Reading Failure in Early Primary Grades: A Serious Challenge to Equity in Primary Education

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Room to Read
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Children are not learning to read well in grades 1 & 2

Evidence from Room to Read assessments:

*India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and South Africa*
Assessment Outline

- Within 2 months of start of the academic session (except Bangladesh)
- Grade 1 & 2 students tested

Sample Size:

**India**: 4432 students in 240 schools in 3 states (Rajasthan, Uttaranchal and Delhi)

**Bangladesh** (dipstick): 400 students across 20 schools in 1 district

**Sri Lanka**: 400 students in 40 schools in one district
Test Description

- 10 sub-tests in ascending order of difficulty roughly corresponding to grade 1 & 2 levels. Adapted from EGRA and Pre-PIRLS tests
- Skills required to read and understand texts and basic writing:
  - Listening comprehension
  - Reading letters
  - Reading simple words correctly and with speed
  - Reading simple text with comprehension questions
  - Dictation of simple words
  - Writing about a picture
### Grade 2 (beginning) literacy assessments in South Asia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>Sri Lanka</th>
<th>Nepal</th>
<th>Bangladesh</th>
<th>India</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Naming letters (per minute)</td>
<td>48 (21.1)</td>
<td>41 (19.6)</td>
<td>37.4 (13.1)</td>
<td>16.33 (13.87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiar word reading (pm)</td>
<td>25 (12.8)</td>
<td>20 (10.5)</td>
<td>14.1 (9.9)</td>
<td>6.13 (10.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral reading accuracy (60 words)</td>
<td>39 (22.3)</td>
<td>38.8 (15.9)</td>
<td></td>
<td>10.24 (19.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral Comprehension (6 questions)</td>
<td>3 (1.7)</td>
<td>3.3 (1.8)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.77 (1.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dictation-simple words</td>
<td>3 (out of 13)</td>
<td>3.4 (Out of 13)</td>
<td>4 (Out of 9)</td>
<td>1.18 (Out of 11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Achievement of 19 school in a state in India (6 months in to school year)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% In Cumulative</th>
<th>Grade 1</th>
<th>Grade 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cannot read</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can read all Simple Letters</td>
<td>85.4</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can read all letters (Incl. complex)</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>88.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can read Simple word</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>86.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can read more difficult words</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>62.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can read simple sentence</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>33.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Literacy Assessments in South Africa for Grade 3
2007: Overall Literacy Score: 35.9%. Reading: 44.2%. Writing: 33.6%
Writing Performance significantly Lower than Reading
Level of Mastery of Grade 3 Students: 2009 (Eastern Cape)

Mean Literacy scores: 38-44%
Reading Achievements in South Africa

• In the PIRLS 2006 assessment, only 13% of Grade 4 students (22% of Grade 5) could achieve the “Low International Standard” that corresponds to basic skills.

• Performance drops significantly when assessments are made in English in grades 4 & 5.
Common Issues

- In South Asia (not Sri Lanka) a majority of students are not learning to read even simple sentences by grade 2.
- In no country do children reach grade level expectations.
- Writing ability is very low in all countries (including South Africa).
- In Sri Lanka, several pockets with low reading achievements. Also Tamil scores significantly lower than Sinhala.
• High disparity within the classroom in reading levels from grade 2 onwards
• In South Africa, reading levels are better, but writing is an issue. Transition to English in grade 4 is problematic
• Comprehension on inferential questions low
Learning to Read: School Barriers

- Effective early grades language teaching strategies not in place
- Time on learning task low
- Focus on content and memorization in teaching and assessment
Learning to Read: School Barriers...

- Revision, reinforcement and remediation not stressed
- Inadequate time allocated to reading/language instruction. Lowest in Bangladesh and India
Learning to Read: School Barriers...

- No simple, graded books/reading materials
- Textbook content and language difficult
- Language of Instruction
Why is reading a crucial equity issue?

- EFA has become synonymous with high enrollment and completion rates
- Crisis of learning needs to be the focus now
- The most basic expectation from primary education: *The child should be able to read and write*
- If a child is not able to read (well) in time, she is denied an equal opportunity to learn
Why is reading a crucial equity issue?..

- Reading is a foundational skill on which all formal education depends (Good reading skills help a child access the rest of the curriculum). 
  
  \[ \text{Reading} \rightarrow \text{Comprehension} \rightarrow \text{Learning} \]

- Any child who doesn’t learn to read early and well will not easily master other skills and knowledge—cannot do well in school
Why is reading a crucial equity issue?.....

- Significant differences in reading/learning levels within the same classroom in developing countries.

- Children below a certain level by the end of Grade 1, stay behind forever, and the gap widens.
Why is reading a crucial equity issue?

- 90% chance that a poor reader at the end of grade 1 will continue to be a poor reader at the end of grade 5.
- And, if children cannot read well, they fall behind in everything else.
- Reading deficits start building up from grade 2.
Matthew Effect in Reading

Graph showing reading performance across grades K, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd.
Children who learn to read late or read slowly

- Read and write less, may avoid reading
- Do not learn skilled, advanced reading
- Cannot understand the textbooks of their grade
- Develop negative attitudes about reading and school
- Are less likely to complete school
Thank You