Using evidence to improve children's foundational skills in India

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Highlights

Evidence impact

- The Haryana evaluation was particularly influential in government decisions about implementing teaching at the right level in several Indian states, although not in Haryana.
- Evaluation evidence informed decisions by other governments, including in Zambia, to pilot the model.
- Independent evaluations, including the Haryana evaluation, have complemented Pratham's work on measurement of programme outcomes and has helped the organisation use evidence effectively in decision-making and course correction.

Factors that contributed to impact

- Evaluation findings contributed to more than a decade's worth of clear evidence from multiple impact evaluations across multiple contexts in India, emphasising the effectiveness of the model.
- The evaluation evidence supported an effective, low-cost, government-led model that fits political priorities.
- The evaluation findings came at a time when the focus of education policy worldwide was shifting from improving access and enrolment to improving learning.
- Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) and Pratham have international reputations and are highly respected. They leveraged each other's networks to promote Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) in India and Africa.
- The partners had sustained engagement with state governments in India.
- J-PAL and Pratham both translated and tailored the evidence to ensure it was useful, relevant and accessible to diverse audiences.

Evidence use brief

This brief tells the story of how impact evaluation evidence informed the scale-up of a government-led TaRL model in India and other countries.

Impact evaluation details

Title: A wide angle view of learning: evaluation of the CCE and LEP programmes in Hary…

Authors: Esther Duflo, James Berry, Shobhini Mukerji and Marc Shotland

Status : Completed June 2014

Context

Low learning levels are a major challenge in rural India, where schooling does not often translate into learning. Although enrolment rates for children in the 6-to-14-year-old age group were 97 per cent in 2018, just around half of the children enrolled in grade 5 could read a grade 2 text, and only 28 per cent were able to solve simple division problems. Compounding the problem is a lack of tools to help teachers identify student-learning levels and customise their teaching, together with high pupil-to-teacher ratios.

Pratham, a large education NGO in India, developed the Teaching at the Right Level (TARL) methodology to improve learning outcomes. The model involves grouping children (typically in grades 3 to 5) based on their learning levels. Teachers use appropriate activities and materials to help children acquire foundational skills in reading and arithmetic. Instead of relying on an end-of-year exam, teachers assess students' progress more regularly using easily administered assessment tools.

For more than a decade, Pratham and the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), a leading research organisation specialising in randomised impact evaluations, have conducted evaluations of this methodology, thereby establishing it as an evidence-informed approach for improving children's learning outcomes.

Although TaRL had been found to be effective when implemented by volunteers and government schoolteachers outside school hours, the partners wanted to test its effectiveness when delivered through the government system. The 3ie-supported evaluation had four treatment arms:

1. the teacher-led Learning Enhancement Programme (LEP) for Hindi that used Pratham's TaRL model and the routine official teacher monitoring system;
2. the government's Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) system, which involves teachers evaluating student performance regularly through various techniques, instead of one final exam;
3. a combination of LEP and CCE; and
4. control schools, which received no intervention.

The evaluation was conducted in 400 primary schools in two districts of Haryana, India.

Evidence

The impact evaluation showed CCE did not have any impact on learning outcomes when compared to the status quo. However, LEP had a large, positive and statistically significant effect on students' basic Hindi reading and writing abilities. The effect was larger for girls than boys. Combining LEP and CCE had no significant effect on test scores relative to LEP alone. Also, LEP had no impact on mathematics scores.

Process monitoring showed that CCE did not lead to any change in teaching practices in terms of implementing any CCE-recommended techniques. Conversely, LEP had high levels of compliance and was well implemented.

Evidence impacts

Informed Haryana's school improvement programme

Elements from the evaluated intervention were taken up in a new programme scaled to 5,000 government primary schools in Haryana. The new programme included remedial education, regrouping children based on their learning levels, building competencies rather than completing the curriculum, and involving government's resource coordinators for monitoring and mentoring support.

Informed TaRL-based programmes in Gujarat and Karnataka

Between 2014 and 2019, Pratham used the approach and findings from evaluations, including the 3ie-supported Haryana study, to work in partnership with the governments of 15 Indian states – including Gujarat and Karnataka, where TaRL-based models have been implemented and assessed.

Informed catch-up programmes in Zambia and Côte d'Ivoire

J-PAL Africa and Pratham have worked together to support organisations and governments in Zambia and Côte d'Ivoire to adapt, pilot and scale up TaRL programmes. In Zambia, the Ministry of General Education is expanding the Catch Up pilot project to 1,800 schools by 2020. Pratham provided technical support to a Belgian Flemish organisation, VVOB education for development, and the government during the pilot process. Along with VVOB, UNICEF and J-PAL Africa, Pratham continues to work with the ministry on the scale-up.
In 2018, the Ministry of National Education of Côte d'Ivoire partnered with Transforming Education in Cocoa Communities, Pratham and J-PAL Africa to adapt and pilot the approach in 50 primary schools.

Suggested citation

International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie), 2020. *Using evidence to improve children's foundational skills in India* **[online summary], Evidence Impact Summaries. New Delhi: 3ie.**

Related

From proof of concept to scalable policies: challenges and solutions, with an application, NBER, Dec 2016
This working paper describes how the 3ie-supported Haryana evaluation evidence contributed to take-up of the TaRL model by strengthening the theory with practical insights.

Case study: Teaching at the Right Level to improve learning
Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab's case study of how research has informed decision-making in the context of foundational learning interventions.

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