

Education accountability relationships between schools, communities, and government in India

September 2020

Foreword

India has made significant progress in pupil enrolment and schooling infrastructure since the implementation of the Right to Education (RTE) Act in 2010. This committed to free and compulsory education for children aged 6–14. Despite this, learning outcomes continue to remain low across the country. There are still wide variations in enrolment and retention between and within different states, with participation and learning outcomes particularly low for children who face multiple disadvantages, including those related to gender, caste, disability, poverty, religion or where they live.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 initiated by the Indian Government has laid out a comprehensive transformation of education in India for provision of access to high-quality public education to all. It envisions foundational learning as the key to building India's education system and recognises the urgent need to shift education policy away from input-based interventions towards identifying policy actions that promote quality and inclusiveness in education.

However, despite widespread recognition of the challenge to improve learning outcomes and the need to shift education systems away from traditional input orientation, there has been relatively little attention paid to how basic education is governed. The robustness of accountability relationships and processes between schools, communities, and government within India's education system largely determine whether learning outcomes are enabled or inhibited. Yet gaps remain in our understanding of how these processes intersect with inequality, and how they can help the most marginalised. Crucially, we have relatively little debate on the kind of governance structures needed within the education system in order to strengthen accountability relationships in education.

This ESRC-FCDO-funded research is an important effort to bridge this gap. The research seeks to enhance our understanding of accountability relationships, how they function, and with what effect on learning outcomes, in both the short and long term. The research offers not only relevant, contextual evidence, but also highlights key implications for policy and practice.

In Uttar Pradesh, a study looks at how children's learning in the classroom can be improved by community-based interventions and how changes occur when schools are encouraged to view their accountability as being primarily to their local community. Meanwhile, in Mumbai, researchers explore how the accountability processes of different types of schools (public, private aided, and unaided) lead to differences in learning outcomes. And in the northern states



Photo: Jenny Matthews/Panos Pictures

Female students walking to school in Bihar, India.

of Bihar and Rajasthan, findings demonstrate how accountability relationships between teachers, community, and government affect school participation and achievement.

As a policy researcher and practitioner, I am delighted to see this collection of evidence: it will serve to substantively enhance our understanding of critical governance questions in education. I believe this work offers us the foundation for building new analytical frameworks and identifying new forms of practice that will serve to shift India's education system firmly in the direction of improving quality and inclusiveness.

Yamini Aiyar
CEO, Centre for Policy Research, India

Key messages

- Mechanisms for school–community engagement should be strengthened to promote collective responsibility for raising learning outcomes. To achieve this, schools could make greater use of their School Management Committees to ensure parents have a voice in the running of their children's school.
- Policies aimed at tackling disadvantage (such as India's Right to Education) need to be better communicated to parents who face structural disadvantages such as those related to caste, unemployment, and poverty.
- State governments could invest more in administrative posts in schools to avoid teachers spending time on non-academic administrative duties which detract from in-class teaching time.

Strengthening accountability of schools at the grassroots

In India, schools and teachers are primarily accountable to education authorities rather than to the children, parents, and communities with whom they work. Lack of engagement between schools, teachers, and parents have consequences for how these actors view each other as well as for children's learning levels, which are far below curriculum expectations. Researchers from the University of Cambridge and the ASER Centre, in partnership with the Pratham Education Foundation, are exploring whether school and community partnerships can help to foster action inside classrooms as well as in homes and communities to raise learning outcomes for all children, especially the most disadvantaged learners.

The project 'Can Schools' Accountability for Learning be Strengthened from the Grassroots?' explores how children's learning can be improved by school and community-based interventions designed to help head teachers, teachers, parents, and communities develop a shared understanding of children's learning levels and take action to improve these. The study hopes to shed light on whether, and how, changes occur when schools and their staff are encouraged to view their accountability as being primarily to their local community.

For over a decade, data from the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) have consistently shown that the gap between children's abilities and curriculum expectations emerges from the very first years of primary school, and widens over time. To stem this learning crisis, the Pratham Education Foundation, the largest education-focused non-governmental organisation (NGO) in India, has worked both within and outside the school system to help improve children's foundational literacy and numeracy skills. However, Pratham's previous community-based interventions have not formally incorporated teachers and other school actors. The project, therefore, aims to investigate whether Pratham's interventions (i) could be more effective if they work in both schools and communities; (ii) raise awareness of the importance of learning for children's futures; and (iii) promote avenues for better interactions between parents and teachers so the message is clear that a child's learning is everyone's responsibility.

The research is being conducted in 400 randomly selected villages in one district of rural Uttar Pradesh, and uses a longitudinal mixed methods design to evaluate two interventions. One intervention focuses on activities to build communities' awareness and capacities to support and improve children's foundational learning in grades 3–5. The other intervention includes similar community-based activities but adds an additional component focusing on school actors' awareness and engagement with these issues. Villages were randomly assigned: they were either where (i) Pratham's interventions work with both schools and communities; (ii) Pratham's interventions work only with the community; or (iii) no intervention was taking place.

SEE ALSO:

Sabates, R.; Bhattacharjea, S. and Wadhwa, W. (2020) *Accountability from the Grassroots: Children's Foundational Reading and Arithmetic in Sitapur District, Uttar Pradesh*, Research and Policy Paper 20/6, Cambridge: REAL Centre, University of Cambridge

The baseline survey included around 24,000 pupils from grades 2–4 from 853 government primary schools in 400 villages. The data reveal that large proportions of children in rural Uttar Pradesh are behind curriculum expectations from their very first years in primary school, and also suggest that:

- **Interactions between teachers and parents are limited.** Although over half of the teachers interviewed said that they had monthly parental meetings, only a third of the parents surveyed had visited the school during the current academic session while 71 per cent of parents could not name even one teacher in their child's school.
- **Teachers and parents have poor opinions of each other.** Lack of interaction has consequences for how these actors view each other: each expected the other to be more proactive in educating children. For example, 92 per cent of parents considered it was a waste of time to meet with teachers, and 43 per cent thought that teachers did not do enough to support children's learning. In contrast, a third of all teachers said that parents were not doing enough to support their children's learning.
- **Both teachers and parents overestimate children's abilities.** Data revealed huge gaps in what teachers and parents think that children are capable of doing, versus what children can actually do. For example, 45 per cent of teachers interviewed incorrectly identified specific children as fluent readers, when in fact a large proportion of them could not read beyond individual letters and none of them could read at grade 2 level.

In order to raise learning outcomes for the most disadvantaged primary school learners, these initial findings suggest that there is a particular need to strengthen mechanisms for school–community engagement, recognising that home, school, and the broader community are all important sites for children's learning. Within schools, there is an urgent need to make teacher training more relevant to pupils' ground realities. Outside of the education system, parents and the community should be included as critical stakeholders in young children's lives. This could involve implementing mechanisms for regular communication, coordination, and collaboration between teachers, parents, and communities in support of children's learning and encouraging parental participation and home support. The research team hope these findings will encourage policies and practices that promote parent and teacher collaboration, recognising that both have an important role in helping children learn.



Project title: *Can Schools' Accountability for Learning be Strengthened from the Grassroots? Investigating the Potential for Community–School Partnerships in India.*

Principal Investigator: Ricardo Sabates

University of Cambridge, UK

This report was written by Suman Bhattacharjea and Purnima Ramanujan, ASER Centre, India.

BLOG POSTS:

Sabates, R. (2019) 'Make Some Noise So No One is Left Behind! Halla Bol!', *The Impact Initiative*, 21 October

Cashman, L.; Bhattacharjea, S. and Sabates, R. (2020) 'Parental Perceptions and Parental Involvement in Children's Education in Rural India: Lessons for the Current COVID-19 Crisis', *PAL Network Blog*, 15 April

Accountability and learning outcomes in different types of school settings

Researchers from the Universities of Bristol and Bath, together with in-country partners at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai, are working to understand how the accountability processes of different types of schools (public, private aided, and unaided) in India lead to differences in learning outcomes, and to what extent these changes can be explained by factors such as organisational culture, community participation, leadership, and wider social contexts.

Researchers on the project 'Organisational Perspectives on Accountability and Learning (OPAL): School Management Models and the Social Impact of Schooling in Mumbai and Kathmandu' are exploring whether accountability relationships between teachers, families, and governing bodies vary depending on school type. With a focus on Mumbai, researchers collected quantitative learning outcome data and questionnaire data from 2,621 pupils across 29 schools, as well as qualitative data from parents, head teachers, teachers, and school governors in ten schools.

The data were collected from three different types of primary school that account for the majority of provision in Mumbai:

- Public schools run and funded by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC schools);
- Private schools that receive funding from the government for teachers' salaries and usually charge relatively low fees (private aided schools); and
- Fully private schools that fund all expenses from non-state sources (private unaided schools).

These schools have different types of accountability processes and relationships. BMC schools are entirely funded and run by the municipal government; they are primarily accountable to it via the reporting of information (e.g. on attendance, lesson plans, and assessments) and through inspections by district education officers; and their teachers are public employees. Private aided schools are generally run by a trust, with trustees having broad oversight of school functioning and finance. Private unaided schools directly employ the teachers and are essentially accountable to market forces, with parents' consumer power requiring them to provide the best possible quality of education.

No matter what type of school, they are all required to provide information on pupil attendance and progress for government information systems. Additionally, both BMC and private aided schools are required by the Right to Education Act 2009 to establish School Management Committees (SMCs) to monitor the overall working of the school; to hold school staff accountable; and to prepare the school development plan each academic year.

Administrative burdens on teachers

The researchers found that in the three types of school, head teachers spent a substantial amount of their time reporting large amounts of information on attendance, progression, and classroom activities 'upwards' to government authorities, which detracted from their availability to undertake more substantive work such as communicating with parents. Furthermore, teachers attending to the paperwork and filling in of online forms (which were created to improve accountability by ensuring that they completed the required tasks) actually reduced the time teachers had available to focus on lesson planning.



Photo: Fredrik Naumann/Panos Pictures

Two schoolboys on their way home in Mumbai, India.

Policy recommendation: By funding administrative positions in all schools, head teachers and teachers would be relieved of their heavy administrative burdens. Public schools in particular often lack the resources for such positions, and funding for administrative support would yield benefits in terms of teachers' availability to focus on teaching. Additionally, processes could be streamlined through a single portal where all data regarding the school could be uploaded for government departments that need to access them, so that the time-consuming preparation of the same data in different formats upon request can be avoided.

School-to-parent relationships

Some schools were found to have strong relationships thanks to clearer and more regular communication with parents and the community. For example, in BMC schools, there is a dedicated team (led by the School Coordinator and a qualified social worker) that engages with the community and involves them in children's learning through a variety of activities including home visits. This interaction supports parents in facilitating home learning and thereby improves pupils' skills in literacy and numeracy. However, in some private aided schools, parents were largely unaware of either the membership or meeting of the SMC, and teachers who held low expectations of parents' abilities or interest in supporting learning devoted minimal effort to engaging them, ultimately leading to lower outcomes for pupils.

Policy recommendation: Schools could make greater use of the SMCs to fulfil their original purpose of accountability. An increase in home visits and development of community activities by school social workers would likely encourage parental involvement and thereby ensure better school-child-parent interaction.

The researchers plan to share this data with the Indian Administrative Services and through dissemination activities to educational practitioners. The research comes at an opportune time for education in India as the government reviews alternative models of school management for the BMC schools in order to ensure greater efficiency; for example, it is looking at NGO-managed public schools as a model that may be more efficient than government-run schools.



Project title: *Organisational Perspectives on Accountability and Learning (OPAL): School Management Models and the Social Impact of Schooling in Mumbai and Kathmandu.*

Principal Investigator: Robin Shields

University of Bristol

Understanding how accountability relationships affect school participation and achievement

Researchers from the Universities of Leeds and Cambridge, in collaboration with partners from Azim Premji University and the Vidya Bhawan Society in India, argue that in order to improve learning outcomes for disadvantaged children, there must be a greater understanding of the role and influence of families, schools, communities, and government.

The 'Researching Accountability in the Indian System of Education (RAISE)' project is exploring these relationships using in-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews with parents, teachers, and head teachers from 62 government, private, NGO, and religious-run primary schools as well as with community leaders and government officials. The research focuses on the northern states of Bihar and Rajasthan, and examines the themes of access, participation, and monitoring in primary education.

Initial data from the study show that there are big differences in how families, teachers, community leaders, and government officials understand – and place value on – educational access and expectations. Often, these differences are shown to be the least favourable for children from marginalised and vulnerable communities. The research also highlights that beyond these differences, relationships between schools, families, and the community in particular are inhibiting a child's ability to participate in education, the quality and amount of teaching taking place, and the effectiveness of how a child's progress is monitored:

1. Teacher–parent relationships and expectations

The researchers found that irregular engagement and a misalignment in expectations between teachers and parents were undermining children's potential to learn. Teachers expected parents to oversee children's home studying to enhance their learning and participation in class, but parents tended to put the onus of their children's learning on the school. Data revealed that the capacity for a child's parents to adequately support them at home was shaped by structural disadvantages such as caste, unemployment, and poverty. In rural areas in particular, lower-caste families tended to prioritise a child's ability to contribute to the family income above sending them to school.

Policy recommendation: Regular and continuous interaction between teachers and parents to understand and support each other's roles could be developed, especially in cases where adequate family support to learners is absent. A possible strategy for this is for teachers to talk regularly to parents by phone to discuss their children's learning and each other's roles in the process, as well as to make home visits.

2. Lack of leadership at school management level

School Management Committees (SMCs) are mandated by state governments to monitor the overall working of schools and to hold staff accountable. SMCs in government and private schools across rural and urban areas were found to be ineffective and overly

focused on managerial concerns such as fund utilisation, rather than on children's learning. Decisions were mostly taken by school staff rather than jointly with other SMC members (i.e. parents and elected community representatives), among whom there was lack of clarity about the committee's role and purpose. However, when school staff themselves make the decisions and do not involve other members, the SMC's role of ensuring accountability of the staff is compromised. These patterns in decision-making processes around school management reflect a hierarchy that places many parents at a disadvantage and as unequal players in relationships of accountability.

Policy recommendation: Linkages between schools and SMCs could be strengthened. For example, elected community representatives who are part of the SMC could actively encourage the participation of parents in deliberations and monitoring the working of a school. Additionally, schools could reach out to existing community groups such as local NGOs and self-help groups, and also to caste associations, which are involved in humanitarian and social work in many villages, to enhance school–community engagement.

3. Unequal bias of teacher accountability towards policy actors

The research showed that government teachers experienced the combined pressures of having to report upwards to local governing bodies as well as undertake non-academic administrative duties – all of which detracted from the time they had available to deliver lessons in the classroom. Circulars and orders sent by officials to teachers asking for data relating to school management (such as pupil attendance numbers) are sent regularly via WhatsApp and teachers said they felt pressured to respond immediately.

Policy recommendation: Teachers should be given the time and space to focus on pupils' needs, and be encouraged to prioritise teaching over administrative work. The state government could ensure that vacant administrative assistant posts in schools are filled to free up teacher time for teaching. A more efficient technology-based system of data collection should be in place and information requests, which are rarely urgent, should be made with a realistic deadline for response.

These emerging findings indicate that there is a need to pay much greater attention to the realities of local contexts and family livelihoods and to how schools can respond more flexibly to sustain access and participation. The findings highlight that policies should create opportunities for regular and continuous interaction of teachers with parents and the community, especially in cases of learners where appropriate family support is mostly absent. They also show that formal mechanisms of accountability tend to focus on managerial concerns and lack a consistent emphasis on promoting children's learning.



Project title: *Researching Accountability in the Indian System of Education (RAISE)*.

Principal Investigator: Caroline Dyer

University of Leeds

SEE ALSO:

Dyer, C.; Sriprakash, A.; Thomas, N. and Jacob, S. (in progress) 'Accountability Relations and Collective Responsibilities in Education: The Social Contract in India's Right to Education', draft available from c.dyer@leeds.ac.uk

BLOG POSTS:

Dyer, C. et al. (2019) 'Relational Systems of Inclusion and Exclusion: A Cross-Scalar Analysis of Educational Access and Participation in India', *The Education and Development Forum (UKFIET)*, 22 October

Series of Research for Policy and Practice papers

Impact Initiative Research for Policy and Practice papers provide key messages and research evidence for policymakers, practitioners, NGOs, and others engaged in development policy and practice. These collections of research provide direct insights into how projects enabled by the ESRC-FCDO Strategic Partnership demonstrate the depth and breadth of research impact in key areas including: disability, gender, education, social protection, teaching, and urban resilience.

Gender and education

This collection of ESRC-FCDO-funded research provides valuable evidence on strategies that can help to eliminate gender inequalities in education. Beyond ensuring that every child – both girls and boys – is in school and learning, it highlights new approaches to how gender equality in and through education can be measured, which is crucial to achieving more than just gender parity in education.

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Photo: Kieran Dodds/Tearfund/Panos Pictures

ESRC-FCDO Research for Policy and Practice: Gender and education
November 2019

Foreword

Disability Development Goal 4 aims to ensure that all children and young people have access to quality education. This research provides evidence on strategies that can help to eliminate gender inequalities in education. Beyond ensuring that every child – both girls and boys – is in school and learning, it highlights new approaches to how gender equality in and through education can be measured, which is crucial to achieving more than just gender parity in education.

Key messages

- New approaches to measuring gender equality in education are needed to ensure that girls and boys are both in school and learning.
- Collaborative approaches to curriculum design can help promote gender equality.
- Non-formal learning strategies that include skills such as digital and financial literacy should be considered to promote girls' learning in contexts of limited resources.

Quality teaching

This collection explores the process of teaching and the factors that make good quality teaching. Drawing on evidence across three continents, it highlights innovative teacher training and recruitment approaches that are improving learning outcomes in Honduras; a classroom observation tool that has improved teaching in Uganda; how Professional Learning Communities can improve teaching quality in China; and the way that transforming teaching quality through active learning is having an impact in Ethiopia.

Read/download pdf: <https://bit.ly/2ArD1JE>

Photo: Adam Dean/Panos Pictures

ESRC-FCDO Research for Policy and Practice: Quality teaching
July 2018

Foreword

Teachers are crucial to achieving the ambitious education targets of the Sustainable Development Goals. This research provides evidence on strategies that can help to improve teaching quality in education. Beyond ensuring that every child – both girls and boys – is in school and learning, it highlights new approaches to how gender equality in and through education can be measured, which is crucial to achieving more than just gender parity in education.

Key messages

- Provide new teachers with well-structured induction programmes to support them in the classroom.
- Foster teacher development as a continuous, ongoing process with opportunities, support and feedback to improve practice.
- Use classroom observation to feed back to teachers to improve practice and inform further professional development.
- Adapt and tailor teacher training to address more specific needs in the classroom.

Disability and education

Bringing together examples of crosscutting work on disability and education, this collection provides valuable new evidence on what governments must consider to ensure that children with disabilities benefit from quality education without discrimination or exclusion. It highlights the value of a study led by deaf researchers in India; explores school-readiness in Malawi; offers greater understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by children with disabilities within the classroom across six countries; and advances strategies in order to support the learning and teaching of children facing multiple disadvantages, including disabilities, in India and Pakistan.

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ESRC-FCDO Research for Policy and Practice: Disability and education

Foreword

Disability Development Goal 4 aims to ensure that all children and young people have access to quality education. This research provides evidence on strategies that can help to eliminate gender inequalities in education. Beyond ensuring that every child – both girls and boys – is in school and learning, it highlights new approaches to how gender equality in and through education can be measured, which is crucial to achieving more than just gender parity in education.

Key messages

- Adopt collaborative approaches to working with parents and communities – including parents with disabilities – to improve educational outcomes for children with disabilities.
- Adapt a non-formal approach to addressing educational exclusion of children with disabilities, including using digital technologies to support learning.
- Collaborative approaches to curriculum design can help promote gender equality.
- Non-formal learning strategies that include skills such as digital and financial literacy should be considered to promote girls' learning in contexts of limited resources.

Women's life choices

This collection identifies the critical elements that need addressing if women's and girls' lives are to change for the better. It explores mobility constraints experienced by girls and how lack of transport options hamper their access to paid work, health services, and schooling; looks at the barriers that women face regarding lifesaving diagnostic treatment and maternal health-care services; and highlights the role of education systems in enhancing women's economic opportunities. The collection draws on research from Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Lesotho, Laos, Malawi, Nigeria, South Africa, and Yemen.

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ESRC-FCDO Research for Policy and Practice: Women's life choices

Foreword

Women's and girls' lives are to change for the better. This research provides evidence on strategies that can help to improve women's and girls' lives. Beyond ensuring that every child – both girls and boys – is in school and learning, it highlights new approaches to how gender equality in and through education can be measured, which is crucial to achieving more than just gender parity in education.

Key messages

- Strengthen coordination of gender-related research.
- Consider different types of evidence, for example qualitative and quantitative, to improve programme design with an understanding of local realities.
- Work with a range of actors, including those who are often overlooked, to address barriers to women's and girls' lives.
- Integrate evidence into policy and practice to improve women's and girls' lives.

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THE IMPACT INITIATIVE

For International Development Research

This summary highlights the key messages from research focusing on accountability and education in India from the ESRC-FCDO (formerly DFID) Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme, and is an output of the Impact Initiative for International Development Research.

It is written in collaboration with research teams and edited by Elizabeth Tofaris, the Impact Initiative Communications Specialist based at the REAL Centre, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge.

The Impact Initiative seeks to connect policymakers and practitioners with the world-class social science research supported by the ESRC-FCDO (formerly DIFD) Strategic Partnership, maximising the uptake and impact of research from: (i) the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research; and (ii) the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme. We seek to identify synergies between these programmes and their grant-holders, support them to exploit influencing and engagement opportunities and facilitate mutual learning. The Impact Initiative is a collaboration between the Institute of Development Studies and the University of Cambridge's Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre.

This research was funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the former UK Department for International Development which merged with the Foreign & Commonwealth Office on 2 September 2020 to become the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

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Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation: aims to enhance the quality and impact of social science research, addressing the key international development goal of reducing poverty amongst the poorest countries and peoples of the world.



Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Programme: aims to provide policymakers and practitioners with concrete ideas on how to improve learning outcomes and to inform relevant policy and programme decision.



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