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Improving Education Quality in South Asia

MAPPING UNICEF'S EFFORTS

UNICEF's efforts have had positive impacts on children's access to quality learning environments. Evaluations of Child-Friendly School (CFS) programmes in Nepal, Sri Lanka and India indicate improved classroom environments and children's participation and raised awareness around children's rights. The Activity-Based Learning (ABL) evaluation in India demonstrates the significant impact child-centred pedagogy can have on reducing learning gaps, social barriers and discrimination.

While improving classroom environments and children's participation are important components of quality, they are not sufficient for ensuring changes in learning processes and outcomes – which have been less of an explicit focus in general for UNICEF's programming. Improving teaching and learning is the critical need of the hour, yet much less visible and more difficult.

UNICEF can play a key role in identifying what works to improve learning, showcasing good working models, and advising governments on the most strategic investments for improving learning.

We need to redefine CFS for South Asia: from child-centred environments to learning-centred education.

In light of the learning crisis globally and in South Asia, the critical need for improving teaching and learning quality, and lack of clarity around how best to do so, ROSA commissioned a mapping of all UNICEF-supported interventions in recent years aimed at improving education quality to inform UNICEF South Asia's ongoing efforts and further research in this area.

The mapping involved a desk review of available documentation, online surveys and Skype interviews with key informants from UNICEF Country Offices (COs), Field Offices and key non-governmental organizations (NGOs)/ government partners.

Findings were analysed to glean specific recommendations for UNICEF South Asia. The findings and analysis are captured in the form of a report, a PDF brief and Powerpoint presentation, as well as a taxonomy listing details of major UNICEF-supported quality interventions in South Asia in recent years. The main findings are broadly summarized in five key messages.

1 UNICEF's quality initiatives have had positive impact on children's access to quality learning environments, yet they have focused more on quality inputs than outcomes. The focus needs to shift to teaching and learning outcomes.

Despite the many challenges to education quality in South Asia, recent citizen-led assessments indicate some positive trends in Pakistan and India, including potential improvements in learning at pre-primary and primary levels (ASER Pakistan 2015, ASER India 2016).

Indeed, the mapping findings indicate that UNICEF's efforts over the past decade have contributed to improvements in children's enrolment and in school facilities. However, a clear message emerging from the mapping is that the call of the day is to focus more explicitly on learning outcomes than has been the focus thus far. It was felt that talking only about quality may or may not lead to improved learning, whereas focusing on learning outcomes will inevitably streamline other interventions needed for quality. With programmes like CFS, the goal should not simply be to implement the programme properly – but to enable students to achieve learning outcomes.

Though many COs are indeed attempting to include a greater focus on learning in their new Country Programmes, executing this is especially challenging given that many South Asian countries lack the needed political and financial support or strong systems for measuring learning, as well as global lack of clarity on how to improve pedagogy and learning outcomes.

In this context, UNICEF can play a key role in helping identify what works and advising governments on the most strategic investments for improving learning. It was felt that UNICEF could increase its impact by defining a long-term vision and strategy for improving teaching-learning outcomes and prioritizing just a few key areas where it can show results, since improvements in learning are the ultimate gauge of our impact on education quality.

2 We need to redefine CFS for South Asia: from child-friendly environments to learning-centred education.

Research on the impact of CFS in Nepal, Sri Lanka and India indicates that it has made a positive contribution to improving learning environments and children's participation and raising awareness around children's rights.

CFS initiatives in South Asia have primarily focused on promoting inclusive welcoming environments and relevant learning materials with a few on strengthening supportive systems. However, while these are certainly important components of quality education, they are not sufficient for ensuring changes in learning processes and outcomes.

At the same time, it should be noted that Activity-Based Learning that UNICEF has supported across India has demonstrated evidence of improvements in child-centred learning processes and increased learning outcomes. UNICEF and other partners worked with government to scale up the NGO Rishi Valley Institute for Educational Resources (RIVER) inspired model across the country and in the region.

Given that CFS as a concept has already gained much traction in South Asia, perhaps we need to redefine what CFS means for South Asia, with a greater articulation of how to improve teaching-learning outcomes within this context. This could mean moving from Child-Friendly Schools to child-friendly learning-centred education.

3 There is need to showcase good working models on the ground.

While there may be pockets of innovation in different sectors, they are often not on the radar of the government or even UNICEF. Showcasing good working models of what learning-centred pedagogy could look like for different subjects, and also of transformative teacher training that is able to bring shifts in teachers' beliefs and practices, could be an important and much-needed resource for building teachers' capacity for improving learning.

UNICEF can create or identify such islands of excellence in the system, showcasing them as demonstrations of what could work within this context and flagging them as potential models for upscaling or partnership. Connecting such outliers with each other will also help build a platform that could gain enough momentum to create a viable alternative to the status quo. UNICEF could analyse and help evaluate such outliers to identify lessons and leverage points for enhancing learning.

4 Our strategies need to take into account regional challenges and leverage them for success.

Models that have worked in other contexts may not necessarily succeed in South Asia given its unique regional challenges, such as its prevalence of conflict and disasters, weak systemic capacity, politicization of teaching, low-skilled teachers and weak teacher training, and strong exam culture.

As these are not likely to change in the near future, our strategies need to build on and leverage these challenges to make them contribute to our success (an example is the recommendation below of using an existing constraint of the dominant exam culture and leveraging that for success by changing the way national assessments are designed).

Given the prevalence of fragile contexts in the region, we also need to think of how to design learning standards that are appropriate.

5 Complex challenges in South Asia require exploring creative new options for capacity building of teachers, systems and UNICEF's own staff.

This is an important area for UNICEF, given that one of its strengths is its access to international resources and that one of its identified limitations is lack of technical expertise in the area of improving learning quality. The magnitude of need for building capacity at all levels requires moving away from traditional options of training workshops or conferences to exploring out-of-the-box options that tap into technology and innovation.



A rigorous evaluation of ABL programmes in seven states of India indicated greater child engagement, learner autonomy and fear-free classrooms, as well as improvements in learning in 11 per cent of classrooms where the programme was being implemented as intended.

What could 'quality' mean for South Asia?

Based on a review and critique of existing definitions of quality, this mapping proposes a definition of quality focusing on six dimensions seen as integral to education quality: (i) ensuring thriving learners; (ii) welcoming learning environments; (iii) relevant learning materials; (iv) learning-centred processes; (v) universal learning outcomes; and (vi) supportive systems.

UNICEF's education programming in South Asia for the past decade has made important contributions in the first, second, third and sixth dimensions, but has had less explicit focus on the fourth and fifth that are central to education quality.

The analysis of findings from the mapping suggests that a more achievable conception of 'quality' for South Asia at this point may be to develop learning-centred education systems, which ensure that the majority of children are able to achieve basic competencies appropriate to their grade level – compared to the mere one third of children currently achieving this.

In particular, a discussion of improved learning outcomes in the South Asian context cannot be divorced from a discussion of how to bring pedagogical shifts from teacher-centred classrooms: pedagogy and learning outcomes must go hand in hand. Based on an analysis of interviews, surveys and document review, the mapping was able to identify some leverage points likely to contribute to improved outcomes for teaching and learning, though these need to be substantiated by further research:

1. **Empower teachers as professionals to engage with basic principles of learning**, through both short-term strategies of providing effective in-school teacher coaching and long-term strategies of developing vibrant teacher education systems that allow teachers to experience and internalize basic principles of learning (like attempts to restructure teacher education systems in Odisha and Maharashtra, India).
2. **Structured pedagogical interventions designed to strengthen teaching and learning**, by organizing materials, training and supervision around a specific pedagogical model designed to change students' learning experiences and adapt teaching to student learning levels (like ABL in India).
3. **Generate political will to clearly define and measure desired learning outcomes**, ensuring these are regularly monitored through both large-scale learning surveys and classroom-based formative assessments (like Afghanistan's attempts to develop national assessment systems, while also training teachers to implement formative assessment).
4. **Build capacity of education stakeholders to discuss and use learning assessment data to inform decision making at all levels**, including both education planners and managers for allocating resources and efforts at sub-national levels, and teachers for allocating time and attention to individual children or specific competencies (education monitoring systems in Punjab province, Pakistan, is one example of analysing data and ranking districts' performance on key quality indicators to prioritize action).
5. **Empower parents to demand and support improved learning**, for example, through developing a simple list of key outcomes every child should know at each grade level and empowering parents to hold schools accountable for ensuring all children learn (like efforts in India to display grade-wise learning objectives stated in simple terms on school walls for parents to know what to demand).
6. **Strengthen governance of learning** by improving transparency and building stronger accountability and efficiency at different levels, including school management (like Nepal's Data Must Speak initiative).

Recommendations for COs and ROSA

Though learning is the call of the day, it is also the most difficult and a relatively new area for UNICEF South Asia. Much more is needed to generate evidence, show good working models, strengthen systems and develop UNICEF's own technical capacity and resource pools in this area.

Keeping in mind the challenges and successes identified, as well as what key informants felt were UNICEF's key strengths and limitations in working for quality improvement, five preliminary recommendations are made for areas where UNICEF could most strategically contribute to improving quality (though these should be substantiated by further research):

1. **Advocate with governments to shift the focus to learning as a right of children,** through strong evidence-based advocacy and research.
2. **Showcase good working models for improving pedagogy and learning,** through piloting innovative strategies, or identifying and leveraging outliers within the current system that have been able to show results from across sectors.
3. **Help shift national assessments from testing memorization towards testing competencies,** as a way of leveraging the strong exam culture to create pressure for teacher training and systems to shift towards learner-centred pedagogies to adequately prepare students.
4. **Build systemic capacity at all levels to analyse and use data for improving learning,** leading to informed decision-making for bringing changes in pedagogy, teacher support and curriculum reform or review of materials, with the view to leading to enhanced learning outcomes.
5. **Strengthen accountability for learning,** by empowering parents to demand and support quality improvement, or working with teacher unions to strengthen teacher accountability.

Based on the recommendations for COs, ROSA could help identify key leverage points for improving teaching-learning outcomes and create a database of good test items measuring children's understanding and competencies for countries to draw from. It was felt that ROSA could facilitate regular opportunities to document and share good work happening on the ground, harvest findings from existing evaluations or reviews conducted by other partners, and provide capacity building opportunities for COs as well as senior government leaders to improve teaching-learning quality.

In terms of further research on the impact of CFS on learning, the mapping suggests that many of South Asia's CFS programmes may not have explicitly targeted teaching-learning outcomes, and thus may not yet be able to show significant changes in learning (especially in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, and Pakistan). Rather, the study suggests four areas

of research that ROSA could facilitate to help UNICEF learn from and identify what works for improving teaching and learning quality, and which could present a first step towards redefining what CFS could look like within South Asia:

1. **Deeper discussion and wider dissemination** of existing evaluations of CFS in South Asia (particularly from India, Sri Lanka and Nepal).
2. **A self-evaluation exercise of UNICEF's quality initiatives** in each country, to enable UNICEF and partners to collectively reflect on the impact and gaps of UNICEF's quality programming.
3. **Mapping of existing outliers** from across sectors that have shown improvements in teaching and learning to look at what works for bringing change on the ground.
4. **More rigorous evaluations of 3–5 of the key outliers** identified in the mapping that may not have already been evaluated to isolate their impact on teaching and learning outcomes.

In the teacher-led CFS Network in Chennai, India, teachers voluntarily come together on weekends and holidays to discuss and brainstorm solutions to moving their schools towards CFS principles and practices.

