

THE ILLUSION OF INCLUSION:

The Silent Crisis of Foundational Learning in India

THE LATEST *Economic Survey of India* reported its near-universal enrolment of 93 per cent and dropout rates as low as 1.9 per cent in primary education. At first glance, this might feel like a sigh of relief. But before we rejoice, we shall pause and think whether all children are truly included on this journey of foundational learning. Educational disparities across genders, grade levels, or regions often hide in plain sight, quietly shaping classroom interactions and future opportunities. So, is the situation of primary education in India really a win for the country, or just a well-disguised warning?

According to UNESCO, globally, girls are 1.2 times more likely to be out of school than boys, and nearly half the out-of-school youth are female. This is not just a statistic, but a signal, a signal of the prevalence of gender disparity in education. The study on *Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)* undertaken by the Institute for Competitiveness (IFC) highlights that educational gender gaps are often symptomatic of broader developmental challenges, including the socio-economic status of the students, educational environments, and societal expectations. Thus, it is imperative to assess learning outcomes not just as a function of the students' innate ability but also as a product of external influences. Therefore, while policies focussed on girls' education are vital, they are not the whole solution. Instead, what we need is a broader, more inclusive approach addressing multiple factors contributing to gender disparities in education, from the very first day of school. This could potentially level the playing field throughout education and into the workforce.

The recent report on *Foundational Literacy and Numeracy* by the Institute for



Competitiveness (IFC) found that India's foundational learning landscape faces a serious challenge in language performance among schoolchildren. The Fourth Edition of the report builds on the ongoing series first launched in 2021 by the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM), in collaboration with the IFC, which released the inaugural edition.

The report noted that the National Achievement Survey (NAS), which is conducted to gauge the understanding of learning outcomes of school education in India, reveals disparities in reading and numeracy skills across various grade levels and states. According to the NAS analysis, over 70 per cent of children in states and Union Territories, including Telangana, Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Meghalaya, Andhra Pradesh, and Haryana, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Delhi, Ladakh, Daman and Diu, and Lakshadweep, are performing at or below the basic level in language skills.

The survey also reveals significant learning gaps in mathematics across several states, including Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Delhi, Telangana, Ladakh, and Chhattisgarh, as only 19-28 per cent of students are at proficient or advanced levels. Whereas, in states like Punjab and Rajasthan, over 55 per cent of Grade 3 students demonstrate advanced mathematical proficiency, strong



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problem-solving skills, analytical thinking, and the ability to apply concepts even beyond the school curriculum.

It also sheds light on children with learning and reading disabilities for whom foundational literacy is a steep uphill climb. For many of these students, struggles with phonemic awareness, decoding, and language fluency make their journey towards academic proficiency more challenging. These challenges often go undetected until later elementary years, and by then, effective intervention becomes more difficult. The study underscores the urgent need for early identification and tailored support to ensure that every child has a fair chance to succeed.

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tion of issues, teacher empowerment, and region-specific interventions because every child deserves a fair shot at learning, from the start. For instance, tools such as 'Index for Inclusion' can be regularly calculated to track progress and identify areas for improvement, on time. In addition, frameworks like Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can be equitably adopted across the country to offer flexible teaching strategies that cater to diverse learning needs from the outset.

Addressing the challenges leading to disparities in the provision and outcomes of foundational learning requires more than just remedial programmes. It calls for targeted policy interventions, enhanced pedagogical strategies, and systemic reforms. Strengthening language and numeracy skills in the early years is essential not only for academic success but also for long-term educa-

tional equity. Without focussed and sustained efforts, many students may miss out on the opportunity to reach their full potential. Thus, it is imperative to re-evaluate current educational practices and invest in sustainable, inclusive learning solutions.

After all, true progress lies not in celebrating enrolment numbers alone, but in ensuring every child, regardless of background or ability, is seen, supported, and set up to succeed. Understanding who is being left behind and what is the first step toward meaningful inclusion, demands clarity, commitment, and action. As India continues to confront its foundational learning crisis, the question now is: can better data lead to better decisions to solve the country's literacy and numeracy crisis? **BW**

The author is Chair, Institute for Competitiveness