



Mass Mobilization of Citizens, Governments, NGOs and Schools to Help Transform Childhood Education

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Overview

Pratham’s mission is for every child in India to be in school and *learning well*. In an ever-evolving sequence of actions since 1995, Pratham has helped identify and then focus wide-scale attention of governments, schools, community leaders, and parents on the fact that while young children may be in school, often they are not actually learning fundamental skills of how to read and how to do arithmetic. Without these core skills, children then fall further and further behind. At the same time, Pratham puts in place straightforward approaches for reversing this situation.

This learning problem is stark, large and critically important. In 2005 Pratham created a survey that sampled over 500,000 children directly, called the *Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)*, and identified that while 93 percent of rural children were enrolled in school, just over half of those in Grade 5 lacked the basic reading or numeracy abilities expected normally by Grade 2. Given India’s population of approximately 133 million children age 6-14 in rural areas and another 56 million in urban areas, the magnitude and implication of this learning problem is immense for individuals, their communities and the nation.

Furthermore, while Pratham and collaborators have developed approaches that succeed in teaching individual children these learning skills in a matter of weeks¹, the subsequent 10 years of annual *ASER* surveys have shown no improvement in learning levels across the educational system as a whole. Millions of additional under-skilled children emerge every year. As professor Lant Pritchett of Harvard University says, “Schooling ain’t learning.”

Together, Pratham, more than 700 public- and private-sector partner organizations, and over 32,000 annual citizen-volunteers have led development and promotion of insights around this core problem and around successful learning approaches for addressing it. Combined with Pratham’s support for government action on these same issues, a nationwide sense of shift in the education sector is being catalyzed. The forces driving this shift are still evolving, however, with future directions and results yet to be determined. They will be influenced by the national- and state-level educational institutions, private businesses and philanthropies, and hundreds of thousands of grassroots citizens who are now involved.

¹ Combining techniques from past experience and new analyses, aspects of Pratham’s approach called *CAMaL* now reaches about 1 million children per year through direct teaching-learning camps, and another 5-7 million through different government partnerships. See more details about *CAMaL* later in this article.

Pratham's learning journey: some milestones

Although Pratham was born in 1995, its co-founder and CEO of 20 years, Madhav Chavan, had previously done mass-scale work for adult literacy. His inspiration came from Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's call to make all of India literate within a short time period, accompanied by the insight that "Governments cannot make people literate, people have to make themselves literate." In Madhav's work, for example, young slum-dwellers would rise to a challenge to benefit their community and thus themselves, regardless of financial reward. This inclination among young people became a powerful force in Pratham's later successes. While the national movement of the time faded amid economic crisis and political turmoil, Madhav had been inspired.

Madhav's next opportunity came when UNICEF floated the idea of bringing together business, government, and civil society across Mumbai, a city of more than 10 million people. This was another opportunity to work at very large scale, and this time the government was not the centerpiece of the initiative. Few people believed in such mass-scale work, or that a non-governmental organization could catalyse governmental action to make the system more effective or efficient. However, within one year of its founding, a well-connected banker who had a reputation as a visionary became Chairman of Pratham.² He approved of the mass-scale approach, and saw that universal and strong primary education would be critical as India's economy grew. His unstinted support won friends for Pratham among business leaders nationwide, and triggered its initial, independent replication in other cities. Pratham subsequently supported these startups with know-how and funds. Some became completely self-sustaining.

Around this time, people of Indian origin, particularly in the United States, were also coming into their own and feeling a desire to give back to India. PrathamUSA was born entirely through an initiative of overseas Indians to raise funds in a systematic way for this work.

From the outset, as Pratham sought to help improve the effectiveness and efficiency of government schools, Madhav learned another valuable lesson: inconsistency and uncertainty are predictable features of government partnership, and building trust with individual government officers is therefore more important than of signing MOUs with government institutions. Pratham has since worked with every layer of government, and has learned that, in mass collective efforts, it is not institutions but people — from civil servants through teachers — who must feel respected and empowered, not just required to perform certain tasks.

All of this took place in Pratham's earliest phase of service delivery, which focused mostly on creating large-scale networks of low cost, high impact programs in slums. Today, Pratham remains firmly rooted in slum and village communities, relying on mass mobilization of volunteers while building parallel relationships with government, businesses, and philanthropies.

In its second phase, beginning around 2002, Pratham created a new indigenous "learning to read" (L2R) technique which combined hands-on listening, imitating, and reading by children with clear scripts in multiple Indian languages. The L2R program helped Pratham's expansion in rural

² Mr. N. Vaghul was Chairman and CEO of the Industrial Credit and Investment Corporation of India, now called ICICI Bank.

areas, and also gave birth to a simple reading and math assessment tool which less-educated slum dwellers and villagers could use to identify and engage children who were lagging behind.

In its third phase, beginning in 2005, Pratham became a truly nationwide organization and entered the arena of public policy. With its 10-year experience of mass-scale volunteer mobilization and the effective L2R technique and assessment tool, Pratham had established a presence in more than 30 cities and 120 of the 640 rural districts in India. From this foundation Pratham created and administered the first *ASER* survey and report, as introduced above. In the 100-day period between the start of the survey and the publication of the final report each year, children three to 16 years old are surveyed by around 32,000 volunteers belonging to over 500 local institutions, universities and NGOs across the nation.

The most recent *ASER* shows school enrolment up to 96 percent of children in some regions, but still no improvement in learning levels. With this kind of annual, transparent results, *ASER* is helping motivate and inform shifts in Indian education policy in the direction of learning outcomes. This innovation in citizen-led assessment has also contributed to similar discourse internationally, and has spread with philanthropic support into Pakistan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Mali, Nigeria, and Senegal.

Importantly for mobilizing collective action across the education sector, in recent years universities and teacher training colleges started recognizing the eye-opening value for their students of helping administer *ASER*. Today, nearly half the survey partners are government-run colleges.

Another lesson from Pratham's creation of *ASER* and contribution to refocusing the sector is worth mentioning: during the time when Pratham was using its initial simple tool alongside L2R to quickly assess how many children could read at what level (2003-2004), the new Indian prime minister levied a tax to support elementary education. At that time Pratham recommended an annual or at least periodic report on status of education, to help monitor progress, but the government did not adopt the idea. Fifteen Pratham leaders gathered in their small basement office and decided that they could conduct a survey and report on the progress themselves: it just implied expanding their current operations in 120 districts by about five times to reach nationwide scale. A back-of-the-envelope calculation indicated that they could raise the funding needed if they worked frugally, and, according to Madhav Chavan, with little discussion they decided to do it.

Continuing to build on previous work and lessons, in 2007 Pratham launched a new campaign called Read India. This program focused on creating partnerships with state governments to improve learning levels that were shown to be poor by *ASER*. Pratham's paid staff (numbering over 5,000), which had grown into leadership from volunteer positions in slums and villages, campaigned hard to mobilize new volunteers in villages to help school teachers. In several states this showed positive results, but by 2009 it was clear that many state governments were being influenced by another model for improving education which had been created within the school system itself and promoted as holistic, in contrast to Pratham's approach which was labelled as minimalistic.

Then in 2010, India's *Right to Education Act* came into force, mandating free and compulsory education for everyone. Ironically, although school resource and enrolment increased, the learning levels began to decline further.³ In this atmosphere, which was not conducive for government partnership, Pratham focused on conclusions of a rigorous randomized control trials (RCT) evaluation⁴: it turned out that when children are grouped according to their reading levels (e.g. not by age or grade) and taught in a "camp" mode over a period of a month or so, they not only learn to read, but the camp children also retain their edge over the non-camp kids for at least two years. Armed with this hard data, Pratham combined its previous L2R know-how, the technique of grouping according to current learning levels, and the Pratham staff-led camp mode into a new approach. This is called *Combined Activities for Maximised Learning* or *CAMaL* (which, when pronounced phonetically, means "wonder" or "maximum"). *CAMaL* has been highly successful, achieving a noteworthy jump in reading abilities, from 15 to 70 percent, over just a 50-day period. A version of the methodology led by school teachers rather than Pratham staff was also developed, dubbed Teaching at the Right Level (*TaRL*).⁵

In 2012, the Planning Commission of India, the government's central policy-making and fund-planning body, acknowledged fully for the first time that schools must become oriented around learning outcomes. This policy was reflected in its five-year plan, and has since been accepted by all the states in the country. While achieving this goal remains a challenge, the new government that took over in 2014 has continued this policy and many states have started measuring learning levels on their own. Although a shift in practice towards improved learning outcomes in government schools is not yet very strong, the equilibrium is slowly shifting. Pratham's recommendation to teach children using *TaRL*, and to reserve two hours every school day to focus on basic reading and math skills, is beginning to get traction in different states. At the same time Pratham acknowledges that different techniques may also work, as long as the government staff are committed to achieving learning outcomes that are defined and measured transparently.

Since 2012, Pratham has also developed a network of projects in approximately 200 of India's 640 rural districts, where village governments, teachers, and parents assess children and support the *CAMaL* or teaching and learning camp mode for their children. Pratham now uses the ongoing results, synthesized with near real-time digital dashboards, to help inform and persuade governments at the district or state level to take up such programs. When such partnerships result, the staff from these select villages help directly in training and support of officials and teachers in the new, much larger number of villages.

³ The proportion of Indian children attending private schools also increased during this time period, from 18 percent in 2007 to 33 percent in 2014.

⁴ <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/read-india-helping-primary-school-students-india-acquire-basic-reading-and-math-skills>

⁵ With *CAMaL*, Pratham staff teach or guide others in a burst of learning activities in a village over a 10-day period, followed by a gap of 20 days, followed by another camp for the same children. In schools, this kind of "camp" was not used, but grouping and teaching according to reading levels was, in a method then called *Teaching at the Right Level* or *TaRL*. Both *CAMaL* camps in villages and *TaRL* in schools have been evaluated in randomized control trials and found to substantially improve learning levels.

Today, Pratham has the capacity to reach about 1 million children per year through direct teaching and learning camps in cities and rural villages, and another 5 to 7 million children per year through various government partnerships⁶. In late 2015, Pratham's base of about 10,000 core communities was also used as a springboard in a three-month campaign to reach over 10 million children directly, across 160,000 slums and rural villages, with the help of over 360,000 newly registered local volunteers, NGOs and colleges.⁷ Collaborations evolving from this campaign, with a focus on group and peer-learning after school and at home (including experiments with cell phones and tablet computers), will help build Pratham's next generation of programs.

Guiding principles in Pratham's work for mobilizing the full education sector

Madhav Chavan has offered several observations based on these experiences:

- To help a large system realize that it has a problem, you must both identify what the actual problem is, and then demystify it in a way that enables a wide range of people to understand it and work to find solutions.
- Synergy of bottom-up and top-down efforts is usually most effective. Because government systems can move slowly, Pratham's strategy is to develop both thrusts from the grassroots (which provides direct impact for children as well as data and political support), and top-down initiatives oriented around proper outcome measures.
- When trying to mobilize masses of people, working for *spread* is more effective than working for replication. People must see the opportunity and pull it into their communities; you cannot push it on them. Additional principles support this premise:
 - Keep the message simple. Do not complicate it with fine print.
 - Enable messengers from within the community, such as from within the slums and villages themselves.
 - Be careful not to create barriers for widespread participation. For example, request short bursts of intensive activity rather than sustained volunteership.
- When designing demonstration projects intended to scale particular ideas or practices, from the outset take into account the constraints you will face at the larger scale.
- When looking for improvements, measurement and evidence is important, but listening carefully to people's ideas is equally important. Obvious solutions are often hidden from view by our own bias. For example, Pratham's first pre-school initiatives in Mumbai were triggered by teachers who lacked confidence in Pratham's training, but nonetheless identified a separate need that Pratham was able to address. Similarly, a simple observation by a visitor about reading fluency first got Pratham thinking about this core driver of wider educational problems.

⁶ http://www.pratham.org/templates/pratham/images/Pratham_Summary_numbers_2014-15_FINAL_JUNE_2015.pdf

⁷ <http://lakhonmeinek.org/>