Tell us about Pratham: Its history, its strategy, and its main accomplishments to date.

Pratham started in Mumbai about 20 years ago. Then and now, our vision has been to ensure that every child is in school and learning well. Then it was Mumbai. Now it is India. We work directly with communities and schools, and also in partnership with governments and others in the pursuit of this vision.

In the early years we followed some basic organizing principles. Surprisingly, many of them are as relevant today as they were twenty years ago. We believe that citizens need to understand the problems the communities and children face in education. Based on this understanding, citizens and governments, people from all walks of life need to work together to find solutions for basic problems. In Pratham, we have always looked for methods and models that can generate impact on scale. Our desire and ambition to work on scale has led us to look for strategies that are low cost, effective, replicable, and can be carried out by ordinary people.

We are convinced that “doing” is one of the best ways of learning. We constantly use measurement and evidence as well as the learnings from our experience on the ground in charting our way forward. We have always been curious about how best to use the resources that we have to maximize change. In this process, we have constantly looked for mechanisms to improve our own capabilities, for ways to open up new opportunities for trying things differently. In our view continuous experimentation is essential to keep up with changing contexts and challenges old and new.

Today we work in 21 out of 29 states in India. In 2013-2014 our programs reached close to 5 million children. We run a variety of interventions from early childhood through elementary school to youth skills and second chance programs. However we are best known for the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) and for our Read India program that helps millions of children gain basic skills in reading and arithmetic.

This year Pratham turns 20. Of all the things we have done in
the last 20 years, I want to talk about two. The first is ASER – Annual Status of Education Report. In India, school enrolment for the age group 6 to 14 is well above 96%. However, many children even after several years in school lack basic skills like reading and arithmetic. Over the 10 years of its existence, ASER has moved discussions and debates in education beyond inputs and infrastructure to the issue of children’s learning. ASER collects data for a representative sample of children from every state and almost every rural district in India. ASER reaches over 560 districts each year, surveying an average of 650,000 children in more than 16,000 villages across the country. The survey is conducted by a local organization or institution in each district. Every year more than 25,000 people are involved in the exercise. This unique model of citizen engagement has been acknowledged as being a path breaker both in India and abroad.

Our second accomplishment has to do with how we help children learn. In the last ten years, we have developed a model which can be best described as “teaching at the right level”. Here we focus on children in Grade 3, 4 and 5 who do not have basic reading and math skills. (In a typical primary school in India, about half the children in Grade 5 do not the skills expected in Grade 2). In about 100 hours of instructional time, we can bring 60 to 70% of these children to the stage where they can read simple text fluently and do basic arithmetic operations. The effectiveness of this learning improvement intervention has been assessed rigorously by independent evaluators. So while we have helped to uncover a major problem in education, we have also been able to develop a scalable solution.

You have been involved in setting up and running large-scale programs to improve children’s learning across India. What are key lessons you’ve learned about effective pedagogy and large-scale change?

Pratham believes that without basic reading and basic arithmetic skills a child cannot move ahead. So how do we help those children who are already well into the primary school years but do not have basic skills? Over the last ten years, we have been evolving our methods for teaching and our models for delivery and experimenting with what can be effective and do-able on large scale.

Here is what we do: We focus on children in Grades 3, 4 and 5 and assess them using the simple ASER testing tool. We group them by their reading (or math) level rather than by their age or grade. Each group is then taught using the methods and materials appropriate to that level. As children progress, they can move from one group to the next. If this strategy is being tried in school, then an hour or two during the school day is reserved for this activity and teachers of Grade 3, 4 and 5 are allocated to the groups. If this is a community based program, then village volunteers or instructors are trained and asked to work with one group each.

The core of this approach is that we start from the level of the child and work with the child to move him or her to the level where she needs to be. This “teaching-at-the-right-level” strategy has been evaluated by JPAL-South Asia using randomized control trial methodology and found to be effective in different settings, whether carried out by school teachers or by community volunteers.

Naturally, we at Pratham are convinced that our approach for improving learning works. We see how children change and how their capabilities get stronger and stronger. We use our own measurement as well as evidence from external evaluations to reinforce our belief. But the real challenge lies in convincing others, especially governments, to adopt/adapt and use our approach. By catalyzing the government to act in effective ways, the impact can multiply many fold and the benefits can reach many more children.
Over the years we have worked with many state governments in India. While there is no hard and fast rules of how to craft and sustain partnership, we see some important elements. Sometimes, convincing someone to do what you think is effective may involve working on a pilot or a project together. In our country, as in others, there are too many people offering advice and guidance but not taking the responsibility of execution. Getting hands and feet dirty together is often a good place to start. Working together builds trust and friendship. It allows for discussions of first hand experiences and observations to start and to continue over a long period of time. All this helps to change mindsets and practices and creates a culture of curiosity and experimentation. Building relationships up and down the chain of command is also essential. Often the top people change but people in the middle and lower down do not. Maintaining friendships at all levels is key. Partnerships with governments should be seen as a long run strategy. It is also wrong to assume that the path will be linear.

For us, another important dimension to “scaling up” is to go on the journey for the entire ride. Typically, in working with the government, we will get involved from the design phase and all the way through implementation. We like to be “owners” of the effort as much as them. We share the failure if things don’t work and celebrate success if they do. In either case, we learn a lot. This learning is then ploughed back into the next round.

For years, a number of unexamined assumptions have guided education in developing countries. For example, we have assumed that schooling leads learning and that more years of schooling are better than less. With these beliefs, we have invested heavily in inputs and infrastructure; expenditure on education, public and private, has been rising over time in India. It is only recently that it is becoming clear that schooling does not automatically translate into learning. Focused efforts have to be made in ensuring learning.

In our work, we have seen that for people to believe that children’s learning is low they have to have first-hand experience of this reality. So in order to raise public engagement in education, opportunities for direct interaction with children is essential. Without engagement it is difficult to understand the depth, the scale and the consequences of children not learning. If the methods, measures and mechanisms for this interaction are simple to follow and easy to understand, then many more people are likely to get involved.

In the evolution of Pratham’s approach for helping children learn, assessment was the first step. The basic ASER measurement has helped us not only to “feel” the problem but also to quantify it in concrete and action-able ways. Understanding the problem first hand was step one, the next step to encourage citizen participation is developing ways in which people can engage in providing or at least attempting to provide solutions. Pratham’s teaching-learning methods are simple to do and enjoyable for both children and instructors. Engagement in the intervention does not need to be of long duration. Results are visible in a relatively short period of time. Being able to discuss progress (or participation. What are major lessons Pratham can offer to other countries interested in encouraging public engagement in education?

We have learned many lessons from our work in assessment and action.

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lack thereof) with parents and others and seek suggestions for the next step are also important to keep the momentum going.

**What is the status of education in India today, and where would you like to see public education in the country moving forward?**

Looking back at the last two decades and more, we can see the impressive progress that India has made in providing educational opportunities to children. Today we have more than 96% of children (in the age group 6-14) are enrolled in school. There is a government primary school in almost every habitation in the country. Children get free meals in schools, in many states textbooks and uniforms are also free. In 2010, the Indian Parliament passed the Right to Education Act which guarantees free and compulsory education to all children age 6-14. In terms of inputs and infrastructure, the Indian government has made huge strides in the provision of schooling.

Now it is time to look at some of the outcomes of schooling and more specifically at the question: are our children learning? Ten years of the ASER effort (ASER stands for Annual Status of Education Report) shows that by the time children have reached Grade 5, only about half can read at least at Grade 2 level. The rest either can read only simple sentences or words or are still struggling with letters. Without being able to read or understand, it is impossible for children to progress in the education system (and in life). The situation with basic arithmetic is even worse. The evidence indicates that there has not been much of a change over time. The data suggests not only that learning levels are low and that they are “stuck”, but also that learning trajectories are flat (i.e. if you did not learn the basics in the early grades, you are unlikely to learn them later). This is the case in government run schools. In the fast growing private school sector, if you control for parental education and family background, the status of children’s learning is quite similar to that in government schools.

In most states in India, classroom interactions and teaching-learning activities are entirely based on the grade level textbook. But more than half of all children in that grade cannot as yet read fluently or have the ability to absorb the content, hence they do not make much progress in that grade (or in later grades). Economist Lant Pritchett calls this the “negative consequences of an overambitious curriculum”. Thus teaching from the grade level textbook or anchoring teaching based on grade level curricular expectations leaves more and more children behind.

What is to be done about this “learning crisis”? First, our government, like governments in other developing countries, needs to squarely accept that there is a crisis of learning. Second, if children’s learning is to be improved, then it is important to articulate stage wise goals. These goals should be easily understood by teachers and parents. Third, the government needs to turn its attention to finding solutions. To find out “what works”, the government (and indeed other players in education too) too need to work out different strategies and models for improving children’s learning and focus on measuring impact and outcomes. Fourth, the government must look at current models of learning improvement that have proven to be effective and work out how to scale them. Fifth, different activities of the education system like curriculum, training, monitoring, measurement, review, goal setting – all need to be aligned to achieve the desired outcomes. This entire process may be an incremental one where experience and evidence accumulate over time but without a strong and sustained focus on how to meaningfully improve learning – it is unlikely to happen. Ignoring the “learning crisis” has growth as well as the equity
consequences which can be serious in the case of a developing country like India.

The 2015 American Educational Research Association (AERA) theme is “Toward Justice: Culture, Language, and Heritage in Education Research and Praxis.” From your perspective, what are key accomplishments, limitations, and possibilities of education justice to advance justice?

Education research can play a big role in bringing out the challenges faced in practice. If we want children of different backgrounds to at least start life on a fair playing field we need to understand how culture and heritage interact in a child’s life and impede or enable the child’s ability to move forward in the education system and in life. While some aspects of a child’s background and profile can be easily quantified, there are others like heritage or culture that do not lend themselves to easy categorization or classification. Like unpeeling an onion, systematic methods of inquiry can be very critical in getting a better understanding of how these interlinked and overlapping dimensions play out in a child’s life.

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