THE READING COACH

WHITE PAPER
Reading in India: Evidence-Based Benefits for School-Going Children Under 15

A Comprehensive Review of Indian Research, Policy Studies & Field Interventions

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A Note on the Indian Research Landscape

India has comparatively fewer laboratory-based neuroimaging studies on children's reading than Western nations, owing to resource constraints and infrastructure. However, India has produced an exceptional volume of large-scale field research, longitudinal household surveys, and randomised controlled trials (RCTs) on reading acquisition, literacy interventions, and their outcomes — much of it conducted at a scale unmatched anywhere in the world. This white paper documents those studies and their findings, and notes where Indian policy bodies have drawn on global neuroscience to inform domestic education reform.

Executive Summary

This white paper compiles findings from Indian research institutions, government bodies, non-governmental organisations, and international collaborations focused specifically on Indian school-going children under 15.

The evidence spans large-scale literacy surveys (Pratham's ASER, 2005–2024), randomised controlled trials in Indian cities and rural districts, neuroscience-informed curriculum interventions, and policy research underpinning the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

Key conclusions:
Indian children who receive structured reading instruction and develop voluntary reading habits demonstrate significantly stronger literacy outcomes, language development, academic achievement, and self-confidence. Targeted reading interventions (including remedial camps and community-based models) have produced some of the most cost-effective educational gains recorded anywhere in the world.

1. The State of Reading in India: ASER Surveys (2005–2024)

1.1 Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) — Pratham Foundation

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), designed and produced by Pratham's independent ASER Centre, is the world's largest annual citizen-led household learning survey. It has assessed reading and arithmetic skills in rural Indian children annually since 2005.
ASER Centre / Pratham Foundation. Annual Status of Education Report, 2005–2024. Published annually. Covers 600,000–700,000 children aged 3–16 across all rural districts of India.

Scale & Methodology:

- ASER 2024 covered 649,491 children across 17,997 villages in 605 rural districts — one of the most extensive assessments of children's foundational skills ever conducted.
- The assessment uses a four-level reading tool: letter recognition → word reading → paragraph reading → story reading (Grade 2 level text).
- Children are tested in their homes, capturing dropouts and irregular attendees overlooked by school-based assessments.

Key Findings on Reading Deficits (and Implications for Intervention):

- In 2008, 33% of rural Indian children in Standards 3–5 could not read a Standard 1 level text; establishing the scale of India's foundational literacy challenge.
- ASER 2024 found that among Standard 3 government school children, only 23.4% could read a Standard 2 level text ; the highest proportion recorded since the survey began, but still alarmingly low.
- ASER data consistently demonstrates a direct correlation between reading ability and academic achievement across subjects ; children who could read fluently performed significantly better in arithmetic and all other assessed competencies.
- The performance gap between high-performing states (Mizoram, Himachal Pradesh) and low-performing states (Bihar, Telangana) has widened, underscoring the need for targeted reading interventions.
- ASER data has directly driven national policy: it prompted the Right to Education Act (2009), the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), and the foundational learning goals of NEP 2020.

2. Randomised Controlled Trials on Reading Interventions in Indian Schools

2.1 Balsakhi Remedial Tutoring Programme (Vadodara & Mumbai, 2001–2003)

Conducted by Prof. Abhijit Banerjee (MIT/J-PAL) and Prof. Esther Duflo (MIT/J-PAL) in partnership with Pratham, this was the first large-scale randomised controlled trial (RCT) on literacy intervention in Indian schools and one of the most influential education studies in the developing world.

Banerjee, A., Cole, S., Duflo, E., & Linden, L. (2007). Remedying Education: Evidence from Two Randomized Experiments in India. Quarterly Journal of Economics, 122(3), 1235–1264. Conducted in 122 government primary schools in Vadodara and 77 in Mumbai.

Intervention:

- A young woman (Balsakhi meaning 'child's friend') recruited from the local community was assigned to work with children in Grades 2, 3, and 4 who were falling behind in basic literacy and numeracy.
- Groups of 15–20 children received 2 hours of daily focused instruction in core competencies primarily basic reading and arithmetic outside the regular classroom.
- Balsakhis were paid approximately US$10–15/month and required only two weeks of initial training, making the model highly replicable and cost-effective.

Key Findings:

- The Balsakhi programme significantly improved overall test scores in both cities, by 0.14 standard deviations in Year 1, rising to 0.28 standard deviations in Year 2.
- The weakest students (the primary targets) showed the largest gains, with the bottom third of children showing improvements of up to 0.6 standard deviations in literacy.

- Cost-effectiveness was extraordinary: approximately US$2.25 per child per year, or US$0.67 per standard deviation increase in test scores.
- J-PAL's comparative analysis found the Balsakhi programme produced a 3.07 standard deviation improvement in test scores per US$100 spent one of the highest returns in global education research.
- Initial gains showed some decay after the programme ended, informing subsequent efforts to embed remedial learning more permanently within school systems.

2.2 Read India Programme (Pratham / J-PAL) (Bihar, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, 2007–2016)

Read India was Pratham's national campaign to ensure every Indian child could read and do basic arithmetic. It was subjected to multiple rigorous RCTs across different states and delivery models.

Banerjee, A. et al. J-PAL evaluations of Read India, Bihar and Uttarakhand, 2007–2011. Multiple publications. Brookings Institution Case Study, 2016.
Key Findings:

- Children who attended intensive Pratham 'learning camps' (6–10 days of focused instruction grouped by reading level) substantially improved their reading skills.
- In Jaunpur, Uttar Pradesh, community volunteers trained by Pratham held remedial reading camps outside school hours; children who attended showed large reading gains, while information-only and school-focused interventions produced no measurable effect.
- Of 346,000 children who attended Pratham learning camps nationally in 2015–2016, the percentage who could read increased from 19% to 79% , a near fourfold improvement.
- After 100 hours of instruction, a 50% improvement in reading levels was recorded alongside a 45% increase in numeracy.

- After just 6–8 weeks in a Pratham learning camp, close to 80% of children became functional readers.
- An RCT in Uttar Pradesh found that the number of Indian children who could read a simple paragraph doubled in just 50 days of intervention (Banerjee et al., 2017).

Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) — The Underlying Principle:

- ASER and Read India data led Pratham to develop TaRL, grouping children by reading ability rather than grade level. This approach, adopted by multiple Indian state governments, dramatically improved reading outcomes.
- TaRL has since reached more than 50 million students in India through partnerships with state governments and direct delivery.

2.3 Shishuvachan Early Literacy Programme , Mumbai Municipal Schools & Balwadis (J-PAL / Pratham, 2008–2011)

Three related J-PAL evaluations in India assessed the impact of Pratham's Shishuvachan reading comprehension programme for children aged 4–6, deployed across Mumbai public schools and preschool settings.

J-PAL / Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab. Searching for a Better Way to Teach Children to Read in India. povertyactionlab.org.

Key Findings:

- The Shishuvachan programme (which used storytelling, games, and comprehension-focused activities rather than rote learning) significantly improved early literacy outcomes.
- Children in established pre-school settings (balwadis) showed the largest gains: a treatment effect of 0.7 standard deviations overall higher than in either primary school delivery setting.
- The programme proved most effective for children with the lowest initial performance and those whose parents were least able to

supplement classroom learning i.e., children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

- Results were robust across different delivery mechanisms (preschool, Grade 1 supplement, standalone), delivering gains of 0.12 to 0.70 standard deviations.

2.4 Madhya Pradesh Cluster: Randomised Controlled Trial (Pratham / UK Aid)

A cluster-randomised controlled trial in 196 villages across Madhya Pradesh evaluated Pratham's before/after-school reading and learning programme delivered by local para-instructors.

STRIPES2 Cluster-RCT, Madhya Pradesh. Pratham Education Foundation in partnership with UK research teams. Published 2021. PMC8299946.

Key Findings:

- The education intervention showed a mean difference of 14.17 percentage points (95% CI: 11.36–16.97) on composite literacy and numeracy scores, equivalent to 0.58 standard deviations.
- Children in the programme showed significantly improved foundational literacy scores on Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA).
- Cost per child per 0.1 standard deviation increase in composite score was INR 2,476 — demonstrating strong cost-effectiveness in an Indian rural context.

2.5 Telangana Cognitive Neuroscience-Informed Reading Programme (Columbia University / Telangana Government, 2018)

Based on cognitive neuroscience research on how children's brains acquire reading skills, a structured literacy workbook programme was designed by

Columbia University's Centre for Sustainable Development and implemented in Mahabubnagar District, Telangana State.

Centre for Sustainable Development, Columbia University & District Government of Telangana | Mahabubnagar District. Reported in State of the Planet, Columbia University, August 2018.

Context:

- At baseline, Grade 1 children in Telangana could correctly read only 25% of words and 36% of letters, reflecting the acute foundational literacy deficit among children from low-income, low-literacy households.
- Unlike standard Grade 1 textbooks (overcrowded with images, small fonts, and multiple concepts per page), the new workbook followed a neuroscience-grounded approach: one letter per day, consistent fonts, large text, minimal distraction, and ample reading practice.

Key Findings:

- First-year results showed remarkable gains: children in the pilot programme correctly read a higher percentage of words, syllables, and letters than control groups.
- Accuracy, a persistent problem in syllabic scripts such as Telugu, Kannada, and Tamil, showed measurable improvement through the phonologically structured approach.
- Following the pilot, the District Collector of Mahabubnagar announced a scale-up of the programme to 70 schools covering over 2,000 children.

3. Reading Habits Across Indian Socioeconomic Strata

3.1 Gehlot et al: Evaluation of Reading Habits in Indian Students Rajasthan, 2020

A mixed-methods study by Gehlot, Mehta, and colleagues evaluated reading habits among Indian children from low, middle, and high socioeconomic backgrounds in Rajasthan, using semi-structured questionnaires and reading assessments.
Gehlot, L., Mehta, H., et al. (2020). Evaluation of the Reading Habits of Indian Students (Reading Aloud and Reading Silently) from Low, Middle and High Class Schools. Educational Research and Reviews. ResearchGate.

Key Findings:

- Language acquisition and memory models form more quickly in the brain during early childhood; reading habits cultivated early enhance language skills, perception, and general cognition, findings consistent across all three socioeconomic groups.
- Children whose parents actively engaged in reading with them significantly outperformed peers, regardless of economic class , confirming parental involvement as the strongest determinant of reading outcomes in Indian households.
- There is no lack of cognitive potential across socioeconomic classes; the performance difference is primarily environmental, driven by access to reading materials and parental engagement.
- Students from higher-income schools showed advantages in vocabulary breadth and reading fluency, but targeted intervention eliminated this gap in reading comprehension within a single school year.
- The study recommended that Indian schools develop vocabulary-development laboratories and prioritise audio-visual reading materials, particularly in government schools, to offset resource disparities.

3.2 MK University Study on Reading Habits and Academic Performance (Tamil Nadu)

A large-scale doctoral study conducted through Manonmaniam Sundaranar University examined reading habits and their contribution to academic outcomes among secondary school students in Tamil Nadu.
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tamil Nadu. Research synopsis — Reading Habits and Attitudes and their Effect on Academic Performance. mkuniversity.ac.in.

Key Findings:

- Regular leisure reading was consistently associated with growth in vocabulary, comprehension, verbal fluency, and general knowledge , even after controlling for classroom instruction.
- Students with strong reading habits scored higher in achievement tests across all subjects, not only language but also science, mathematics, and social studies.
- Reading failure was found to co-occur with anxiety, low motivation, and conduct problems, mirroring international research findings on literacy and wellbeing.
- The study found that Indian schools teach children how to read, but not why or what to read, recommending a shift in pedagogy toward building reading culture alongside reading skill.
- There was a significant relationship between class, board type, and gender on reading contributions, with girls showing stronger reading habits, though not necessarily stronger academic self-concept.

3.3 Jharkhand Pilot Study: Reading Habits in English and Self-Concept (2025)

A pilot study investigated the impact of English reading habits on the self-concept of secondary school students in Jharkhand, a state facing significant socio-economic and educational challenges.
JETIR (2025). Pilot Study on Impact of Reading Habits in English on Self-Concept of Secondary School Students in Jharkhand. JETIR2503970.

Key Findings:

- Reading habits in English showed a positive impact on academic self-concept, students' beliefs about their ability and worth in educational contexts.
- Regular English readers demonstrated higher cognitive and emotional growth, enhanced self-confidence, and greater motivation to learn.
- Socio-economic disparities limited access to quality English reading materials in rural Jharkhand, confirming that equity of access is as important as pedagogy.
- Female students exhibited stronger reading habits overall, but showed lower academic self-concept, calling for gender-sensitive reading programme designs.

3.4 Scholastic India National Survey : Parent Read-Aloud Practices

Scholastic India conducted a nationwide survey of 1,752 parents and children examining the relationship between parental reading-aloud habits and children's reading frequency and language development.

Scholastic India. National Survey on Reading Aloud and Reading Habits Among Indian Children. Published findings cited in Grobro.ai and multiple Indian educational sources.

Key Findings:

- Children read aloud to by parents 5–7 days per week were significantly more likely to become frequent, independent readers later in childhood.
- 85% of Indian children reported loving being read to, confirming strong intrinsic receptivity.

- Among children aged 6–11 whose parents had stopped reading to them, 57% wished parents had continued; indicating the lasting motivational value of shared reading.
- Parents consistently observed rapid vocabulary growth and improved language development in children who were read to regularly from a young age.

4. Neuroscience, Cognitive Development & Indian Policy

4.1 NEP 2020 — Cognitive Neuroscience as Policy Foundation

India's National Education Policy 2020, the most comprehensive overhaul of India's education system in three decades, is grounded in neuroscientific and developmental research. It extensively cites evidence on brain development and literacy acquisition to justify its foundational learning and language policies.
Ministry of Education, Government of India. National Education Policy 2020. New Delhi: Government of India. Supported by NCERT, UNICEF India, and international research bodies.

Key Neuroscience-Informed Policy Conclusions:

- NEP 2020 identifies that approximately 85% of brain development occurs between ages 0 and 6, making the early childhood and foundational school years (Classes 1–2) the most critical window for reading's neurological impact.
- The policy cites research showing that children between ages 2 and 8 acquire languages most rapidly, and that multilingualism at this stage enhances cognitive flexibility, memory, and attention.
- NEP mandates mother-tongue instruction up to at least Grade 5 (preferably Grade 8), based on evidence that comprehension in a familiar language lays the neural foundations for logical reasoning, communication, and reading comprehension.
- CBSE has formally recognised NEP's neuroscientific basis, issuing guidelines acknowledging the 'significant cognitive advantages of multilingualism for young learners, particularly when exposed to multiple languages from the foundational stage.'

- NCERT is developing new textbooks in all 22 scheduled Indian languages, a policy directly informed by reading research on mother-tongue literacy acquisition.

4.2 NCERT NCF-ECCE Framework — Early Childhood Curriculum and Cognitive Development

The National Curriculum Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NCF-ECCE),
developed by NCERT, operationalises the NEP 2020 vision with specific cognitive development and reading milestones for children from birth through age 8.

National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). National Curriculum Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NCF-ECCE). New Delhi: NCERT, 2022.

Key Findings and Recommendations:

- The framework identifies oral language development in the mother tongue as the foundation for all subsequent literacy and cognitive development.
- It recommends local stories, folk tales, and culturally embedded texts as primary reading materials, based on evidence that culturally relevant content produces deeper engagement and better comprehension outcomes.
- The curriculum explicitly draws on cognitive neuroscience findings that reading stimulates neural pathway formation, improves attention, and builds working memory.
- Activity-based and play-based reading experiences in the 3–6 age bracket are recommended specifically for their neurological benefits during the period of most active synaptogenesis.

4.3 National Achievement Survey (NAS) 2021 & Foundational Learning Study (FLS) 2022

Two major government-conducted surveys (NAS 2021 and FLS 2022) both commissioned by the Ministry of Education, assessed foundational literacy and numeracy across Indian states.

Ministry of Education, Government of India. National Achievement Survey 2021. New Delhi. / Foundational Learning Study 2022. New Delhi: Ministry of Education / UNICEF India.

Key Findings:

- FLS 2022 found that children from Tribal communities performed significantly below average in foundational reading, directly linked to language mismatch between home language and school instruction language.
- NAS 2021 confirmed persistent learning deficits in foundational reading at Grades 3, 5, and 8, with strong correlation between reading proficiency and performance in all other subjects.
- Both studies identified early reading instruction in the mother tongue as the highest-leverage intervention available to Indian policymakers for improving educational outcomes equitably.

4.4 Mindspark Computer-Assisted Learning — Adaptive Reading & Hindi (Delhi, 2019)

Researchers Muralidharan, Singh, and Ganimian evaluated the Mindspark adaptive learning programme in Delhi government schools, with specific modules for Hindi literacy.

Muralidharan, K., Singh, A., & Ganimian, A.J. (2019). Disrupting Education? Experimental Evidence on Technology-Aided Instruction in India. American Economic Review, 109(4), 1426–1460.

Key Findings:

- Mindspark produced 2.5 times as much progress in Hindi reading compared to control groups demonstrating that adaptive, child-paced reading instruction produces dramatically superior gains.
- The programme customised content to each child's reading level in real time, embodying the 'Teaching at the Right Level' principle in a digital format.
- Children at the bottom of the reading distribution benefited most, supporting the policy recommendation that reading interventions should prioritise the most disadvantaged learners.

5. Reading, Language & Multilingualism in the Indian Classroom

5.1 Hyderabad University: English Readiness, Oral Vocabulary & Reading in Low-SES Schools

A study from the University of Hyderabad examined English reading readiness among low-SES children in government primary schools in Hyderabad, correlating oral vocabulary and English classroom input with early reading outcomes.

University of Hyderabad. How Ready Are Indian Primary School Children for English Medium Instruction? Analysis of reading skills of low-SES children, oral vocabulary, and English input in Hyderabad government schools. Published in academia.edu and international journals.

Key Findings:

- Children's oral vocabulary levels in English were far below the threshold required to decode standard textbook materials, indicating a fundamental mismatch between instruction language and reading readiness.

- Of the 90 children who attempted a story retelling task in English, performance was severely constrained by vocabulary limitations, not by cognitive capacity, confirming that reading instruction must be aligned with language familiarity.
- Oral language development in the home/mother tongue was found to be the strongest predictor of subsequent reading readiness in any language.

5.2 UNICEF India & Ministry of Education — Mother Tongue Reading Research

UNICEF India, in collaboration with India's Ministry of Education and state education departments, has produced a body of applied research on mother-tongue instruction and reading outcomes.

UNICEF India. Children learn best when they're taught in their mother tongue. February 2024. unicef.org/india.

Key Findings:

- Children who are taught to read in their mother tongue in early schooling show better comprehension, stronger engagement, and faster transfer of reading skills to other languages.
- Tribal children, who face the greatest language mismatch between home and school, show the lowest reading outcomes nationally; mother-tongue instruction is identified as the primary corrective policy.
- UNICEF India's work in multiple Indian states found that the quality of engagement between teacher and child in the familiar language predicts reading outcomes more strongly than infrastructure, class size, or material provision.

6. Reading, Equity & Socioeconomic Development in India

6.1 Reading as the Primary Equity Lever : J-PAL India Evidence Synthesis

The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) South Asia has synthesised evidence from its India-based education evaluations to establish the relationship between foundational reading and long-term life outcomes.

J-PAL South Asia. Improving Learning Outcomes through the Government School System in India. povertyactionlab.org.

Key Findings:

- Learning to read at an early age lays a strong foundation for all future academic development and improvements in early reading programmes yield significant long-term returns on education investment.
- Children from low-income homes in India are systematically more disadvantaged in reading acquisition, because they lack both literacy-rich home environments and school quality.
- Reading interventions, particularly those targeting children at the bottom of the distribution are the most cost-effective single investment available to Indian policymakers for improving intergenerational equity.
- Evidence from 2005–2024 demonstrates that the reading skills gap between socioeconomic groups is not a product of cognitive difference, but of access, language, and instructional quality.

6.2 Mother Literacy Programme: Impact on Children's Learning (India)

J-PAL evaluated a Pratham-led programme designed to improve mothers' literacy in rural India, with specific assessment of its downstream impact on children's reading outcomes.

Pratham / J-PAL. The Impact of Mother Literacy and Participation Programs on Child Learning in India. povertyactionlab.org.

Key Findings:

- Children whose mothers participated in the literacy programme showed measurable improvements in their own reading skills ,

establishing a direct intergenerational link between maternal literacy and child reading development.

- Mothers who became literate were more likely to read with and to their children, initiating a home reading environment where none had previously existed.
- The study confirmed that the home reading environment is not a luxury, even modest improvements in parental literacy produce measurable cognitive gains in school-age children.

7. Reading & Mental Wellbeing in Indian Children

7.1 Reading and Self-Confidence : Evidence from Across Indian States

Multiple Indian studies (Gehlot 2020, Jharkhand Pilot 2025, MK University Tamil Nadu) converge on a finding not adequately captured in standardised assessments: the relationship between reading and children's confidence, motivation, and emotional wellbeing.

Synthesised Findings:

- Children who developed reading habits reported higher academic self-concept, their belief in their own ability to learn and succeed.
- Reading failure, by contrast, was consistently associated with anxiety, low motivation, and disruptive behaviour, an Indian parallel to international mental health literature.
- In Jharkhand, even exposure to English-language books, a language many children were not fluent in, produced measurable improvements in self-esteem and academic confidence when reading was structured and supported.
- The Balsakhi programme's success was attributed partly to the non-threatening, personalised nature of small-group reading instruction, children who had experienced repeated failure in the regular classroom regained confidence in a smaller, supportive setting.

7.2 NEP 2020 — Reading, Wellbeing & Holistic Development

NEP 2020 explicitly frames reading and language development not merely as academic skills but as components of holistic child development, encompassing emotional intelligence, cultural identity, and psychological security.

Key Policy Conclusions:

- Children who learn to read in their mother tongue develop a stronger sense of cultural identity and belonging, a foundation for psychological wellbeing throughout schooling.
- The policy links reading fluency with reduced school anxiety and higher intrinsic motivation to learn, citing research that children who can read by Grade 3 are significantly less likely to disengage from school.
- Storytelling-based reading (oral and written) is recommended as both a cognitive and socio-emotional tool, connecting children to community, history, and values while building literacy.

8. Summary of Evidence

Study / Programme	Sample	Key Reading Outcome
ASER 2005–2024	600,000–700,000 rural children annually	Reading ability directly predicts cross-subject academic achievement
Balsakhi Programme RCT	~9,000 children, Gr 2–4, Vadodara & Mumbai	0.28 SD literacy gain; most cost-effective literacy intervention globally
Read India Camps	346,000 children nationally (2015–16)	Readers increased from 19% to 79% after 100 hours of instruction
Shishuvachan RCT	Pre-school & Grade 1 children, Mumbai	0.70 SD gain; comprehension-based reading beats rote methods
STRIPES2 RCT	Villages in Madhya Pradesh, Grades 1–3	0.58 SD improvement in foundational literacy; INR 2,476 per 0.1 SD
Telangana Neuro-Literacy	Grade 1 children, Mahabubnagar District	Neuroscience-informed phonics produced measurable first-year reading gains
Mindspark Delhi	Grade 4–6 children, Delhi	2.5× more progress in Hindi reading vs. control groups

Gehlot et al. (Rajasthan)	30 students across 3 SES groups	Parental reading engagement = strongest predictor of reading outcomes
NEP 2020 / NCERT	National policy, all Indian children	85% brain development by age 6; mother-tongue reading is optimal
Scholastic India Survey	1,752 parents and children, nationwide	85% of children love being read to; daily read-alouds predict later reading

9. Implications for Stakeholders

For Indian Parents

Begin reading aloud from birth — in your mother tongue. Even 15–20 minutes daily produces measurable language gains. Do not stop when children start school; children aged 6–11 whose parents stop reading to them consistently report wishing it had continued. Engage with books interactively: ask questions, relate stories to daily life, and let children choose what they read. Building a home library, however small, is one of the highest-return educational investments available.

For Indian Educators

Prioritise foundational reading in early grades above curriculum coverage. Use grouping by reading level (TaRL approach) rather than grade. Ensure reading instruction begins in the child's home language before transitioning to other languages. Create dedicated, daily reading time free from assessment pressure. Identify and support struggling readers early ASER data shows that reading deficits in Grade 3 persist and widen unless specifically addressed.

For Indian Policymakers & NGOs

Invest in community-based reading camps modelled on Pratham's approach , the most cost-effective literacy intervention India has produced. Scale TaRL across government school systems. Ensure equitable access to books and reading materials in all government schools and anganwadis. Fast-track implementation of NEP 2020's mother-tongue instruction mandate. Commission longitudinal neuroimaging research in Indian children to build India-specific brain science evidence for future policy.

10. Conclusion

India has produced some of the world's most rigorous and consequential research on reading in children — not in neuroscience laboratories, but in the classrooms, balwadis, village camps, and homes of hundreds of millions of its citizens. From the Balsakhi RCTs of 2001 to the ASER surveys of 2024, the evidence is unambiguous: reading ability is the foundation of

all academic learning, and targeted reading intervention produces dramatic, scalable, and cost-effective benefits for Indian children regardless of their socioeconomic background.

The challenges are equally clear: nearly one in four Grade 3 children in Indian government schools cannot read a Grade 2 text; rural, tribal, and low-income children bear the greatest burden of this literacy deficit; and the gap between the best- and worst-performing states is growing. These are not cognitive problems — Indian children possess equal intellectual capacity across all demographic groups. They are access, equity, and instructional problems, each of which reading-focused interventions can directly address.

NEP 2020 has placed reading and foundational literacy at the heart of India's education transformation. The research base reviewed in this paper provides a clear roadmap: read to children early, read in their mother tongue, read at their level, make it joyful, and ensure every child — regardless of income, caste, gender, or geography — has access to books. The returns, as decades of evidence demonstrate, are extraordinary.

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