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Is our children learning?

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After \$12 billion of World Bank money, and the promise of more to come, donors still don't really know

A lot of turtles lived on the bank of a big lake. Boys would go to the bank and look at the turtles. Sometimes the turtles would walk around and at other times retreat into their shells, as if they were stones. On seeing this, the boys would laugh loudly and clap. They would go home and tell everyone the story of the turtles.

NOT the most thrilling narrative perhaps, but less than half of Indian schoolchildren between the ages of seven and 14 could read this passage in their native language even if they wanted to. That was one discouraging result of a national study of literacy and numeracy published by Pratham, an educational charity, earlier this year.



Education for all is a popular cause. So popular, indeed, that every decade or two, governments and donor agencies promise to put all the world's children in primary school by some date, normally ten or 15 years hence. In 1990 they set a deadline of 2000. In 2000 they set one of 2015. All that is required, the donors say, is money and will.

The money may be forthcoming. In April Gordon Brown, Britain's chancellor of the exchequer, promised to spend \$15 billion over the next ten years to help realise this goal. Russia, which is hosting the G8 summit in St Petersburg between July 15th and 17th, has put the subject on the agenda and \$7m of its money on the table. But throwing money at the problem is not unprecedented. Since 1990 the World Bank has spent over \$12 billion on primary education. What has it accomplished? This week its Independent Evaluation Group (IEG) gave its verdict.

Many more children are going to primary school. In the 12 countries the IEG studied in depth, enrolment rates rose by an average of 19 percentage points over the past ten to 12 years. In 1996 Uganda abolished fees for primary education. As a result, enrolment almost doubled in a year, according to official figures (which some scholars distrust). Both Kenya and Ghana have since followed Uganda's lead.

Cutting fees is now touted as a "quick win", one of precious few easy victories in development. Indeed, far from charging people to attend school, some governments, with donors' help, now bribe them to enrol. They offer free meals or cash handouts to parents on the condition they keep their children in school. In Nicaragua, the IEG reports, a pilot programme along these lines raised enrolment rates by about 22 percentage points.

Governments and donors have been remarkably successful at getting children into school. But what do they learn when they are there? Pratham's study in India is one of few serious attempts to find out.

Only five of the 12 countries visited by the IEG had carried out repeated, standardised tests to monitor their progress in educating pupils, rather than merely enrolling them. Parents cannot fill this gap. Their children are often the first members of their family to get an education. As a result, parents do not know what to demand from their schools. In Uttar Pradesh, a state in India, 41% of children could not read a single paragraph, but only 21% of parents think their offspring cannot read.

Uganda's explosive increases in the quantity of schooling came at the expense of an implosion in quality. Three years after the big bang of 1997, for example, the Bundibugyo district of Uganda had 209 pupils for every classroom. In 2005 there were, on average, three students per textbook in the country.

Faced with ratios like these, the obvious response is to build more classrooms and print more textbooks—in other words, to increase the “inputs” to education. In Uganda the obvious response is probably the right one. But it may not be sufficient. In the past few years trials have shown that simply spending more on textbooks, flipcharts or extra teachers does not necessarily raise test scores for the average pupil.

But these scholarly results rest uneasily with donors' habits. On the whole, they are better at procurement than at pedagogy, better at school-building than schooling. In Peru the bank helped to improve buildings, distribute textbooks and provide training. But Peru's teachers remained ill paid, poorly motivated and barely supervised, and were rarely held to account. Some refused to use free textbooks, preferring to collect commissions from commercial publishers for assigning their books instead.

Learning how to teach

Pratham's response to widespread illiteracy and innumeracy was to experiment. It tried various remedies in half the schools in a district or city, picking which half at random. The remaining schools provided a control group with which to compare the results of its efforts*. One of its more successful ventures was to hire unqualified high-school graduates to provide remedial education for students falling behind. These *balsakhis* (which means “children's friends”) were cheap, paid about \$10-15 a month, and quick to train, receiving only two weeks of prior instruction. Because they did their work in hallways or even under trees, there was nothing for governments or donors to build.

Nonetheless, the instruction they offered was surprisingly effective. In Mumbai it raised the chances of fourth-year pupils grasping first-year maths by 11.9 percentage points. It improved their chances of mastering second-year literacy by 9.9 percentage points. The gains in Vadadora (formerly known as Baroda) were smaller, but still worthwhile.

Pratham's remedy may not apply to Africa, where fully trained teachers are still relatively cheap. But the charity's approach—measure, experiment, evaluate—should. Thanks to the *balsakhis*, more of India's children are learning to count and read—well enough at least to enjoy turtle stories. Whether donors are also learning any lessons remains to be seen.

* “[Remediating Education](#)”, by Abhijit Banerjee, Shawn Cole, Esther Duflo and Leigh Linden. NBER working paper 11904, December 2005.