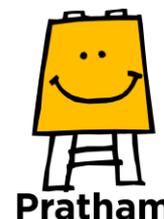


PRATHAM'S MODELS FOR LEARNING IMPROVEMENT  
A SHORT NOTE



February 2016

## Summary

Pratham was founded over twenty years ago in Mumbai, India with the aim of providing pre-school education to children in urban slums. Since then, the organization has grown both in scope and size. In 2005, the first ASER<sup>1</sup> survey was carried out highlighting the huge deficiency learning levels of children in schools across the country. The findings led Pratham to adopt a learning outcomes based approach and to the evolution of Pratham's flagship *Read India* program.

In 2007, Pratham launched the nationwide *Read India* movement with the objective that all children in India should be able to read, write and do basic math. Pratham's CAMaL (Combined Activities for Maximized Learning) methodology, evolved as a result of the various stages of work on learning in different locations through "Learning to Read (L2R)" and "Reading to Learn (R2L)" methodologies. It combines reading, speaking, and doing, writing in a variety of ways to enhance and accelerate the learning of a child. Recent experiments with running short-duration high-intensity camps led to Pratham's current approach of *Learning Camps*, adopting the above methodologies. Pratham's Teaching at the Right Level approach adopted in these camps and in similar interventions through partnerships, has led to impressive improvements in children's reading and arithmetic levels, evaluated and proven through multiple Randomized Control Trial (RCT) studies. Key aspects of Pratham's approach include *Assessment*, *Grouping by level* and *Teaching by level* with a focus on reading, writing and arithmetic with an aim to make a sustained impact on children's reading, comprehension and speaking abilities in a fixed duration.

Over the years, Pratham has also been working in collaboration with government at various levels to increase impact manifold and to create sustainable change. While significant strides have been made in improving access to education across the country, learning continues to remain a challenge.

In this scenario, Pratham continues to work towards directly impacting children's learning while continuing to campaign for institutional change across the country. With interventions now spread across 23 states and union territories, Pratham is reaching millions of children each year. In 2014-15 alone, Pratham direct and partnership interventions reached over 7 million children across the country.

In the coming year, Pratham is seeking to implement learning improvement programs using the Teaching at the Right Level approach in multiple locations across the country. In particular, Pratham is actively seeking partnerships with state and district level governments for working together to improve learning outcomes of children on scale.

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<sup>1</sup> Facilitated by Pratham, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) is a massive nationally representative household survey of children's basic reading and arithmetic that has been carried out in India every year since 2005. ASER reaches over 560 districts each year, surveying an average of 650,000 children in more than 16,000 villages across India. To access ASER reports from 2005 to 2014, see [www.asercentre.org](http://www.asercentre.org)

## Problem Statement

India is close to universal enrollment for children in the age group 6 to 14. Recent figures for rural India indicate that 96.7% of children (in the age group 6-14 years) are enrolled in a nearby school (ASER 2014). Reaching universal enrollment in a country as big and diverse as India is an impressive achievement. But now that children are in school, the critical question facing the country is – Are children learning?

Ten years of data from ASER point to three key facts: First, at every grade level, basic learning levels are unacceptably low.<sup>2</sup> Second, over time learning levels seem to be “stuck”. If anything, there are some indications of a declining trend, implying that later cohorts are doing worse than earlier counterparts.<sup>3</sup> Third, learning trajectories over time are relatively flat. This suggests that if children do not acquire fundamental skills in the primary school years, it is unlikely that they will pick them up later. All of this leads to the simple fact that basic reading and arithmetic skills are essential for moving ahead meaningfully through the school system or indeed through life.

While more and more children are completing more and more years of schooling, learning is stagnant. This crisis in learning can undercut gains that have been made in education on the schooling side. The scale is enormous. Census 2011 figures indicate that for each single year age group, there are roughly 25 million children – at least half of these are several grade levels behind where they are expected to be.

## What does Pratham do?

ASER has, year on year, provided evidence of the learning crisis in Indian classrooms. The results as early 2005 called for a need for change in strategy – each of these groups of children at varying levels needed special and specific attention.

## Pratham’s teaching-learning methodology

Pratham’s techniques for enabling children to acquire basic skills in reading and arithmetic has evolved considerably over the last decade.<sup>4</sup> For over ten years, the focus has been on children who are in Grades 3 to 5 (or of that age). Many such children have been in school for a number of years but have not acquired the foundational skills that are essential for moving ahead. There are several core elements of the method that Pratham uses. One, learning goals are clearly articulated so that teachers and parents know what is to be achieved. Two, simple assessment is used at the beginning of the program. This is done both to understand the level of individual children and of the group and also for grouping them for instruction. Later in the program, similar assessments are used to track children’s progress and for making course corrections. Third, for instruction, children are grouped by level rather than by grade. Fourth, the method relies on a set of combined daily activities to maximize learning; for

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<sup>2</sup> ASER 2014 finds that only about half of all children in Grade V can read simple text (Grade II level of difficulty). In arithmetic, about a similar proportion can do a simple subtraction problem (2 digit with borrowing).

<sup>3</sup> Other data sources are also finding evidence of a decline in learning levels. For example: Young Lives project in Andhra Pradesh and preliminary results from the latest India Human Development Survey.

<sup>4</sup> Earlier the pedagogy was called “Learning to Read (L2R)”. It has also been referred to as CAMaL (Combined Activities for Maximized Learning) and more recently the approach has also been called “Teaching at the Right Level” or TaRL. A unique feature of Pratham’s development is that over these ten years, there have a series of impact evaluations of different dimensions of Pratham’s model. The experiences on the ground along with the evidence generated from these randomized control trials have helped in shaping the intervention’s evolution. For a summary of the impact evaluations, see: [http://pratham.org/templates/pratham/images/Evaluations\\_of\\_Pratham\\_Teaching\\_at\\_the\\_Right\\_Level\\_TaRL\\_programs\\_by\\_J-PAL.pdf](http://pratham.org/templates/pratham/images/Evaluations_of_Pratham_Teaching_at_the_Right_Level_TaRL_programs_by_J-PAL.pdf). More details are available on JPAL’s website.

example, for building number knowledge and operations in arithmetic – children will do tasks that require them to listen, speak, do, read and write. Children do activities in big groups, in smaller groups and also individually. Fifth, appropriate teaching-learning materials are developed for the program and used in a way that there are materials for each group and their activities.<sup>5</sup>

This methodology has been implemented in two major ways. First, where Pratham team members lead the work and demonstrate that a significant change in basic learning possible in a relatively short period of time. This “direct” work takes the form of “Learning Camps”. Secondly, the model is also used in partnership with government school systems where Pratham teams work with government teams to incorporate Pratham’s techniques for teaching-learning, for assessment as well as Pratham materials into what primary school teachers do in their classrooms. Both these strategies are described in more detail below.

## **What are Pratham’s models of implementation?**

### **Model 1: Direct implementation via Learning Camps**

Learning Camps are short-duration periods with high-intensity activities that last 5-10 days each time. Led by a trained Pratham team member and assisted by community volunteers, these camps are conducted with children 3-5 times in the course of one school year - a total of 80-100 hours of instruction. These camps are held in the local government elementary school and usually during school hours. Negotiations at the local level with the schools (and if needed with the village government) are done to enable this to happen in the school.<sup>6</sup> For each of the camps, the Pratham team member identifies local youth volunteers to assist him/her in the running of the Learning Camp. Children from Grade 3, 4 and 5 are grouped by level for instruction. Each of these groups has an “instructor”. While the Pratham person takes charge of organizing the entire camp and is often responsible for one of the groups, the volunteers that s/he have identified and trained will work with the other groups under his/her supervision. Since the camp runs for 6 to 10 days at a time, it is relatively easier for volunteers to give time to this effort.

Pratham has worked in about 10,000 schools/villages in the “Learning Camp” mode in the last two school years directly reaching close to a million children. In each Learning Camp, baseline assessment (in basic reading and arithmetic) is conducted for every child enrolled in Grades 3 to 5 in that school. Usually 3 to 4 camps are conducted of 6-10 days each with gap days between the camps. At the end of each camp an endline is carried out. The last endline is then compared with the baseline levels.<sup>7</sup> Program and tracking data from the Learning Camps indicate a substantial and significant impact on basic reading and arithmetic. For example, Across India, out of the 10,562 schools that Pratham has worked in over the past two years, in 67% of the schools over 75% or more children could read at the end of the intervention. Similar results are available at block, district, state or national level for children’s progress in arithmetic as well.<sup>8</sup>

Here it may be worth laying out briefly how measurement is done in the Learning Camps context. A universal baseline is conducted with all children in Grades 3, 4 and 5 in the school in which the Learning Camp is to be initiated. In some states where class sizes are large, only those children are selected for

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<sup>5</sup> For more details on the pedagogy used, see Note on Pratham’s teaching-learning methodology.

<sup>6</sup> In most locations, once schools in the area have seen Learning Camps in action, they ask for similar work in their own schools too. During the camps, progress that children make in reading and basic arithmetic is shared with parents, community members and teachers. Materials like story cards and worksheets are sent home and also shared with teachers so that everyone can see what is being attempted.

<sup>7</sup> For more details on the measurement framework for Read India Learning Camps see Annexure II.

<sup>8</sup> See [http://pratham.org/templates/pratham/images/Read\\_India\\_National\\_Report\\_2014-15.pdf](http://pratham.org/templates/pratham/images/Read_India_National_Report_2014-15.pdf)

the intervention, who are not able to read sentences. In other states, the camps are conducted with all children. (Children who can read get more time to spend on reading, comprehension and writing.) A quick measurement of basic reading and arithmetic is done at the end of each learning camp. This measurement allows teams to provide support and inputs as needed for course correction.

Pratham's Learning Camp model was also recently evaluated by JPAL using randomized control trial methodology showing very promising results. The evaluation concludes that the Learning Camps have a strong and significant positive impact on basic learning outcomes of students in both reading and arithmetic. Compared to the control group, the intervention groups children showed improvements of approximately 20 percentage points higher in both subjects (0.71 standard deviations higher than the control group in reading and 0.69 standard deviations in maths).<sup>9</sup>

Questions are often asked about whether the learning that children gained during the camps endures after the camps are over. There are two responses to this question. First, internal Pratham measurements suggest approximately 70% of children who were in Learning Camps two years ago are still "readers" thus indicating that learning gains endure over time. Second, an independent evaluation is currently going on. JPAL is carrying out a follow up to the Learning Camp RCT that had been done in 2013-14. This formal evaluation will track children 2 years after the camps have been completed.

## **Model 2: Catalyzing school systems – Partnerships with government**

Pratham's direct work (Learning Camps), in addition to creating direct impact, serve as demonstration areas to showcase the Pratham methodology for raising learning outcomes of children. These direct demonstrations help in the scale-up of Pratham's teaching-learning approach through government and other partners.

In the last ten years, there have been a variety of partnerships that have developed with governments at different levels. Until 2012 or so, Pratham's discussions would usually take place at the state level. But since 2012-13, discussions with interested district administrations have also led to fruitful partnerships. It is hard to summarize these partnerships over time. Some partnership programs that started at the district level have later moved to a statewide program. In other cases, such partnerships have spread to other districts and sometimes to other states as well. The lessons from each episode of working together, are ploughed in as critical inputs into the next set of partnerships.

One of the reasons that Pratham's partnerships with government are primarily for Grades 3 to 5 is because children who have been "left behind" in early years do not seem to be an area in which there is much concerted action – either within the government or among others working in education. Building basic skills is still possible in Grades 3 to 5 especially if accelerated techniques are used. Building basic skills in these grades still allows children a good chance to be able to move into higher grades and be able to deal with the content and curriculum that has been prescribed.<sup>10</sup>

Since 2011, Pratham has had partnerships at various levels with governments in 16 states across the country. In multiple states these partnerships have carried on for multiple years, either staggered over

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<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see [http://pratham.org/templates/pratham/images/Learning\\_Camps-Preliminary\\_Results\\_from\\_an\\_RCT\\_by\\_J-PAL.pdf](http://pratham.org/templates/pratham/images/Learning_Camps-Preliminary_Results_from_an_RCT_by_J-PAL.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Pratham is also working on early grades (Grade 1 and 2) both in the direct intervention mode as well as in partnership with governments but the impact of these models on children's learning has not as yet been evaluated independently. We expect that in the next few years, Pratham will be ready to scale up the early grade work on a substantial scale. In several states, Pratham's programs are implemented as "early years" interventions in which the last year of pre-school and first two years in primary school are taken as a continuum.

the period or continuously or both. In 2014-15 alone, partnership programs with governments in 8 states reached over 6 million children.

Typically, during such a partnership, Pratham team members work closely with their government counterparts on all aspects of the program from design, to preparation, training, implementation, monitoring, measurement, evaluation and review. In the last few years, Pratham's partnership programs with governments, have usually had the following characteristics:

- Learning goals: Clear articulation of learning goals to be achieved in a specific time duration.
- Simple Assessment: Use of simple assessment to understand the "baseline" situation. Often the assessment feeds into the instructional design and leads to the organization of groups for learning. In some states, the Pratham/ASER assessment tools were used directly. In other cases, the tools are modified with inputs from the state governments. In all cases, one-on-one assessment of children's reading ability is part of the assessment.
- Cluster resource teams from the government: Usually, the "cluster" level cadre within the government system is trained first. They often do 10-20 days of actual practice teaching using the methods they have learned in Pratham training. Once this phase is completed, the cluster resource people will train the teachers in their charge (Pratham team members assist).
- Appropriate teaching-learning materials: The materials that Pratham has developed for use in the direct programs is shared with the government. These are then printed by the government school system and distributed in their schools.
- Teacher training: Teachers are trained in the Pratham methods. Government officials and Pratham conduct trainings for teachers. The government pays for the entire cost of teacher training.
- Time for basic learning: As part of the learning improvement program, time is created during the school day to carry out the activities to improve basic learning. This feature of the program is jointly discussed and decided at the initial stages of designing the program. Usually it is one hour for reading and one hour for arithmetic. For that period, "normal" curriculum/teaching-learning activities are not done. Focus in on building foundational skills.
- Grouping by level not grade: For instructional purposes, children from grades 3 and 5 are grouped by level not grade. During the "special period", teachers who usually teach these grades are assigned to groups instead of to grades. Depending on the availability of government teachers in the school, two or more groups for instruction are formed.
- Monitoring and mentoring: The cluster resource people and the Prathams move from school to school to support the teachers in conducting specific activities. Since cluster coordinators are government employees, all the additional costs borne by the government.<sup>11</sup>
- Tracking of progress: Periodic assessment is done by teachers during the course of the program. In many cases, Pratham helps by analysing data and providing feedback to the different levels of decision-makers in the government school system.
- In most cases, a formal memorandum of understanding is signed by the government department and Pratham to begin the intervention.

The contribution of the government in Pratham-government partnership programs has varied considerably over time. As stated earlier, in all cases, governments pay for the costs of teacher training and for the cost of additional teaching-learning materials that go the schools in their district or state.

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<sup>11</sup> In a Pratham-government partnership program, cluster coordinators from the government side and other officials at a sub-district level, have to move around from school to school a lot. This transformation of tasks from administration and "supervision" to academic support implies that cluster coordinators must spend time in the schools in their charge.

Like with Pratham's direct work with learning camps, recent Pratham-government partnership work (including the focus on building a cadre of cluster coordinators) has also been evaluated by an external agency – JPAL. In 2013-14, Pratham partnered with Haryana government to implement a collaboration for learning enhancement in two districts. The government cluster resource people, trained and assisted, by Pratham led the effort where teachers taught children in Grades 3, 4 and 5 using Pratham's methods for 1-2 hours a day. The aim was to reach a satisfactory level of basic skills. Using randomized control trial methodology, JPAL evaluated the impact of this intervention and concluded that the intervention group's oral reading score improved by over 0.15 standard deviation over control groups.<sup>12</sup> This program was very similar to what was implemented in Bihar as Mission Gunwatta from 2014 onwards.

The same kinds of questions about sustaining learning that are asked for Pratham's Learning Camps can be asked for the government partnerships as well. What is the evidence to show that learning gains from the intervention period (partnership program) endure over time?

Unlike in the Learning Camps case, where there is currently an ongoing external evaluation to answer the durability of learning gains question, in the government partnership sector we can only turn to two existing pieces of data. The first is from an early evaluation of Read India conducted in Bihar by JPAL where a joint program of Bihar government and Pratham. Early in that project, in the summer of 2008, there was a summer camp in which government school teachers taught children of Grades 3, 4 and 5 for one month using Pratham's "teaching-at-the-right-level" methodology. JPAL found that the learning gains from the summer one month were larger than the gains that were made during the school year. Also the increase in learning in the summer was visible even two years later for the children who had attended the summer camps.

More recent data comes from comparisons of ASER data from year to year. Let us look at the comparison of ASER 2014 and 2015 for the state of Maharashtra.<sup>13</sup> Pratham worked with Maharashtra government in a partnership program in 2014-15. The intervention lasted from December 2014 to March 2015. The ASER survey is done each year in September-October. Data from ASER 2015 as compared to ASER 2014 shows a definite increase that is visible even six months after the intervention was completed. Similar comparative analysis can be done with ASER 2013 and ASER 2014 in the case of Bihar. (More details can be shared).

Through both direct (demonstration via learning camps) and indirect work (catalyzing the school system via government partnership programs), Pratham's objective is to bring about a substantial and significant improvement in basic reading and arithmetic levels of children in primary grades especially those in Grade 3, 4 and 5 in the district and in the state.

At the end of the interventions, it is expected that majority of the targeted children will be able to:

- Read basic text in the local language
- Express their thoughts orally and in writing
- Have thorough number knowledge at least up to two digit numbers
- Perform basic arithmetic operations with numbers up to 100

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<sup>12</sup> See note on impact evaluations:

[http://pratham.org/templates/pratham/images/Evaluations\\_of\\_Pratham\\_Teaching\\_at\\_the\\_Right\\_Level\\_TaRL\\_programs\\_by\\_J-PAL.pdf](http://pratham.org/templates/pratham/images/Evaluations_of_Pratham_Teaching_at_the_Right_Level_TaRL_programs_by_J-PAL.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> In 2015, the ASER survey was only conducted in two states – Punjab and Maharashtra. Data for both states is available on [www.asercentre.org](http://www.asercentre.org)