

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The fourteenth Annual Status of Education Report (ASER 2019 ‘Early Years’) was released in New Delhi, 14 January 2020

ASER 2019 ‘Early Years’ was released in New Delhi today. This is the fourteenth annual report.

Every year since 2005, ASER has reported on the schooling status and the ability to do basic reading and arithmetic tasks for children in the 5-16 age group in rural India. After ten years of producing an annual report, in 2016, ASER switched to an alternate-year cycle where this ‘basic’ ASER is conducted every other year (2016, 2018, and next in 2020); and in alternate years ASER focuses on a different aspect of children’s schooling and learning. In 2017, ASER ‘Beyond Basics’ focused on the abilities, experiences, and aspirations of youth in the 14-18 age group.

In 2019, ASER has attempted to shine the spotlight on the early years, reporting on the schooling status as well as on a range of important developmental indicators for young children in the age group 4-8.

The early years, defined globally as age 0-8, is known to be the most important stage of cognitive, motor, social and emotional development in the human life cycle. A large body of worldwide research demonstrates that exposure to enabling environments and access to appropriate inputs during these years is fundamental to ensuring that children have a firm foundation on which to build, both in school and in life. However, in India, as in many low- and middle-income countries, there is little evidence on scale with respect to whether young children have access to pre-primary facilities and whether they are acquiring the foundational skills and abilities that are key to subsequent success in school and beyond.

ASER 2019 ‘Early Years’ was designed to begin to fill these gaps. Conducted in 26 districts across 24 states in India, the survey covered a total of 1,514 villages, 30,425 households, and 36,930 children in the age group of 4-8 years. Sampled children’s enrollment status in pre-school or school was collected. Children did a variety of cognitive, early language, and early numeracy tasks; and activities to assess children’s social and emotional development were also undertaken. All tasks were done one-on-one with children in their homes.

ASER 2019 ‘EARLY YEARS’ FINDINGS:

PRE-SCHOOL & SCHOOL ENROLLMENT PATTERNS

- ASER 2019 ‘Early Years’ finds that more than 90% of children in the 4-8 age group are enrolled in some type of educational institution. This proportion increases with age, from 91.3% of all 4-year-olds to 99.5% of all 8-year-olds in sampled districts.
- However, young children of the same age vary enormously in terms of where they are enrolled. For example, at age 5, 70% children are in anganwadis or pre-primary classes, but 21.6% are already enrolled in Std I. At age 6, 32.8% children are in anganwadis or pre-primary classes, while 46.4% are in Std I, and 18.7% are in Std II or higher.

- Boys and girls have different enrollment patterns even among these young children, with a higher proportion of girls enrolled in government institutions and a higher proportion of boys in private institutions. These differences grow larger as children get older. For example, among 4- and 5-year-old children, 56.8% girls and 50.4% boys are enrolled in government pre-schools or schools, while 43.2% girls and 49.6% boys are enrolled in private pre-schools or schools. For 6- to 8-year-olds, 61.1% of all girls versus 52.1% of all boys in this age group are going to a government institution.

CHILDREN IN THE PRE-SCHOOL AGE GROUP (AGE 4-5)

National policy recommends that children age 4 and 5 should be in pre-primary classes. At this stage, children should be encouraged to develop a range of abilities and skills, including cognitive, social and emotional skills as well as the conceptual foundations needed for formal schooling.

- At age 5, what we offer to and expect from children varies enormously across the country depending on state norms for entry to school. As a result, what a 5-year-old is doing depends largely on where she lives. For example, in Thrissur, Kerala, 89.9% of 5-year-olds are in a pre-primary grade and almost all the rest are in Std I. But in East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya, just 65.8% are in pre-school, 9.8% are in Std I, and 16% are in Std II. On the other hand, in Satna, Madhya Pradesh, 47.7% are in pre-school, 40.5% are in Std I, and 4.1% are in Std II.
- From age 4 to age 5, children's ability to do all tasks improves substantially, in line with what child development experts expect and other studies have found. Regardless of whether or where they are enrolled, young children's ability to do cognitive, early language, early numeracy, and social and emotional learning tasks is higher among 5-year-olds than among 4-year-olds. For example, while 31% of 4-year-olds enrolled in anganwadis or government pre-primary classes were able to do a 4-piece puzzle, 45% of 5-year-olds attending these institutions could do so.
- However, although at age 5, children should be able to do most of these tasks with ease, a large proportion is unable to do so. Children from less advantaged homes are disproportionately affected. Although almost half of all 4-year-olds and more than a quarter of all 5-year-olds are enrolled in anganwadis, these children have far lower levels of cognitive skill and foundational ability than their counterparts in private LKG/UKG classes.
- Because these are young children who spend much of their time at home, these differences in outcomes may be driven mainly by children's home characteristics. For example, among the pre-primary age group, children with mothers who had completed eight or fewer years of schooling are more likely to be attending anganwadis or government pre-primary classes; whereas their peers whose mothers studied beyond the elementary stage are more likely to be enrolled in private LKG/UKG classes.
- ASER 'Early Years' data shows that children's performance on tasks requiring cognitive skills is strongly related to their ability to do early language tasks and early numeracy tasks. This suggests that focusing on play-based activities that build memory, reasoning, and problem-solving abilities is more productive than an early focus on content knowledge.

CHILDREN IN STD I

Std I is a critical year – the period when children transition into formal schooling, with the associated curriculum expectations for formal subject-specific learning.

- The Right to Education Act, 2009 (RTE) mandates that children should enter Std I at age 6. Many states allow entry to Std I at age 5+. However, 4 out of every 10 children in Std I are younger than 5 or older than 6. Overall, 41.7% of children in Std I are of the RTE-mandated age of 6 years, 36.4% are 7 or 8 years old, and 21.9% are 4 or 5 years old.
- Even within Std I, children's performance on cognitive, early language, early numeracy, and social and emotional learning tasks is strongly related to their age. Older children do better on all tasks. For example, within the Std I cohort, almost no children age 4 and 5 can read a Std I level text. This proportion increases steadily with age.
- Children in Std I in government schools are younger than those in the same grade in private schools. More than a quarter of Std I students in government schools are either 4 or 5 years old at 26.1%, while the corresponding proportion for private schools is ten percentage points lower at 15.7%. On the other hand, 30.4% students in Std I in government schools are 7-8 years old, while this proportion in private schools is far higher at 45.4%.
- As was seen among the 4- and 5-year olds, a clear relationship is visible between children's cognitive skills and their ability to do early language and early numeracy tasks in Std I. For example, children in Std I who could do 3 cognitive tasks correctly had higher reading ability and were also more likely to solve oral word problems than their peers who could not.

CHILDREN IN EARLY PRIMARY GRADES (STD I, II, III)

In the first few years of primary school, children's progress towards developing foundational reading and arithmetic abilities should be consolidated, giving them a solid base on which to build. It is important that curriculum expectations and classroom activities are developed with this progression in mind.

- Findings from ASER 'Early Years' show that the variation in age distribution within each grade is widest in Std I and decreases in each subsequent grade. But older children continue to do better than younger ones on every ASER task. For example, while most children in Std III in both government and private schools are either 7 or 8 years old, 53.4% of 8-year-olds in Std III could read a Std I level text, while only 46.1% of 7-year-olds could do so.
- Children's skills and abilities improve in each subsequent grade. But the huge jump between curriculum expectations at each grade means that by Std III, their early language and early numeracy outcomes are already well behind curriculum expectations. For example, children's ability to read Std I level text improves from 16.2% of children in Std I to 50.8% children in Std III. This means that half of all children in Std III are already at least two years behind where the curriculum expects them to be.

- Similarly, 41.1% of students in Std I can recognize 2-digit numbers, while 72.2% of students in Std III can do so. But according to NCERT's specification of learning outcomes, children are expected to be able to recognize numbers up to 99 in Std I itself.
- As before, there is a strong relationship between children's cognitive skills and their performance on early language and early numeracy tasks. For example, in Std III, 63.2% of children who did all 3 cognitive tasks correctly were able to read at Std I level, as compared to 19.9% of children who were able to do one or none of the cognitive tasks correctly.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Three key implications emerge from ASER 2019 'Early Years' findings.

- Anganwadis cater to large proportions of children well before they can enter pre-primary grades. The already significant scale of this network can be leveraged to reach those children who remain unreached. At the same time, the ability of these centres to implement appropriate school readiness activities for 3- and 4-year-olds needs to be strengthened.
- Data from ASER 2019 'Early Years' clearly shows that performance on cognitive, early language, early numeracy, and social and emotional development tasks is closely related to children's age, with older children doing better than younger ones. Permitting underage children into primary grades puts them at a learning disadvantage which is difficult to overcome.
- ASER 2019 'Early Years' data shows a clear relationship between children's performance on cognitive tasks and measures of early language and early numeracy, suggesting that a focus on activities that strengthen cognitive skills rather than subject learning in the early years may generate substantial benefits in terms of children's future learning. The entire age band from 4 to 8 needs to be seen as a continuum, and curriculum progression across grades and schooling stages designed accordingly. For an effective and implementable curriculum, the process of designing, planning, piloting, and finalizing needs to keep ground realities in mind.

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