Improving reading and arithmetic outcomes at scale: Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), Pratham’s approach to teaching and learning

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Background

India launched the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Education for All) program in 2001 and ratified the Right to Education Act 2009 to ensure universal enrolment and retention in schooling. A consequence of these endeavors is that well over 95% of Indian children in the age group six to fourteen are enrolled in school but their learning levels remain disappointingly low. Available data indicates that even after five years in school, only half of all children in the fifth grade in India can read simple texts meant for second grade children. The situation with arithmetic is even worse.

The Indian school system is structured by age and grade, and tends to favor rote learning; children are promoted through elementary school and are expected to meet the rising curricular expectations with each year. However, the reality is that most children come from illiterate or semi-literate homes thus do not receive much support for learning at home. In school, a large proportion of classes in India have two or more grades being taught by one teacher. As a result, a substantial proportion of children do not develop basic skills in reading and arithmetic in the early grades. With weak foundational skills, it becomes difficult for these children to make progress in later years. This trend is reflected in flat learning trajectories seen in empirical work that tracks children longitudinally. Growing evidence suggests a declining trend in learning levels – meaning that in recent years, each subsequent cohort is performing below the level reached by the preceding cohort.
Teaching at the Right Level

In order to begin to tackle the evident learning crisis in India, Pratham developed a solution called Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL). This approach enables children aged seven and above who are likely to be in Grades 3, 4 and 5 to acquire basic skills in reading and arithmetic, in a relatively short period of time. By this age, school-going children have had substantial exposure to a school environment and can acquire these skills through an accelerated learning approach. This method has several elements at the core of its instructional practice.

First, regardless of age or grade, a simple assessment tool is used individually with each child to understand where to begin as well as the level of individual children and of the group in reading and arithmetic. This data is also used for grouping children for instruction. Later in the program, similar assessments are used to track children’s progress and re-strategize. Second, learning goals are clearly articulated so that children, instructors and parents know what is to be achieved. For instance, in reading, the goal is to read a simple short story fluently while in arithmetic, it is recognition of three digits and proficiency in basic operations. Third, for instruction, children are grouped according to their current learning levels identified in the assessment tool rather than by grade. As children make progress, they move to the next level group respectively. The number of groups is contingent on the availability of instructors. Fourth, the pedagogy relies on combining a variety of daily activities to maximize and stimulate different kinds of learning; for example, for building number knowledge and operations – children undertake tasks that require them to listen, speak, do, read and write. Children do activities in big groups, in smaller groups and also individually. Fifth, appropriate teaching-learning materials are developed in both subjects and used in a way that there are materials for each group and their activities.

In addition to the classroom practice, there are several core support elements that help make the TaRL approach successful:
- Restructuring Implementation Teams to ensure adequate support to instructors and facilitation of review processes
- Dedicated and frequent mentoring support to instructors
- Ongoing review of processes to enable course correction and future planning

Pratham’s models for implementing Teaching at the Right Level

TaRL has been implemented in three major ways. First, as a volunteer-based model in earlier iterations of the approach. Second, where Pratham team members lead the work (assisted by volunteers) and demonstrate that significant change in basic learning is possible in a relatively short period of time. This “direct” work takes the form of intensive instructional activity called “Learning Camps” that last for 6 to 10 days at a time and are repeated several times during the next few months in the same school. Depending on the size of the school and children’s baseline levels in reading and arithmetic, the duration of camps could be anywhere between 30 and 50 days in total (approximately 100 instructional hours). Negotiations at the local level with the schools and/or the government are undertaken to enable camps to happen in the school.
Pratham instructor organizes the entire camp and is often responsible for one of the groups, the volunteers that Pratham has identified and trained work with the other groups under their supervision. Instead of volunteers, the government schoolteacher also helps sometimes. A quick assessment is done at the end of each camp. This measurement serves as the starting point for grouping and activities for the next camp. The Pratham instructors go to children’s homes to discuss their progress with parents and to explain what they are doing in the camp.

A third model is partnerships with government school systems either at a state or district level where Pratham teams work closely with governments to incorporate the core elements of the TaRL methodology into classroom instruction. Typically, Pratham teams work closely with their government counterparts on all aspects of the program from devising program models, to redesigning assessment tools and appropriate teaching-learning materials, defining clear goals, training government cluster resource cadres and school teachers, scheduling time for TaRL instruction and periodic assessment, grouping by level, monitoring, measurement, evaluation and review. The “cluster” level cadre within the government system are trained first and conduct 10 to 20 days of practice classes using the TaRL methods before training teachers. This government academic leadership team become “leaders of practice” and is crucial for the successful roll out of the program. This cadre along with Pratham teams mentor teachers in conducting TaRL activities. In most cases, a formal document like a memorandum of understanding is signed by the government department and Pratham to begin the intervention. In all cases, governments pay for the costs of teacher training, additional teaching-learning materials and additional costs borne by government employees. Usually, Pratham covers its own costs – primarily the cost of Pratham teams who are working with the government. Some partnership programs started at the district level and evolved into statewide programs while others lost steam and the collaboration disintegrated. Since 2011, Pratham partnered with governments at various levels in 19 states and union territories across the India. In 2017-18 alone, partnership programs with governments in 10 states and union territories reached over 6 million children.

**Evidence**

Internal Pratham data of Learning Camps from 2013 to 2016 shows that by the last end line, over 75% of the target children in the camps have learned to read fluently and do basic operations. In locations where children have been tracked longitudinally, it has been observed that these learning gains sustain for more than 70% of these children. The Learning Camp model has been evaluated by the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) using randomized control trial methodology revealing that the model has a strong and significant positive impact on basic learning outcomes of students in both reading and arithmetic. Compared to the control group, the intervention groups’ children showed improvements of approximately 20 percentage points higher in both subjects (0.71 standard deviations higher that the control group in reading and 0.69 standard deviations in arithmetic).
Way forward
9 Pratham continues to conduct Learning Camps across India that serve as laboratories for innovation and experiment for refining instructional methods and materials, training new staff, and demonstrating that substantial changes in children’s learning can happen in a short period of time. In terms of government partnerships, Pratham anticipates continuing and deepening the current partnerships for learning improvement. Beyond India, the TaRL approach has generated interest and curiosity among governments and organizations across the African continent. A new initiative jointly led by Pratham Education Foundation and J-PAL focuses on adapting TaRL to these new contexts. Currently TaRL inspired programming is active in twelve African countries with varying levels of support by the Pratham and J-PAL teams.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES
2. See Pritchett and Beatty (2012), The Negative Consequences of Overambitious Curricula in Developing countries, Working paper 293, Centre for Global Development, Washington DC.
3. In India, in most states, there are government people from the education system at the “cluster” level. A cluster comprises of 12 to 15 or more schools.
4. For a more detailed discussion, see [https://bit.ly/2HirwEO].
ABSTRACTS

In India, despite a gross enrolment rate of more than 95%, performance levels remain low, particularly for children of illiterate or undereducated families. To contend with this, the “Teaching at the Right Level” project was implemented. This has taken many forms: the “camps for learning”, either repeated short term sessions (6 to 10 days), or long term sessions (30 to 50 days); and partnership arrangements with public school system authorities. The project’s methodology, attained objectives and its prospects are presented.

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Palabras claves: método de enseñanza, evaluación, matemáticas, lectura, práctica pedagógica, alfabetización informacional, objetivo de aprendizaje, rendimiento escolar

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