basic building blocks of language. In their first year of school – Std 1 – they are typically expected to learn to read and write letters, simple words, and short sentences. This is not an insurmountable task if methods and materials are carefully designed to take them from where they are today to where we want them to be at the end of the school year. But in every state in India, the curriculum and the textbook is far more difficult than what most children can manage. For example, in ASER 2012, nationally, four out of every ten children in Std 1 in rural India were unable to identify letters of the alphabet, let alone read words or sentences. But textbooks even in Std 1 expect them to be able to read and do activities based on text that is far more difficult (Fig 1). Even

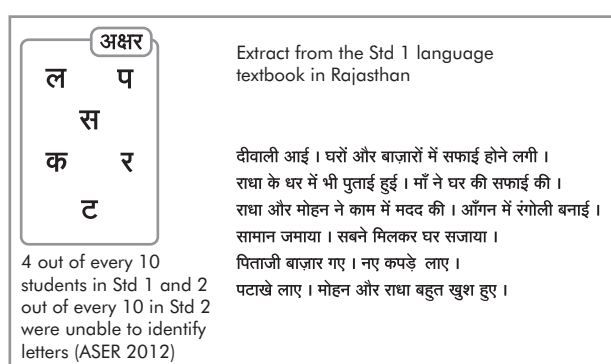


Figure 1
Children's reading: Expectations and reality

though most children are unable to master this content, the textbook for Std 2 is even more difficult – and so on with each passing year. Far from providing bridges that enable learning, our school curricula and textbooks systematically leave children further and further behind.

The third example has to do with providing 'child friendly' learning environments that make children feel comfortable, secure, and valued in school. Both the National Curriculum Framework (2005) and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009) stress the importance of child friendly learning environments in promoting children's retention and learning. But there is little evidence on scale in India as to how child-friendly our classrooms actually are.

The 'Inside Primary Schools' study used six very simple indicators of "child friendliness" within the classroom and looked at whether these were present in more than 1,700 primary school classrooms located in 900 schools in five major states. These indicators attempted to produce a basic snapshot of each classroom in terms of several different aspects of 'child friendliness':

- Was the teacher observed smiling, laughing or joking with at least some students?
- Did at least one student ask the teacher a content-related question?
- Was children's work displayed in the classroom?
- Did the teacher use local information to make academic content relevant?
- Did the teacher use any TLM other than the textbook?
- Did the teacher ask children to work in small groups or pairs?

Data compiled from more than 1,700 classroom observations show that there is an enormous gap between what policy documents espouse and what actually happens in the classroom. In four out of every 10 classrooms, not a single one of these six indicators was observed. By contrast, four or more of these were observed in less than 1 out of every 10 classrooms. And no individual indicator was observed in more than 30% of observed classrooms (Fig. 2).

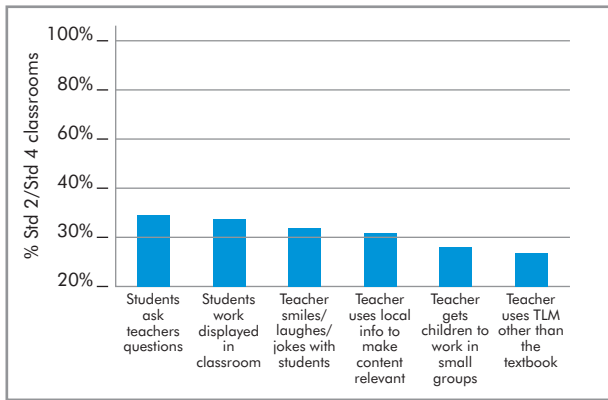


Figure 2
'Child friendly' classrooms

There is clearly a huge gap between policy and practice in terms of the scaffolding that is needed for effective teaching and sustained learning. A great deal of the discourse in India is focused

on the philosophical, cognitive and pedagogical underpinnings of how to teach children and how children learn. But just as ensuring physical access to school requires knowing where children live, so too ensuring access to learning requires starting from where children are today - what they know, what they think, and what they can do.

I often ask people if they remember when they discovered reading. Few people do. It is a skill that we take entirely for granted. Like most others who are reading this article, once I started reading, my engagement with the printed word never stopped. An environment that 'enables learning' would do well to start by providing the same opportunity to all children.

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