

It is common sense that a strong and sturdy foundation is crucial for a good building. It is also well known that the foundations, although usually underground and not visible, make a critical difference to the strength, scope and scale of the actual building. Similarly, what we do with our children in early grades in school sets the tone and the pace for what will be possible for them to achieve in the future.

The thrust of policy and practice in India is beginning to shift from “schooling” to “learning”. The Twelfth Plan document underlines the importance of learning outcomes. One of the most important steps for long run and sustainable improvement in learning outcomes is to focus at the beginning. For the 2014-15 school year the annual work plan guidelines of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan have new insertions that underline the importance of building solid foundations of language and numeracy in early grades.<sup>1</sup> India’s Right to Education Act “guarantees” education from age six and provides 25% reservation in private schools for economically disadvantaged students from the first year in school.

For all of these old and new reasons, it is worth taking a closer look at Std. I in India. In order to understand how foundations of learning can be built for children in rural India, let us explore who is in Std. I? And who is beginning to read? Available data from the series of Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER) are used to search for answers to these questions.<sup>2</sup>

Every year the ASER survey is done in the middle of the school year. The set of reading tasks used in ASER are very basic – reading letters, common and simple every day words, easy four line paragraphs (at Std. I level of difficulty). The highest reading task is reading a small “story” at Std. II level of difficulty. Since this is an assessment of reading, this exercise is carried out orally, one-on-one with children (age 5 to 16) and in the language of instruction that the child has in school. The child is marked at the highest level that s/he can read comfortably.

<b>Table 1 Std I: Children reading at different levels. ASER 2013</b>			
<b>ASER 2013 (Rural) : All India</b>	<b>Std I: % Children reading at different levels by school type</b>		
<b>Reading levels</b>	<b>Govt. schools</b>	<b>Pvt. schools</b>	<b>All schools</b>
Can read “story” (at Std. II level)	1.7	7.8	3.6
Can read a simple paragraph (at Std. I level) but not as yet able to read “story” (at Std II level)	2.4	8.6	4.4
Can read words but not as yet able to read sentences or paragraphs	9.0	20.8	12.6
Can recognize letters but not as yet able to read words	29.8	37.9	32.3
Not able to recognize letters as yet	57.1	24.9	47.3
Total	100	100	100

Table 1 summarizes the all India findings for reading in Std. I in 2013. Nationally about half of all children can recognize letters. But the difference between government school children and those in private schools is quite substantial.<sup>3</sup> Among private school children close to 75% can recognize letters but the comparable figure for government school children is closer to 40%.

<sup>1</sup>Discussions about the post 2015 MDG goals for education are focusing a great deal on access plus learning as a new goal. See documents related to the UNESCO-Brookings Learning Metrics Task Force. See also the “All Children Reading”, a joint initiative of USAID, AUSAID and World Vision ([allchildrenreading.org](http://allchildrenreading.org)). The World Bank Education strategy 2020 focuses on learning for all: “the bottom line is invest early, invest smart and invest for all”.

<sup>2</sup> The analyses presented in this note are preliminary but they serve as a useful pointer towards deeper research that needs to be done on this topic.

<sup>3</sup>Nationally, about a third of all children in Std. I are enrolled in private schools. But here too there is a great deal of variation by state. In five states (Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Manipur) more than 50% children in Std. I are enrolled in private schools. Another seven states (Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Sikkim and Meghalaya) have 41-50% children in private schools in Std. I. In four states (Assam, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka) this figure is between 21 and 30%. And in 7 states (Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, Tripura, Gujarat and Maharashtra), the percentage of Std. I children in private schools is less than 20%.

Usually, in India, the debates on the pros and cons of government versus private schools tend to be of a macro and generic nature. Very little is done to actually look at empirical evidence from different stages of the school system, to analyze the main similarities and differences, or attempt to understand their implications. A close look at Std. I data from ASER 2013 shows an interesting difference between these two types of children – a difference that has not been discussed much in policy or academic circles.

Table 2 Std I : % Children by age and school type. ASER 2013						
ASER 2013 (Rural)	Of all children in Std. I, % enrolled in private school	School type	Std I: % Children by age and school type			
			Age 5	Age 6	Age more than 6	Total
All India	31.5	Govt.	27.4	45.2	27.4	100
		Pvt.	18.3	34.8	46.9	100
		Total	24.5	41.9	33.6	100

Table 2 takes a closer look at the age distributions of children enrolled in government schools and private schools. Despite the age specified in the Right to Education Act, the actual age of children enrolled in Std. I varies considerably both within and across states. If we compare the age distributions of children enrolled in government schools with the age distribution of children in private schools we find that a greater proportion of older children in Std. I are in private schools as compared to government schools. The All India (rural) figures show that of all children enrolled in Std. I in government schools, about 27% are less than six years old. In a comparable population of private school children this figure is almost 10 percentage points lower at 18.3%. If we look at children who are older than six, we see the reverse trend. Of all children enrolled in Std. I in private schools, close to half are older than six, whereas the equivalent figure in government schools is only about one fourth. Similar trends are visible in almost every state.

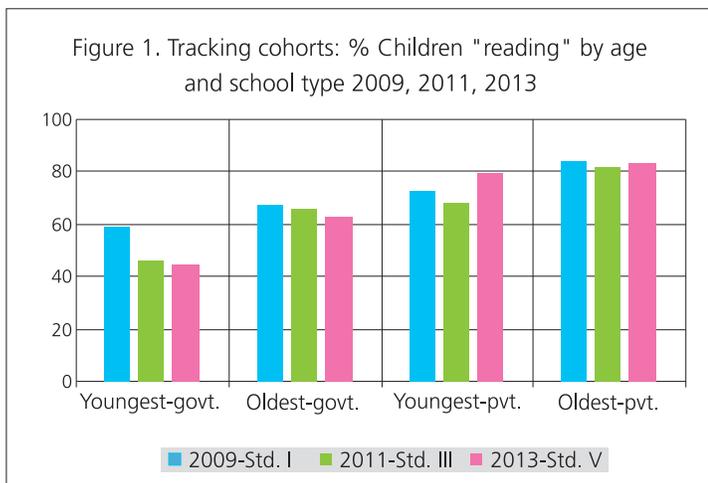
Looking at the different age patterns in Std. I, the obvious question that crops up is: does age matter for learning in early grades? Based on data from ASER 2013, the quick answer is yes. Let us take the ability to recognize letters as an indicator of beginning “reading”. Table 3 shows that across both types of schools, a higher fraction of older children are able to at least read letters as compared to younger children.

Table 3 Reading level in Std. I by age and school type			
ASER 2013 (Rural)	School type	% Children in each category who can at least read letters	
		Children who are 5 years old in Std. I	Children who are more than 6 years old in Std. I
All India	Govt	33.2	49.0
	Pvt	57.2	82.0

Note: Age for Std. I can be divided into three categories: (a) age 5 (b) age 6 (c) age more than 6. Here the youngest and oldest age categories have been shown.

The beginnings of different learning trajectories for different kinds of children can be seen as early as Std. I. Within the same type of schools, older children seem to have a definite advantage in learning. If we compare across school types, the differences are also clear. The comparison is most stark if we compare the two extremes in age in Std. I - the youngest children in government schools with the oldest children in private schools.

The next logical question that follows is whether the early learning advantage sustains over time. Again, the quick answer from ASER data is yes.<sup>4</sup> For purposes of illustration, let us follow a cohort that was in Std. I in 2009, moved to Std. III in 2011 and to Std. V in 2013. In this tracking exercise, the youngest age group in the Std. I cohort (those who were five years old in 2009) and the oldest (those who were more than six in 2009) are compared with the youngest age group in Std. V (those who were less than nine years old in 2013) and the oldest (age more than ten in 2013). Reading level for Std. I children is taken as the ability to at least recognize letters. Reading level for Std. III is taken as the ability to at least read simple words and the reading level for Std. V children is taken as the ability to read Std. I level text. Figure 1 gives a glimpse of trends over time.



For the cohort who started Std. I in 2009, the youngest and the oldest children are tracked to Std. III in 2011 and to Std. V in 2013. Even the basic tabulations presented here suggest that the learning disadvantage of the youngest children in the cohort that was visible in Std. I persists over time. First, for all cohorts, the proportion of children who can read at least a simple text by Std. V is about the same as the proportion of children who could read alphabets when they were in Std. I. The implication is that those who did not learn to read at least letters in Std. I were unlikely to learn to read later. Second, the youngest children in government schools simply never catch up with their older counterparts or those in private schools. Relatively speaking, this group of children (who were five when they started their formal schooling in government school) continues to be the weakest group two years later in Std. III and another two years later in Std. V. The early lead of private school children over government school children that

was visible in Std. I continues and sustains over the next five years.

Where is the early advantage of children attending private schools coming from? It is often argued that children self-select into private schools and that the differences in outcomes that are visible for children enrolled in different kinds of schools are a result at least partially of other non-school related factors. Family background, additional expenditures on education and parental aspirations all influence the eventual outcomes of children.

But looking at Std. I in the context of this discussion, it is worth thinking about how what children do before entering Std. I and how that may influence their early learning opportunities. ASER data suggests that in states with high incidence of private schooling, a significant proportion of three and four year olds go to LKG/UKG. It is quite likely that children who enroll in Std. I in private schools are coming with a one- or two-year period of "preparation" or school readiness. Anecdotal information suggests that private schools discourage direct enrollment of young children in Std. I and re-direct such children to LKG or UKG. It is also likely that children who eventually enroll in Std. I in government schools come either from anganwadis or have not been to any early childhood education program. Rising educational aspirations and the assumption that more schooling is better often leads parents to enroll children early into school, especially in states or areas where anganwadi services are weak. All of these factors may help to explain the age gap and also the learning advantage of private school students. Clearly, much more analysis is needed both with available ASER data as well as with new research to understand the pathways of children through primary school and beyond.

### Thinking ahead

The issue of the right age to enter formal schooling has been the subject of a lot of research and debate in Western countries. It is well known that the early years set the stage for later development. The concept of "school readiness" in terms of content and delivery as well as questions of when children should enter first grade and what should be taught, are all issues taken seriously in policy and practice in developed countries. In

<sup>4</sup> ASER is a rotating panel of villages and does not track the same children over time. However, one can construct artificial cohorts and follow them over time. So, for instance, a cohort that started Std. I in 2009 would be in Std. II in 2010, in Std. III in 2011 and so on. This tracking of "artificial cohorts" may give us a glimpse of some of the underlying dynamics of change over time. The use of artificial cohorts, however is based on certain assumptions. For example, that children in private schools remain in private schools over time and likewise for government school children.

India too, as we move towards taking the foundation-building activity in Std. I seriously, there are important considerations to think about.

The Right to Education Act specifies age six as the starting point for formal schooling. It assumes that children enter school in Std. I at age six (and that eight years later they complete the elementary stage in Std. VIII at age fourteen). Should we not take this age cut off seriously? If entry into school into Std. I is supposed to be the first step in "guaranteeing education", then what steps can be taken to ensure that children are not left behind even before they start? How can we provide "school readiness" and preparation for children, especially to those who enroll in government schools and who may be younger than age 6? Reforming the ICDS structure to give priority to pre-school education may be a tall order but certainly within the school system decisions can be taken to ensure that children have a good opportunity to become "ready for school". The world over, formal school systems start with "reception" classes or kindergartens. Is it not time for India to consider such a step?<sup>5</sup> In order to improve learning outcomes and sustain them in the long run, early years may be the best place to invest.

Serious discussions also need to take place in India about curriculum expectations in Std. I. Where to start from, how to move forward, how far (and deep) to go and how fast? Analyses of different Std. I textbooks across states reveal many underlying assumptions related to content, method and pace. At age 5, children's ability to learn needs to be scaffolded well but in most states the Std. I curriculum covers a great deal of content very quickly, so that many children get left behind even before they have started.

Curriculum or textbooks are means to an end. It is the end – learning – that is of key importance. Learning goals need to be stated. What we want our children to be able to do by the end of the first year (or even the second year) of school needs to be clearly laid out. The articulation should be simple enough so that parents and teachers understand it well and can work together to enable children to achieve these goals. The goals need to be within the reach of the majority of all children enrolled in Std. I. Regardless of what the Right to Education Act says about completing the syllabus on time, it is critical that the goal of the first year in school be widely understood not as a race to finish all chapters in the textbook, but to enable all children to reach the learning objectives that have been decided on.

Finally, the role that families, especially mothers, can play in supporting children's learning must be integrated into learning support interventions for children in Std. I. For example a recent study tracking children in early years in Assam, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh found that although a high proportion of young children in Andhra Pradesh had been to private schools and pre-schools, children in Assam who had attended anganwadis did better on many dimensions of school readiness. What was different in Assam was that mothers were more educated and home literacy environments were much richer - more mothers telling stories and reading stories to children, for example.<sup>6</sup> Another study conducted in rural Rajasthan and Bihar with mostly illiterate and unschooled mothers of children (age 4 to 8) concluded that specific engagement activities that mothers did with children led to improvements in children's ability to read and to basic arithmetic.<sup>7</sup>

Enrolling children only after they are 6, preparing children to enter schools through school readiness programs, starting at least one year of school preparation classes for children under 6, involving mothers in the child's learning, or better yet starting mothers' adult education programs and integrating them with the child's learning process are all necessary initiatives for a strong beginning for all children.

Now that SSA has taken the first steps toward attainment of learning outcomes, there is hope that policy makers will think of the first steps that the children need to take.

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<sup>5</sup> In the past, many states have had experiences of integrating a school-readiness stage into the primary stage. In line with the kindergarten idea, Assam has had "ka-sreni" in school – a class before Std. I. Bihar has had "baal-varg". But typically these initiatives have not been supported thoroughly with resources or trained manpower. Years ago, Mumbai Municipal Corporation had an eight week program for the first two months of the school year to support children coming into Std. I. Summer school readiness programs are another possibility for the summer as children enter Std. I.

<sup>6</sup>This is a five year longitudinal study of young children that is being jointly carried out by ASER Centre/Pratham and Ambedkar University, known as the India Early Childhood Education Impact study.

<sup>7</sup><http://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/impact-mother-literacy-and-participation-programs-child-learning-india>