IS THERE A LEARNING CRISIS IN TELANGANA STATE?

Dr. K. Anji Reddy

Associate Professor
Mahatma Gandhi University, Nalgonda, Telangana
Email: kanjireddy036@gmail.com

1. Introduction

In recent years one of the most debated issues related to the quality of education. There would not have been much concern had the quality of education is satisfactory. Not only it is far away from satisfactory but it is negatively afflicting the society and economy. Therefore, the debate on quality of education, referred to as the debate on learning crisis[1] not confined to a particular country or a particular level of education but taken at a global level and for all levels and types of education (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2012).

The global level learning deficits are assessed through Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test which tests the learning levels of 15 year old conducted by OECD on a regular basis. According to PISA test scores achieved by students of participant countries are ranked**.** As per ranking the average score in mathematics, science and reading is highest for Singapore followed by Hong Kong, Japan and Macau. In addition to these countries Canada is only country where four out of five 15 year old children have mastered the OECD's base line level of proficiency in mathematics, science and reading. Of the 70 countries which participated in the test during 2015-16 all the participating countries of South East Asia have a better record even compared to some of the developed countries. The score of USA, the country known for global destination for higher education, is below the OECD average. In several countries the 75th PISA test takers performed below the 25th percentile of the OECD average. When compared to South East Asian countries the performance is poor in South and South West Asian Countries.

According to World Development Report (2018:5) the percentage of grade 2 students who could not read was more than 80% in Malawi, India and Ghana. The percentage of grade 2 students who could not perform two-digit subtraction was more than 80% in India and Uganda. India's position in learning level is far from satisfactory both in relative and absolute terms. It's position was 73rd out of 74 countries in 2009-10.

For assessing the learning levels of children it is necessary to capture both cognitive and non-cognitive skills as both are essential for the overall development of a child. Thus, the indicators of quality of education should be able to assess whether children are learning effectively, acquiring knowledge and skills, and growing socially and morally or not (Govinda and Varghese, 1993).

Learning levels are an important indicator of health of the education system and global and national scenario indicates some deficiencies in learning levels. Whether some situations exists at the state level or not as the school education continues be under state list. Among the states Telangana State is a newly formed state where education did not receive due attention it needed. Therefore, In this paper an attempt is made to examine the status of learning levels in Telangana and analyse whether they are improving over a period of time in Telangana state or not. The following section (Section-2) examines the status of learning outcomes in the state. Some of the economic implications are analysed in Section-3. Summary and conclusions are presented in the last Section.

2. Status of Learning Levels in Telangana:

Literacy Rate: Literacy Rate is considered to be one of the indicators of education development. The performance of the Telangana state in terms of literacy rate is very poor. Its position is 35th among the 36

states and union territories and far below the literacy rate of other Southern states. Not only the literacy rate is low but there are large variations: gender, rural-urban, social and regional (district/Mandal).

In the Indian context literacy rate is defined as the percentage of population of an area at a particular time aged seven years or above who can read and write with understanding (Census, 2011). As per the definition all those children aged above seven years completing two years of schooling should be literate. If there is no learning deficiencies all those who complete three years of schooling should be able to read, write and do simple arithmetic calculations. Data presented in the following graphs/tables clearly indicate that significant percentage of those completing primary education cannot classified as literates.

Table –1 Shows age group wise literacy rates (2011) and learning levels (2018). Though not comparable the literacy rate with learning levels but indicates that some of those classified as literates are not able to read and do simple arithmetic. A brief look at some statistical evidence on test scores in various grades would give us a clear indication of the learning levels in Telangana state. A comparison with all India and southern states give us an idea where the state stands.

Gender-wise Learning Levels: Gender-wise achievement scores are presented in Graph-2. There are no significant gender differences in achievement scores both in the state and at the national level. There is no specific pattern emerges from the data on gender-wise and grade wise achievement scores presented. In some instances, the girls performed better than boys. Subject wise differences are negligible except in Mathematics where boys' performance is better than girls. In all respects the performance of girls is better than boys in school education. GER for girls is more than boys and drop-out rate is less among girls than among boys. In terminal examinations (SSC/Intermediate) also girls' performance is better. In this respect public education system is able to address the educational needs of the girls. Research on achievement scores also observed that gender variations are less significant on the whole (Azim Premji, 2004). However, the private sector is biased against the girls in school education.

Social Groups: It becomes pertinent to note the difference in the performance of students of different social backgrounds. The data on achievement levels by social category indicate that children from certain social backgrounds perform better than children from other social groups (Graph-2). ST Children are consistently underperforming compared to all other social groups in all grades and in all subjects. Compared to national average the performance of SCs and STs in Telangana is poor in language and the difference widens as they move to higher classes.

Social differences exist at every level including in literacy rates, GERs and Drop-out rates in the state. Literacy rate among STs is much less than Literacy rate among SCs and other groups. Female literacy rate (39%) among STs is nearly half the urban female literacy rate (75%). The GERs in school education are more for SCs than all other social groups where it is less for STs than all other groups. The public education is able address the educational needs of the SCs and STs to a greater extent but due to predominance of private sector in education these groups are lagging behind many indicators of education development. For example, the percentage SC and ST students attending private schools is 45 and 24% in elementary stage and 39and 39 at secondary stage, respectively. On the other hand, the percentage OBC and OCs students attending private schools is 55 and 89 in elementary stage and 53 and 83 at secondary stage, respectively(IIDS, 2018:Table-12.7 P.160)

Rural Urban Variation in Learning Levels: Though rural urban differences exist in many indicators of education no such differences are observed in achievement scores both at the state as well as at the national level (Graph-3). There is no specific pattern emerges from the data on grade wise achievement scores in rural and urban areas. At national level, in grade 8, the performance of rural children is better than urban children in all the subjects. Both Census and NSSO Reports suggest that urban areas are better in the provision of education to all groups, including SC/ST children compared to rural areas(IIDS,2018:Table-12.1 to 12.3 P.158).

At this rate of improvement in learning it takes several years for our children to reach the rich country average score. In Telangana state those who lack foundational skills are more likely from poorer and less educated families. Transition to secondary education is likely to be lower for those who lack foundations of numeracy and literacy. But in the state the transition rates are not significantly different among social groups. In Telangana state majority of those completing the elementary are entering secondary stage and majority of those completing the secondary stage are entering higher secondary stage. Further, of those completing intermediate is either entering the technical/professional or general stream. At every stage students are pushed out disregarding their competency level.

Cohort study:

Retrospective cohort studies, also known as historical cohort studies, are carried out at the present time and look to the past to examine outcomes in basic subjects (Language and mathematics). In other words, a cohort of subjects selected based on exposure status is chosen at the present time, and outcome data (i.e. learning levels), which was measured in the past, are reconstructed for analysis.

In Tables 3 and 4 data on performance of students over a period of time is presented, separately, for all Schools and Government schools. There is no improvement in the reading levels of children in all schools. In fact, the percentage of students who could read and solve simple arithmetic problems has come down. Even at the end of class VIII about 30 percentage of students (all schools) and two-fifth of Government schools could not read Std II level text. Similarly, the percentage of students of Class VIII who could do simple division declined from 67 in 2010 to 49 in 2018 for all schools. The corresponding decline is from 67% in 2010 to 43.0% in 2018 in government schools.

Learning Crisis is said to exist if children are not achieving class appropriate learning levels. This learning crisis is widening social gaps instead of narrowing them. Young students who are already disadvantaged by poverty, conflict, gender or disability reach young adulthood without even the most basic life skills. ... But these benefits depend on learning, and schooling without learning is a wasted opportunity. The learning crisis is a moral crisis. Several social ills can be cured through effective delivery of quality education (World Bank. ,2018:3).

The learning of school children is further badly affected by Covid-19 due to closure of schools for almost a year aimed at containing the spread of covid-19. More than 1 billion children are at risk of falling behind in education due to closure of schools. To keep the children learning countries have made alternative arrangements by providing online teaching, Telecasting Video lessons etc. But poor households do not have internet access, personal computers, TVs or even radio at home, amplifying the effects of existing learning inequalities. Students lacking access to the technologies needed for home-based learning have limited means to continue their education. As a result, many face the risk of never returning to school, undoing years of progress made in education around the world.

Reasons in Telangana:

i. Multi-grade Teaching: Though multi grading is not new to the teaching in the schools, it is expected to decline over a period of time. But in Telangana it increased over a period of time. For example, the percentage of schools where Standard 2 students are sitting with one or more classes increased from 57.3% in 2010 to 60.5% in 2018. Similarly, the percentage of schools where Standard 4 children sitting are with one or more classes are increased from 48.5% in 2010 to 49.0% in 2018(ACER, 2019:221).

ii. Increase in the number of schools having less enrolment: The percentage of primary and Upper schools with less than 60 students increased from 17.2% in 2010 to 34.8% in 2018(ACER, 2019:222). In two-third of the primary schools the enrolment is less than 60 and as many as 40 percent have less than children 2015-16. Similarly in upper primary schools also there are less number of students. About 5% of the schools have less than 30 students; 27% have less than 60 students and 61% have less than 100 students.

If an upper primary school has to run effectively there should be at least 200 students and in Telangana state there are very few government schools with an enrolment of more than 200. There is uneven distribution of schools which are a cause of concern because it is difficult to ensure all the basic facilities in all the schools, including the schools which have very few students.

iii. Inadequate and Unequal Funding: Funding to education has not kept pace with the requirements. Most often the emphasis is placed on providing basic facilities like drinking water and toilets. The cost of providing and keeping them in useable condition is very high which requires allocation of additional funding in schools, particularly in schools having few children.
Not only funds made available for education are inadequate but they are not properly allocated. The difference between residential and regular schools is very high. But within regular schools the per student expenditure is very high in schools having less enrolment and more enrolment. As explained above the performance of schools with less enrolment appears to be poor when compared to schools with more enrolment.

Teacher Training and Recruitment: Krishna Kumar (2018) calls crisis in education as teaching crisis rather than learning crisis. Teaching at the school level depends on the quality of higher education. Teachers at the all levels from nursery to University are ultimately the products of higher education. Teachers serving primary/secondary sections require undergraduate/post graduate degree. They get their basic subject knowledge in colleges and Universities. Even teacher training at a best institution cannot compensate for a 'poorer grasp of the subject.' Teacher education in India is itself is a matter of concern, regardless of whether it has any impact on learning levels ((Tara Beteille, 2018). According to him the problem of learning at the school level is a product of systemic negligence and decay so manifest in undergraduate colleges across the country.

Non-detention Policy: The impact of social promotion policies such as Non-detention Policy on learning is both negative as well as positive. Non-detention policy, which is in vogue in many state including Telangana state, is stated as one of the factors for low learning levels. A recent study on impact of Non-Detention Policy on learning levels, however, suggest that it has positively impacted achievement improved reading scores by 2.5 % and mathematics scores by 5 per cent (Ashan et al 2018). Detention system forces the children to either to perform or face the humiliation. Excessive pressure on the young minds to perform may lead to adverse consequences[5].

Poor Monitoring and Supervision: Monitoring and supervision system is very weak as majority of the posts of supervisory staff are vacant. The evidence suggest that two-third of the District Educational Officer (DEO) posts, three-fourth of Deputy Educational Officer (DyEOs), 90 per cent of Mandal Education Officer (MEOs) posts and three-fourth of State Council of Education Research and Training (SCERT) academic staff post are vacant in 2020-21. These days that teachers are self-regulators are no more exists and Telangana teachers are not an exception. Even to provide them academic and administrative guidance also there should be more staff and the existing staff is quite insufficient to provide it.

The above analysis indicates that Telangana state is facing a learning crisis, which have short-run and long run economic and non-economic implications. The economic implications of the learning crisis are briefly explained below in the following section.

3. Economic Aspects of Learning Crisis

Though not discussed explicitly, learning crisis has economic and non-economic, short-run and long run implication for both the child and society. For the convenience they are classified into two categories: Internal to the education system and External to the education system. Society is investing scarce resource on education. Both the government and parents, including poor, are spending on education and hence, except a return on this expenditure, consider to be investment. Parents think that by sending their children to school improve employment opportunities, income, status and quality of life. Similarly, society expects that

"expanded education will lead to economic growth, improved health outcomes, and nation building (Prichett and Banerji, 2013:3).

Internal:
According to UNESCO (2013) Global learning crisis is costing 129billion dollars to the governments a year. About ten percent of global spending on primary education is lost on poor quality. It is estimated that the cost of 250 million children across the globe not learning the basics translates into a loss of 129 billion dollars. Further, of the total as many as 37 countries, including India, are losing at least half of the amount they spend on primary education on account of not learning (UNESCO, 2013).

By contrast, the report shows that ensuring an equal, quality education for all can generate huge economic rewards, increasing a country's gross domestic product per capita by 23 per cent over 40 years. If Pakistan were to halve inequality on access to education to the level of Viet Nam, it would increase its economic growth by 1.7 percentage points. If the education system is not able to deliver on learning, 'it is hard to justify all the money that is spent on schools (Pritchett and Banerji,2013:17).

As examined in the last section the progress in learning levels is very low, indicating value addition is poor. Spending time and money on an additional year in school is contributing very little to the learning levels. This is true for school as well as higher education.

The Report also shows that to achieve good quality education for all, governments must provide enough trained teachers, and focus their teacher policies on meeting the needs of the disadvantaged. This means attracting the best candidates into teaching; giving them relevant training; deploying them within countries to areas where they are needed most; and offering them incentives to make a long-term commitment to teaching. The Report highlights the need to address gender-based violence in schools, a major barrier to quality and equality in education. It underscores the importance of curriculum and assessment strategies to promote inclusion and improve learning.

How much additional learning is taking place by spending additional years in school is analysed by comparing the scores of the same cohort as they successively progress to higher grades (See table-7 for government schools). Value added analysis compares the current test scores with the scores in previous years. It also shows the impact of the school facilities, including teacher contribution, on acquiring additional scores and compare the cost of the facilities with the test scores. The value addition in government schools in the state is very low.
The value addition varies widely depending on management, control over student time, school size etc. The value addition is more in private schools and with government schools the schools having more enrolment and having more control over student time. In the case of private schools the value addition is considered to cost effective due to low cost of teaching and other costs. Within government schools the value addition is more in schools having control over student time (Residential Schools) and less in majority of small schools having few students. Both are serving the poor student s from marginalised sections. Both residential schools and small schools are spending more per child enrolled in them. Spending more and learning less is a typical feature of government schools with few students.

Once the child lags behind the expected level for which arrangements are made both by the family and the government, the resources spent on the child become unproductive. Resources employed to improve the learning levels at a later stage have minimal impact. Once the child falls in the 'low learning trap' it is a stupendous, though not an impossible, task to rectify them. According to Banerji (2018) "Evidence …. shows that the improvement in mean scores in language or math is minimal even after a year of being in school, regardless of whether the child is in upper primary or even when he or she has already transitioned to class 9. Those who are doing well academically move further and further ahead and the gaps between students grow as they spend longer in school. Being in this kind of 'low learning trap' means that although there is expenditure on schooling by families and by the government for each year spent in school, the

'value added' in terms of learning is minimal. The low productivity of this expenditure is not just a waste of financial resources but also has huge implications in terms of the mismatch between rising aspirations of parents and students and realities on the ground."
In this context mention may be made of the residential schools opened in the Telangana state. Government is spending, on an average, Rs.1.2 lakhs per student in these schools in a year. Admission to them takes place in class 5. It is not clear how these schools are rectifying the deficiencies in learning levels of admitted children. Needless to say most of the admitted children are from government schools that lacks the conducive teaching learning environment. Therefore, emphasis on residential and neglecting the regular government schools may not yield optimal results. In this context reference may be made to Dakar Framework: "improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognised and measurable outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy and numeracy and essential life skills" for only a small select group does not fulfil the basic human right to education for all UNESCO (2000). Therefore, to improve the value added in residential schools it is necessary to improve the learning levels at the primary stage. Efforts made to strengthen the higher education system without improving the school education at best yield marginal improvement as it based on weak foundation.

External: The learning crisis is a critical impediment for economic development. Learning crisis does not end with school years but show up as weak skills in the work force (Filmer and Rogers,2018). As the workers are not prepared well during their schooling they enter the labour force with inadequate skills. Lack of even foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy let alone advanced skills make many workers end up in jobs that require minimal amounts of reading and maths. As pointed out by Filmer and Roger (2018) "A lack of skills reduces job quality, earnings and labour mobility". Poor quality of education diminishes the promised economic and social returns (Van der Gaag and Adams, 2010:4). According to them student achievement conditional on years of schooling rather than years of schooling alone has a higher explanatory power of growth.

In order to compete in the rapid changing scientific and technological world school students should acquire higher levels of knowledge and skills than what they are essentially imparted with throughout the eight years of elementary education. Also, crucial stage in the hierarchy, secondary education empowers children by preparing them for higher education and the world of work. Secondary education, in specific, as part of this virtuous circle of growth and development, not only serves an important transition from primary to higher education but provides key generic competencies to individuals which prove important across all domains of knowledge. It provides skills for early employment and the foundation for further education. Secondary education is a vital part of virtuous circle of economic growth within the context of globalised knowledge economy (TISS, 2017). It is a minimum entitlement for equipping youth with the knowledge and skills they need to secure decent livelihoods in today's globalised world.

4. Conclusion:

The important findings of study on learning levels in Telangana state broadly indicate the achievement levels of students at every stage are disappointingly low, achievement scores are more in language but less in mathematics. Achievement levels vary from grade to grade and there is negative relation between grade and achievement level. Performance declined as students progressed to higher classes. Achievement levels vary across regions and social groups. The scores are less among STs followed by SCs and OBCs. Learning deficiencies continued beyond elementary and secondary education. The learning crisis will last for several generations and hit the disadvantaged hardest unless steps are taken redress them. The reason for low levels of learning include prevalence of multi-grade teaching, many schools with few students, inadequate and unequal funding, deficiencies in teaching, lack of effective monitoring and supervision.

World Development Report of 2018 has suggested three points formula to address the learning crisis. First, assess learning to make it a serious goal. NCERT and ASER surveys have been providing enough information on the status of levels in India. They are also throwing enough light on the learning deficiencies among our children. Second act on evidence to make schools work for learning, multiple factors have contribute to the low learning levels. They range from providing basic facilities, to improve teaching, to

strengthening monitoring and supervisory system and recognising the schools based on the need than on norm. Mention may be made strengthening the pre-primary education system to make the children ready to enter formal school. Third, align actors to make the entire system to work for the learning. Political will in the form of increasing state funding and restructuring the school system is needed. To make education as an instrument of social and economic development it is necessary to address the issues challenging the education system that lead to poor learning levels.

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