Combating the learning crisis in South Asia

*Amongst a range of development challenges that South Asian countries face is poor education, with only around half of primary aged children receiving education within the minimum learning standards framework. In order to combat this crisis, learning must be placed at the centre of education and students at the centre of learning, write **Anushna Jha** and **Mehrin Shah.***

Amongst a range of development challenges that South Asian countries face is that of poor education – both in terms of literacy rates and quality of education imparted to those counted as 'literate'. While governments are attempting to increase literacy levels in their respective countries through policy interventions for improved infrastructure and greater access to schools, they seem to have progressed much less in addressing the *learning crisis* that has enveloped most of the South Asia today.

The present scenario of education in South Asia

In May 2018, UNICEF noted that only about half of primary-aged children currently receive education with minimum learning standards. Looking into the micro picture further reveals the dismal state of education in the region. According to the World Development Report 2018, India topped the list of countries where a grade two student could not perform two-digit subtraction and was ranked second in the list of countries where a grade two student could not read a single word of a short text. As per a World Bank Policy Research Working Paper published in 2006, less than 20% of children in Pakistan are capable of comprehending a simple paragraph, with most of them not being able to write a simple sentence with a word like "school" in the national language of the country.

While these statistics give an initial peek into the state of learning in these countries, a closer look at the education priorities of South Asian governments reveal that 'learning outcomes' have a rather peripheral status. The focus of most governments is on access, enrolment, and completion rates. There is a lack of adequate measurement of learning outcomes. For example, in Bangladesh only 1 in 12 performance indicators set by the government targets learning. The evaluation of the Education For All initiative in Nepal revealed an absence of mechanisms to monitor classroom environments and progress in learning levels. Other countries in the region including Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Bhutan have reported low levels of learning despite relative increase in literacy rates. Maldives, despite an impressive literacy rate of 98%, faces challenges in terms of quality. According to a UNICEF report, untrained teachers, regional inequality in teaching standards, emphasis on rote-learning, and gender-bias in curricula are some of the problems that this almost universally literate country faces.

Contributing factors to the learning crisis

In this section, we attempt to flag some of the factors that have led to this learning crisis in the region. First, learning is not given prominence in policies and strategies to improve education. Rising the share of education budgets in countries like Pakistan and Nepal accompanied by a persistent lack of learning quality bears testimony to the neglect of the 'learning' aspect of education. In India, despite regular alarms raised by the Annual Status of Education Reports regarding low learning levels, the country has not seen any significant success in changing the status quo.

Second, the role of teachers in the learning process is not paid enough attention. Teachers are supposed to not just be subject experts but also ensure that students from various socio-economic backgrounds are integrated into the classroom space. In the South Asian context where teacher absenteeism, inadequate teacher training, and incidents of discrimination by teachers are prevalent, teachers form a significant part of the problem.

Third, in a region like South Asia that faces deprivation, education has to be envisaged as a tool to alleviate poverty. This can only be done if what students learn in schools is aligned with professional skills and economic opportunities. Presently, there exists a mismatch between school curricula and the demands of the economies.

Fourth, learning deficits are greater for learners from economically disadvantaged families compared to those from well-off families. The family background of a child which includes socio-economic status, home environment and the educational status of the parents remains a huge determinant of learning outcomes. Learning gaps between the poor and rich students increase as they move to higher classes.

Fifth, there is neglect of careful curriculum design to suit the needs of the population being educated. There seems to be a trend of importing course content predominantly from Western education systems and placing it in the midst of a very different target audience. This lack of context-specific curriculum makes learning not just less relatable and thus harder to grasp for students, but also does little to equip them to think of locally relevant solutions to the everyday problems they grapple with.

The learning crisis has a causal relation with the economic wellbeing of a population and development prospects in general. If more generations of learners continue to graduate out of schools without basic skills like reading, writing, comprehension, and analytical thinking, it is naive to expect them to be active participants in the economic growth of the region. The learning crisis also negatively impacts the political development and civic engagement of a nation. People who are more educated tend to participate more in civic activities compared to those who are less educated.

Pupils stand to attention in their classroom in Shree Sanskrit School, Tandrang, Nepal. Photo credit: Andrew Purdam, Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Potential solutions for improving education

Be it for economic, political, and social gains or for the intrinsic importance of learning in education, this major issue that South Asian countries face needs to be dealt with. For this, the following solutions may be considered.

1. *Measurement of learning*: The first step towards addressing the learning crisis is making it visible through an effective and efficient measurement system. Lack of a proper assessment of learning gives authorities the leverage to ignore the outcomes of education. Proper evaluation of learning outcomes shall also lead to awareness of the poor quality of education among parents and who may consequently demand the government to improve it.
2. *Early childhood development programmes*: Acquisition of foundational skills during early childhood is essential for the learning process throughout a child's life. Factors which hinder early childhood development include malnutrition, low parental support, distressed environment and material deprivation. Immediate action is required, targeting these socio-economic factors that give birth to these deprivations in the first place.
3. *Context-specific curriculum*: Tuning the curriculum in consonance with the socio-economic environment of the learner will enable greater efficiency in learning outcomes. Students will be able to comprehend easily and apply what they learn to the context they are situated in. This would help develop cognitive and analytical skills and thus amplify learning outcomes.
4. *Continuous teacher education*: There needs to be concerted attempt to make teachers effective in order to make the learning process successful. Even where there exist multiple training programmes for teachers over the course of their career, there is seldom continuity in training modules. The potential power of teacher training programmes to translate into enhanced pedagogies and thus better learning can be harnessed by comprehensive and continuous teacher education.
5. *Learner-centric education policies*: If education is seen as a vehicle of social and economic transformation, as is the case in many government publications across the region, students have to be made capable drivers of development. They have to be made the epicentre of education policies. What they learn, how they learn, and

from whom they learn must be well thought through, for this will define the state of education in the region.

Conclusion

Besides efforts by individual states, the learning crisis has scope to be dealt with collectively. Given various socio-economic similarities, countries in South Asia can create some common curricular and pedagogic framework in line with the needs of students in the region. This will help make learning locally relevant while also making learners more aware. Such an engagement within the region shall help produce knowledge sharing platforms that shall enhance learning outcomes.

It is imperative that this learning crisis be arrested. This undoubtedly would require political will, apart from efforts by educators, civil society organisations working in education, and citizens. Placing learning at the centre of education and students at the centre of learning would be a vital prerequisite if we are to combat this learning crisis.

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