

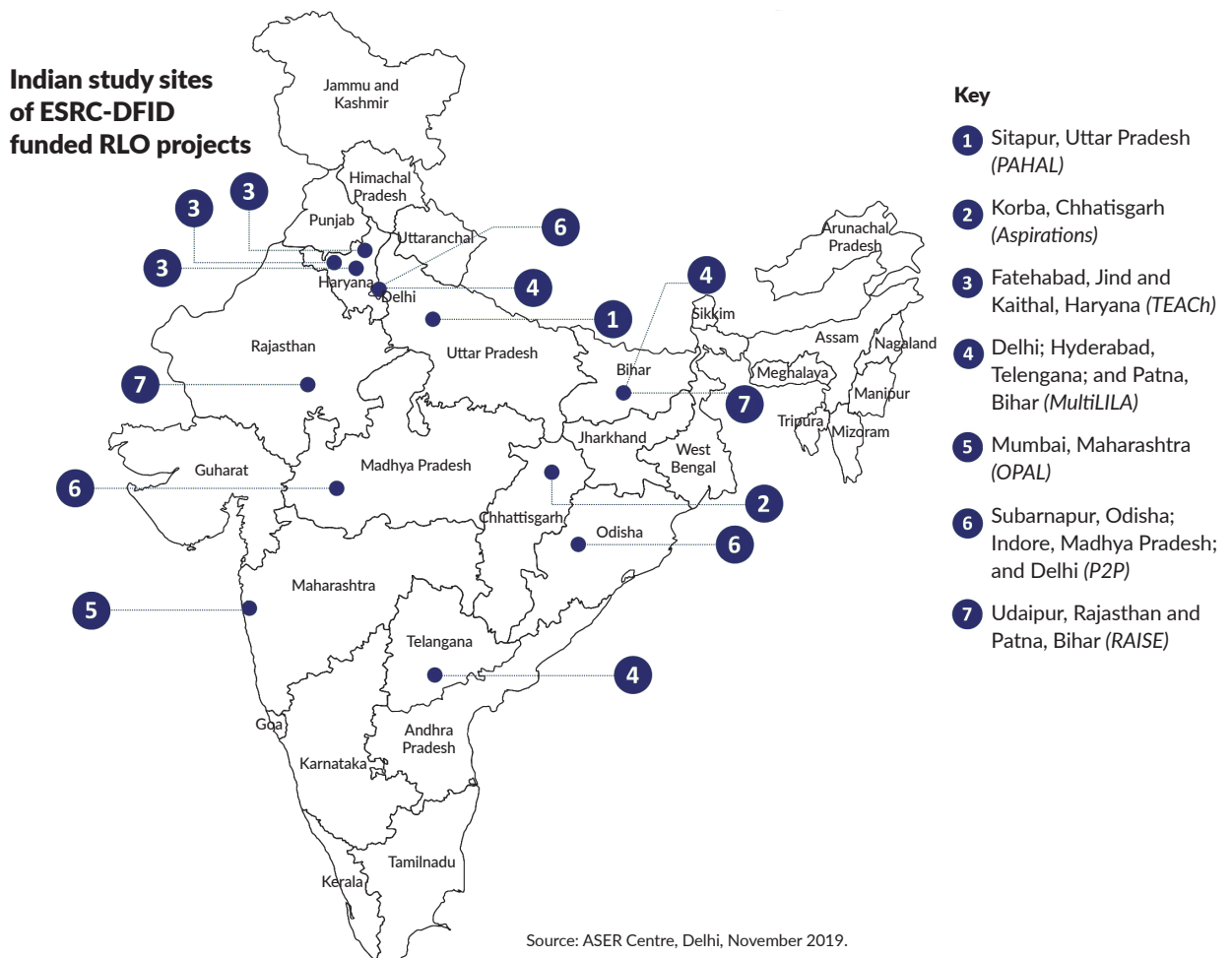
# Raising Learning Outcomes in Diverse Indian Contexts

Over the past two decades, India has witnessed a rapid increase in primary school enrolment. Today, more students than ever before attend school, even those from very disadvantaged backgrounds. By 2014, only 3 per cent of children aged 6–14 were out of school (Social and Rural Research Institute 2014). However, not all complete primary school, and for those who do, many are not learning the basics in literacy and numeracy (ASER Centre 2019).

Since 2014, researchers supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) under the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research programme (RLO) have examined issues of access and learning for those at risk of being left behind.

Research on schools in varied contexts across India – from small schools in remote rural areas to crowded ones in urban slums – found wide variation in students' backgrounds, needs and abilities. Pupils attending the same school often come from different caste, class or religious backgrounds. Their ability to participate and learn in classrooms also varied – sometimes due to different forms and degrees of disability. Studies also found that students who faced multiple disadvantages (due to poverty, gender, caste, religion, disability or where they live) were among those least likely to be learning. One study found that more than 10 per cent of students between the ages of eight and 12 could not read or recognise two-digit numbers (*Learning outcomes and teacher effectiveness for children facing multiple disadvantages, including those with disabilities*, [TEACH]).

This paper highlights the key messages and policy implications from seven ESRC-DFID-funded RLO projects (see the map below and Box 1). The studies provide valuable new evidence to inform the Indian government's efforts to ensure that all children benefit from quality education.



## THREE KEY MESSAGES FOR POLICYMAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS

### 1: Widen policy perspectives on learning outcomes

Indian education policies typically measure learning outcomes in terms of (1) literacy and numeracy, (2) higher-level language and mathematical skills, and (3) subject-specific knowledge attainment. Policy approaches should be broadened to encompass multiple dimensions, to ensure that students acquire the skills needed to prepare them for school and for life. These include non-cognitive and social skills such as communication, critical thinking and empathy, which will build responsible citizenship in the face of challenges such as conflict, unemployment and climate change.

Most of the seven studies emphasised the need to explore the multiple dimensions of learning outcomes as well as the relevance of different dimensions to different cultures and population groups. For instance, the project *Peer to peer deaf multiliteracies: research into a sustainable approach to education of deaf children and young adults in the global South (P2P)*, which examined innovations in sign language and literacy and other communication skills for young deaf learners, identified the importance of building motivation, confidence and agency as the basis of learning. Similarly, the *Education systems, aspiration and learning in remote rural settings (Aspirations)* project highlights the value of aspirations in motivating students. While students dream about a future when they will 'move forward' and 'become someone', most had given up on their dreams by their teens, as they had not acquired sufficient knowledge and skills in school. The *Rights and accountability in the Indian system of education (RAISE)* project goes beyond test-based outcomes to look at outcomes in terms of active participation in classroom activities while *Organizational perspectives on accountability and learning: school management models and the social impact of schooling in Mumbai (OPAL)* looks at non-cognitive and social skills such as empathy.

**Policy implications:** Improving learning outcomes requires system-level changes:

- Learning outcomes should be broadened to include different dimensions of cognitive and non-cognitive skills, adapting priorities to specific contexts.
- School curricula and teacher training should be designed to build both cognitive and non-cognitive skills to prepare students for adult life.
- Both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes should be assessed and monitored.

### 2: Teachers are crucial to ensure that no one is left behind in education. Without appropriate support, teacher motivation, skills and knowledge are severely compromised

Schools enrol children from diverse backgrounds, many of whom have limited or no home support. In such contexts, teachers require extensive training and support to help all children learn.

### 2a: Understanding student needs and abilities and providing the necessary support

Teachers usually see their job as 'completing the syllabus' and are unaware of the different learning needs of their students. For example, one study, *Can schools' accountability for learning be strengthened from the grassroots? Investigating the potential for community-school partnerships in India (PAHAL)*, shows that almost half of all sampled teachers in early primary grades believed their students could read fluently when in fact they could not. The TEACH study found that although 4 per cent of students were identified as having moderate to severe disabilities and 17 per cent as having mild disabilities, teachers were unable to identify these students or provide additional support. Even when teachers were aware of individuals' learning needs, they felt unable to meet those needs due to an unsupportive school environment and lack of training.

Two studies – *Multilingualism and multiliteracy: raising learning outcomes in challenging contexts in primary schools across India (MultiLiLa)* and OPAL – reported that teachers found it very difficult to address students' linguistic needs and had a limited range of classroom practices. However, the MultiLiLa study also highlights cases where teachers were able to boost learning outcomes (for mathematics in particular) for slum children in Delhi by using strategies linked to a child's home language.

These studies identify learning needs in multiple domains that the government education system does not adequately address:

- students who are first-generation school-goers, with limited home support;
- students facing difficulties in functioning, including disability;
- students whose home language is different from the medium of instruction in school;
- students from vulnerable home environments and with irregular attendance;
- students whose future livelihoods depend on agriculture and forests.

**Policy implications:** Teacher training should be designed based on the lived realities of multi-grade teaching, multilingualism and classroom diversity.

- Teacher training should emphasise inclusive and participatory pedagogies rather than rote learning.
- Teachers need to be trained to teach large classes with students from diverse backgrounds. Training should help teachers identify students who are not participating or facing difficulty learning. It should include contextual data collection and analysis of student outcomes, as well as understanding students' living conditions and aspirations.
- For deaf students, more teachers should be recruited who are sign language users; and more training programmes should be organised for deaf sign language users to become recognised professionals in deaf education.

- Teachers should be trained in multilingual pedagogy for teaching disciplinary concepts and ideas.

## 2b: Improving administrative infrastructure

Teachers also need improvements to school administrative infrastructure so they have the time, space and opportunity to teach all children according to their needs. However, studies found several instances where teacher shortages and increased administrative burden reduced teaching time. Challenges include the following.

- Teacher shortages and sub-optimal deployment:
  - Large classes with diverse needs compromise teachers' ability to deliver even when they have appropriate knowledge and skills.
  - Teachers frequently teach mixed/multi-grade classrooms. Three studies – PAHAL, OPAL, and RAISE – found that multi-grade classrooms are very common, although teachers are not trained for these.
- Heavy administrative workload:
  - Teachers' engagement in administrative work intensifies teacher shortages and reduces time for teaching. Several studies found teachers on election duty (RAISE) or busy opening bank accounts (TEACH).
  - Government monitoring requires schools to provide data on students, locality, etc. While this is an important requirement, putting the onus on principals and teachers compromises their direct responsibilities for teaching and learning. For example, the OPAL study highlighted how a strict inspection process puts pressure to produce reports in different formats for different stakeholders.
- Centralised planning and ad-hoc assignment of new schemes and events:
  - The TEACH study found that the setting of syllabus and assessment tests were done at the state level, leaving no space for teachers to adapt their teaching to classroom requirements. The RAISE study also found that principals are under substantial pressure dealing with frequent changes in administrative requirements from government.
- Limited systemic attention to teacher aspirations and professional growth:
  - The Aspirations study demonstrated that teachers were demotivated as they found teaching dull and repetitive, with content not relevant to students' future livelihoods.

**Policy implications:** Education administration should provide a supportive teaching environment.

## SUMMARY

This paper shows that improving learning outcomes in diverse Indian contexts requires a rethinking of educational strategies. While improvements in physical access to schools

- The system needs to ensure the presence of more, and better trained, teachers to reduce class sizes and improve learning outcomes.
- Teachers should be given the time and space to focus on students' needs.
- Adding administrative support staff in schools will free up teacher time for teaching.
- Data collection and use should be rationalised, with a single common portal where all school-related data can be uploaded in the designated format for various stakeholders to access it.

## 3: Families and teachers both have an important role in helping children learn

When parents and teachers collaborate, it can have a positive impact on children's learning. However, although most schools have formal accountability mechanisms such as school management committees, interviews with parents and teachers in multiple studies (PAHAL, TEACH, RAISE and Aspirations) indicate a relationship of mutual distrust. Instead of working together, each expected the other to be more proactive in teaching their children.

- Teachers feel that parents are uninterested or unable to support children's learning and interested only in receiving material incentives.
- Uneducated parents feel they are not capable of providing home support to their children.
- Parents have little faith in schools and teachers. In the PAHAL study, most parents felt that it is a waste of time to meet teachers.
- As parents with children in government schools are typically more disadvantaged (in educational and socioeconomic status) compared to teachers, they are less able to hold teachers and schools to account.

**Policy implications:** Mechanisms for school–community engagement should be strengthened.

- School management committees need support and training to play an effective role, and could be linked with the *panchayat* (village council).
- Community members with livelihood skills and local knowledge should be involved in school activities, allowing communities to feel more engaged in schooling and enhancing students' skills for the future.
- Parent participation and home support needs to be encouraged. Regular community outreach from the school should be mandated by policy. Teachers should discuss with parents their child's progress and how to support their child's schooling.

are welcome, improving learning outcomes requires different stakeholders to strengthen their role and adapt teaching content and methods to local contexts.

## Box 1 ESRC-DFID RLO projects

### 1. [Can schools' accountability for learning be strengthened from the grassroots? Investigating the potential for community-school partnerships in India \(PAHAL\) \(January 2018–March 2021\)](#)

Project team in India: ASER Centre/ Pratham Education Foundation, Delhi

Principal Investigator (PI): Prof Ricardo Sabates, University of Cambridge

Study site: Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh

This project aims to understand whether and how school accountability for learning can be improved from the grass roots. It assesses the impact of a community-based intervention in rural India, which aims to engage with local school actors to improve children's foundational learning in school.

### 2. [Education systems, aspiration and learning in remote rural settings \(Aspirations\) \(September 2016–April 2019\)](#)

Project team in India: Sociation for Action on Health, Education and Environment (SAHEE), Latehar, Jharkhand

PI: Prof Nicola Ansell, University of Brunel

Study site: Korba, Chhattisgarh

This project investigates the processes through which schooling shapes young people's aspirations in remote areas, and how young people's aspirations shape their engagement with schooling and their learning outcomes.

### 3. [Learning outcomes and teacher effectiveness for children facing multiple disadvantages, including those with disabilities \(TEACH\) \(July 2015–December 2018\)](#)

Project team in India: Collaborative Research and Dissemination (CORD), Delhi

PI: Prof Pauline Rose, University of Cambridge

Study sites: Fatehabad, Jind; and Kaithal, Haryana

This project identified ways in which teaching affects children's learning, focusing on children from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those with disabilities.

### 4. [Multilingualism and multiliteracy: raising learning outcomes in challenging contexts in primary schools across India \(MultiLiLa\) \(March 2017–April 2020\)](#)

Project team in India: National Multilingual Education Resource Consortium, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi; English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad; National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), Bengaluru

PI: Prof Ianthi Tsimpli, University of Cambridge

Study sites: Delhi; Hyderabad, Telengana; and Patna, Bihar

This study examines the causes of low educational outcomes, focusing on the medium of instruction and its relationship to the languages used in the child's home, as well as how gender differences and geographical disparities affect learning outcomes.

### 5. [Organizational perspectives on accountability and learning: school management models and the social impact of schooling in Mumbai \(OPAL\) \(October 2017–October 2020\)](#)

Project team in India: Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, Maharashtra

PI: Prof Robin Shields, University of Bristol

Study site: Mumbai, Maharashtra

This project investigates how school accountability differs according to the school management model and whether accountability is linked to differences in learning outcomes.

### 6. [Peer to peer deaf multiliteracies: research into a sustainable approach to education of deaf children and young adults in the global South \(P2P\) \(July 2017–June 2020\)](#)

Project team in India: AlterNEXT, Odisha, and Delhi Foundation of Deaf Women, Delhi

PI: Prof Ulrike Zeshan, University of Central Lancashire

Study sites: Subarnapur, Odisha; Indore, Madhya Pradesh; and Delhi

This peer-led project focuses on innovative methods of teaching literacy to deaf learners.

### 7. [Rights and accountability in the Indian system of education \(RAISE\) \(May 2017–March 2020\)](#)

Project team in India: Vidya Bhawan Society, Udaipur, Rajasthan; and Centre for Social Equity and Inclusion, Delhi

PI: Prof Caroline Dyer, University of Leeds

Study site: Udaipur, Rajasthan; and Patna, Bihar




This project investigates how learning outcomes for disadvantaged children are shaped by norms and interests, modes of participation, and regulatory roles among multiple actors from across the home, community, school and bureaucracies.

## References

- ASER Centre (2019) *Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2018 Provisional*, New Delhi: ASER Centre
- Social and Rural Research Institute (2014) *National Sample Survey of Estimation of Out-of-School Children in the Age 6–13 in India*, Draft report, Social and Rural Research Institute, IMRB International, Educational Consultants India Ltd. (EdCIL), [https://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/upload\\_document/National-Survey-Estimation-School-Children-Draft-Report.pdf](https://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/upload_document/National-Survey-Estimation-School-Children-Draft-Report.pdf) (accessed 21 November 2019)
- Learning Outcomes and Teacher Effectiveness for Children Facing Multiple Disadvantages, Including Those With Disabilities: India and Pakistan*, Teaching Effectively All Children (TEACH) in India and Pakistan, [www.theimpactinitiative.net/project/learning-outcomes-and-teacher-effectiveness-children-facing-multiple-disadvantages-including](http://www.theimpactinitiative.net/project/learning-outcomes-and-teacher-effectiveness-children-facing-multiple-disadvantages-including) (accessed 21 November 2019)

## Credits

The paper was a collaborative effort of the seven research teams in India, led by Anuradha De of Collaborative Research and Dissemination (CORD). Additional editing was provided by The Impact Initiative for International Development Research, which supports the uptake and impact of research funded under the ESRC-DFID Raising Learning Outcomes programme.

 [info@theimpactinitiative.net](mailto:info@theimpactinitiative.net)  
 [www.theimpactinitiative.net](http://www.theimpactinitiative.net)  
 [#The\\_Impact\\_Init #ImpactLessons](https://twitter.com/The_Impact_Init)

All content is available under the Open Government License v.3.0, except where otherwise stated.

© Institute of Development Studies, 2019

**THE IMPACT INITIATIVE**

For International Development Research