

PRATHAM'S READ INDIA PROGRAM

TAKING SMALL STEPS
TOWARD LEARNING
AT SCALE

**Shushmita Chatterji Dutt, Christina Kwauk,
and Jenny Perlman Robinson**

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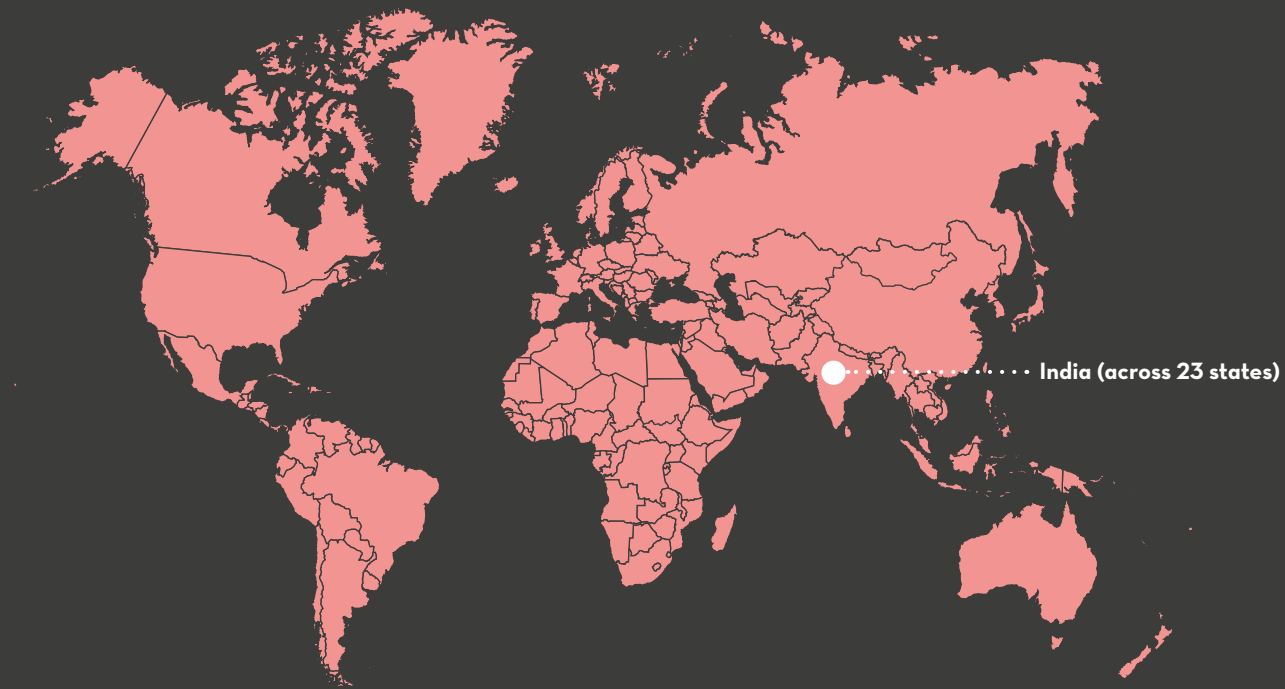
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Read India at a glance

EDUCATION LEVEL:

Primary (grades 3-5)



LOCATION:

India (across 23 states)

FOCUS OF INTERVENTION:

Remedial education for children who are lagging behind in basic reading and arithmetic

INTERVENTION OVERVIEW:

Read India III—Learning Camps (2013–2016), implemented by the Pratham Education Foundation, provide intensive bursts of remedial education in reading and mathematics through “learning camps” to primary school children (grades 3–5) who are behind in basic skills. These camps are conducted in bursts of 8 to 10 days and spread over the course of three to five sessions (up to 50 days per year), depending on the child’s level. To enhance learning, children are grouped by ability rather than by age and grade, and the camps use Pratham’s rigorously evaluated methodology, “Teaching at the Right Level” (TaRL), and pedagogy, “Combined Activities for Maximized Learning” (CAMaL). Teaching and learning activities and materials are tailored to each group, are interactive and group-based, and are designed to help children move to the next level. Camps are led by full-time, trained staff members, who are assisted by locally recruited and trained volunteers. Other implementation models for Read India, which began in 2007, have been delivered through trained community volunteers, Pratham staff, or government teachers during the regular school day or in an out-of-school context.

TYPE OF LEARNING MEASURED:

Reading and basic arithmetic

COST:

Approximately \$2.5 million for 2013 to 2014, or \$10 to \$15 per child. Financing is provided by Indian and international foundations, corporations, and individuals.

SIZE:

Direct reach—424,190 students, from 2014 to 2015 (with about an equal distribution of girls and boys). *Indirect reach*—Over 6 million students indirectly via state or district government partnerships.

IMPACT:

Reading—A 51 percent increase in reading among children (grades 3–5) of at least grade-2 texts; a 37 percent decrease in the proportion of children who could not identify any letters. *Mathematics*—A 43 percent increase in the number of children who could recognize numbers; a 25 percent increase in the number of children who can add at the end line; a 33 percent increase in those who can subtract; a 33 percent increase in those who can multiply; and a 28 percent increase in those who can divide. *Partnerships*—Developed with nine Indian state governments. Estimates indicate approximately 6.2 million children have been reached by these partnerships.

Background

India has made great strides in universalizing access to primary education, starting with the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in 1994 and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan initiative (SSA) in 2000. Today, primary school enrollment rates are at about 96 percent. For the majority of these children, however, the challenge that persists in their education is no longer gaining access to school but learning once they get there (Banerji and Walton 2011).

Large proportions of children who are enrolled cannot read, write, or do simple arithmetic calculation. National education surveys consistently show that the majority of Indian students fail to attain grade-level competencies at the end of five years of primary school. For example, in 2012, 53 percent of grade 5 students could not read grade-2-level texts proficiently, and 75 percent of grade 5 students were unable to solve questions involving division, a grade 4 level competency (ASER Centre 2013; Duflo et al. 2014, 1). Alarming, by grade 8, 24 percent of students cannot read at the grade 2 level or above, and 52 percent of students cannot perform mathematical operations at a grade 4

level (ASER Centre 2013). This suggests that learning gaps not only persist but also accumulate over time, causing students who are lagging behind in early grades to fall even further behind as they progress to higher grade levels (Duflo et al. 2014).

India's current education policy environment, under the Right to Education Act of 2009, promises that every child, up to the age of 14, is guaranteed free and compulsory education; thus no child can be held back, expelled, or required to pass a board examination until grade 10 (J-PAL n.d.). Another consequence of this legislation is an automatic promotion policy for primary education that allows children to move to the next grade until grade 8, even if they do not achieve grade-level competencies (Banerji and Walton 2011). The law makes it mandatory for teachers to complete the grade curriculum within the academic year. With this emphasis on completing the curriculum, teachers are incentivized to teach to the "top of the class," which ultimately prohibits the vast majority of children in early grades from acquiring the basic skills necessary to build a foundation for continued learning.

The genesis of Read India

In 1994, the commissioner of the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai, representatives of UNICEF, and several prominent Mumbai citizens came together to establish Pratham as a public charitable trust to work toward the improvement of child learning in Mumbai's slums. By 2000, Pratham had begun to

consolidate its initial years' experiences. In doing so, Pratham recognized that it was working with two kinds of children—those who were *left out* and those who were *left behind*. Whether children were in school or out of school, the common thread seemed to be that if children began to learn, they were able to gain the confidence and

capability to move ahead. The Pratham team also realized that while they were helping children make progress, a much faster pace was needed if children were to have a real opportunity to complete primary schooling.

Under the leadership of Madhav Chavan (cofounder and first CEO of Pratham), Farida Lambay (the other cofounder), Usha Rane (who has played a major role in content and pedagogy), and Rukmini Banerji (who headed the Annual Status of Education Report Centre, or ASER Centre, before becoming CEO of Pratham in 2015), Pratham took stock of its work to introspect, reflect, look around, and innovate according to its renewed awareness of the needs of the field and where need was strong.

After a serendipitous remark made by a Pratham visitor, reading became Pratham's focus area. Chavan asked a group of Pratham staff and volunteers in Patna to try something new to help children learn to read quickly. They were asked to do "simple things," such as read stories and play with the alphabet and a traditional phonemic chart. The idea was to engage children in different reading-related activities and expose them to texts, words, and the alphabet. Two or three weeks later, "almost like magic," the Pratham staff found children reading, their accuracy improving with practice and help over time (Madhav Chavan, interview by Shushmita Chatterji Dutt and Jenny Perlman Robinson, July 16, 2015). This method was tried again in different parts of the country, where different scripts are used. The core principle of exposing children to different activities with texts, words, and the alphabet remained the

same, although the execution varied somewhat locally. Amid the chaos of the method, Pratham eventually identified a clear learning pattern demonstrated by the children: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Learning to read the language spoken by the child could be achieved quickly—in as few as 25 days. Thus, Pratham found, if children could be placed in a literate environment, and engaged in activities that gave multiple stimuli, they could "unwind the mystery" and bring together the fundamental building blocks of literacy on their own (Madhav Chavan, interview by Shushmita Chatterji Dutt and Jenny Perlman Robinson, July 16, 2015).

Over time and through much experimentation, it became clear to Pratham's leaders that reading was transformative; it was not only about gaining fluency but also about increasing the child's sense of empowerment and self-worth. With the intention to help children not only to learn to read but also "read to learn," Pratham's leaders began to use evidence generated from evaluations of their methods and models to formulate a solution that was about breaking down the process of learning to read into small, doable steps. Guided by a reading pedagogy developed by A. K. Jalaluddin that combined the whole language with phonics approaches, and using Pratham's rigorously evaluated method of teaching-learning, described below, a child could even be taught to read by volunteers with fairly low levels of education themselves (Banerjee et al. 2006, 2010).¹ In the end, the Read India campaign's fundamentals were formulated, and by 2003 to 2004, Pratham teams in nearly 120 districts and five cities were implementing this reading methodology.

Impact and evidence of success

The evidence from a series of rigorous, randomized evaluations conducted externally by J-PAL of earlier phases of Read India activities indicates that the philosophy of TaRL supports gains in learning, sometimes double the normal yearly gain in learning, especially for low-performing students (Banerjee, Banerji, and Kannan 2015). TaRL involves children being grouped by ability rather than by grade, and then taught using methods and materials appropriate to their level of ability until they have reached the correct level of their grade. This methodology has proven to be effective in multiple contexts (for an example in Kenya, see Duflo, Dupas, and Kremer 2011), whether implemented by locally recruited and trained volunteers outside school hours, or used by trained government school teachers during the school day or at camps during the summer holidays (Banerjee et al. 2006, 2010; Duflo et al. 2014).

In Pratham's latest Read India model that uses TaRL methods, children are taught basic Hindi and mathematics in intensive bursts of teaching-learning activity called Learning Camps—the focal intervention of this case study. Depending on the baseline levels of children, a total camp cycle could be between three to five camps conducted in bursts of eight to 10 days for up to 50 days of activities. Evidence from the evaluations of Pratham's learning camp model indicate that large improvements in learning can be gained in short, intensive periods of teaching-learning. For example, a preliminary analysis of baseline and end-line data from a randomized, controlled trial (RCT) of Pratham's Learning Camps in Uttar Pradesh, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development,

shows children gaining between 0.9 and 1.3 levels in reading and mathematics and an additional operational competency during a Learning Camp cycle.

Other evaluations of Read India Learning Camps have also demonstrated impressive gains in reading and basic arithmetic. For instance, at the beginning of the 2013-14 Learning Camp cycle in Uttar Pradesh, approximately 85 percent of children were either not able to recognize letters or just able to read letters, with less than 10 percent able to read. By the end of the fifth Learning Camp (50 days of intervention), well above 80 percent of children could read paragraphs and stories, changing the distribution of reading ability completely. In mathematics, camps have led to a 43 percent increase in the number of children who could recognize numbers, a 25 percent increase in the number of children who could add at end line, a 33 percent increase in those who could subtract, a 33 percent increase in those who could multiply, and a 28 percent increase in those who could divide (ASER Centre 2014; Banerjee, Banerji, and Kannan 2015).

Combined with findings from previous RCTs of a variety of earlier models of Read India reading camps and TaRL methods, the results suggest a consistent demonstration of the effectiveness—and cost-effectiveness—of remedial education over the course of several intensive periods in making possible large improvements in children's reading and mathematics learning levels (see, for example, Banerjee et al. 2010). Moreover, by restructuring classroom instruction to the level and

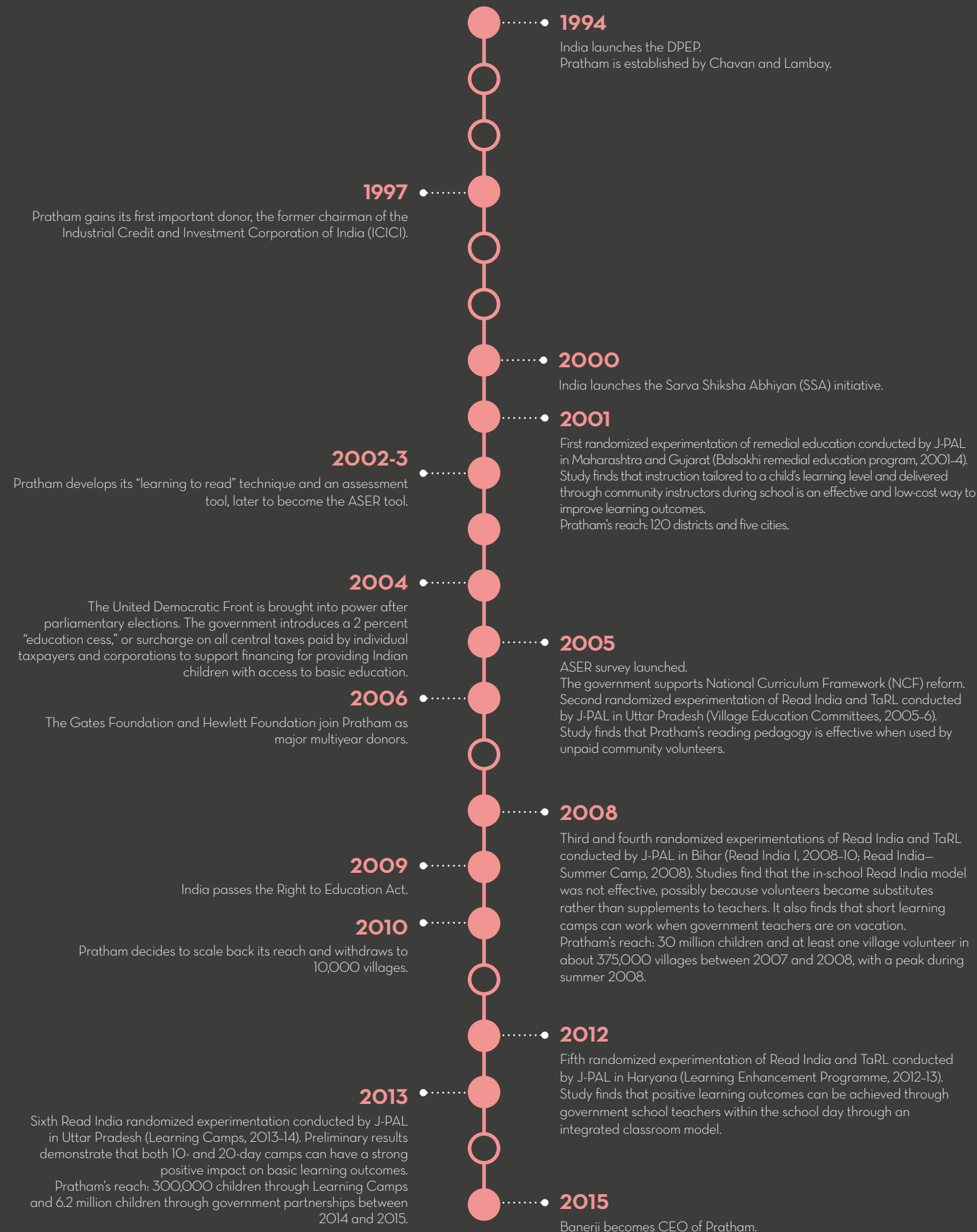
pace of the student, rather than having rigid expectations of a curriculum, TaRL produced large gains in learning outcomes (“learn to read”) by ensuring that those students who had been left behind gained basic skills and were equipped with the tools to continue learning (“read to learn”).

In earlier Read India phases (2005-8), Pratham's activities reached well over 30 million children (Banerji and Walton 2011). Village-level community volunteers participated in massive numbers in over 300,000 villages, either by helping in statewide government partnerships or by teaching children in their own villages. Now in its third phase (2013-16), as of 2015 Read India Learning Camps had reached nearly 300,000 children (grades 3 to 5) in 7,065 schools across 15 states (ASER

Centre 2015). In the two years after 2013, the intervention reached 10,562 schools, of which 67 percent had more than 75 percent or more children who could read a grade-1-level or grade-2-level text, and 65 percent of whom had 75 percent or more children who could complete a basic subtraction problem (ASER Centre 2015).

Larger outcomes of the Uttar Pradesh Learning Camps have been the use of success evidence in advocacy with officials at the state and district levels. Between 2014 to 2015, Pratham developed partnerships with governments in 127 Indian districts, varying in scale from state to state and district to district. Estimates indicate that an additional 6.2 million children have been reached through these partnerships (Pratham 2015).

Timeline of key events



Key drivers behind scaling impact

How did Pratham improve literacy and numeracy across India? The remainder of this case study illustrates how the story of Read India's genesis and success lies partially in programmatic design components, such as Learning Camps and TaRL, but primarily in the program's delivery, enabling environment, and financing. That is, Pratham's educational

experimentation and commitment to an evidence-based approach; its focus on small, incremental change and on scaling ideas rather than expanding the organization; its engagement with Read India's local champions; and its relationship with long-term donors enabled the organization to scale up learning across the nation.

Learning by doing

A unique feature of Pratham's experience that has been a key factor in enabling the organization to scale up not only its Read India campaign but also learning among millions of children in India has been the organization's appetite for experimentation with new teaching-learning models. Purposefully partnering with external research organizations to conduct RCTs of its programs and methods; developing simple, easy-to-do and easy-to-understand internal measurements; and trusting field workers with the responsibility and freedom to experiment and innovate with the model have meant that Read India is constantly being tweaked, redesigned, and improved based on evidence, feedback, and learning. This experimentation has also given government partners the flexibility to be able to choose which model and delivery method makes the most sense in their contexts (i.e., teacher-led, volunteer-led, school-based, camp-based, 10-day, 20-day), as well as the assurance that the intervention they were about to pick up has been tried, evaluated, and proven successful in other states.

Underlying Pratham's openness to experiment is the program's philosophy of learning by doing, whether it is a teacher learning to use TaRL methods, a student learning to read, a government official learning to provide on-site support to schools, or a volunteer learning to conduct Read India activities. As Banerji explains, the mantra has always been "Know how to do it yourself and then teach others" (Rukmini Banerji, interview by Shushmita Chatterji Dutt and Jenny Perlman Robinson, July 20, 2015). This philosophy has also helped to motivate and maintain Pratham's focus on keeping Read India's learning methodologies and assessment tools simple so that people with very little education can use them.

Learning by doing also means learning from data. While data and the evidence it generates about a program are important to give prospective partners and donors confidence in their investment, data are also an integral component of Pratham's organizational processes. According to Banerji, the "role of data has been to prove to ourselves. [The] biggest need for data

in our system is for us” to learn where we are now and where we need to go (Rukmini Banerji, interview by Shushmita Chatterji Dutt and Jenny Perlman Robinson, July 20, 2015). For more than 15 years, Pratham has built into its program operations regular assessments of learning to chart evidence on whether or not its activities are working: from 2000, when Pratham staff first took a month to stop their work and reflect on what small goals could be achieved in one month's time, to Pratham's longtime partnership with J-PAL to integrate RCTs as a learning tool in their work, to today, when Pratham staff are beginning to integrate process evaluations into their programs to evaluate TaRL in practice.

Pratham's honesty about what is not working has enabled the organization to consolidate both positive and negative lessons from research evaluations and field experience to inform its critical decisions, help it formulate and inform new strategies, and empower it to correct its course of action when needed. This has even included reducing scale at one point in the history of Read India (discussed further below). Altogether, Pratham's willingness to experiment, its learning-by-doing philosophy, and its honesty about what is or is not working has not only enabled Pratham to come up with a menu of tried-and-tested intervention options—each with

their financial and resource requirements worked out—but also to multiply its impact in the face of competing needs and scarce resources.

As technological advances have been made in the collection and analysis of monitoring-and-evaluation data, Pratham has maintained its stance on the importance of human involvement in the process of integrating technology within its operations. As a critical component of learning by doing, having people actually interact with, analyze, and interpret the data is important for learning from the data and for the process of learning by doing. Banerji described the human interface as the glue between back office technology and front office visualization. “Too much data is not useful—[you] drown in that” (Rukmini Banerji, interview by Shushmita Chatterji Dutt and Jenny Perlman Robinson, July 18, 2015). In the quest to measure outcomes, Pratham's leaders believe that it is easy to lose sight of the importance of learning from the process. As a result, evaluation resources are wasted. Instead, having people interact with the data not only makes the data come alive, but also have given Pratham staff members in the field confidence about what they are doing right, making it possible for them to learn from and adapt what they are doing.

Recognizing how change happens

An important component of scaling up is the existence of an enabling environment that allows for the replication of interventions. One of the greatest challenges for Pratham, however, was identifying how to tackle the bigger problems in learning that no one at

the top was discussing. Or, if people at the top were discussing learning, the challenge was getting those voices to talk about evidence-based solutions such as Read India, rather than the trendiest learning approaches in the international community. This made the environment in

which Pratham was operating far from enabling. In fact, at many points it often appeared that the environment did not want to make room for Read India.

According to Pratham's leaders, the organization often found itself in a policy environment that ebbed and flowed, depending on who was in power at the time and what partnerships could be developed in a specific time frame. Understanding how to endure and sustain progress beyond the life of a bureaucrat thus meant recognizing how change happens in the system, despite who is in charge, and then leveraging those processes. For Pratham's leaders, the task of institutionalizing and scaling up or spreading their intervention translated into identifying how to integrate small innovations into a very large, and sometimes dysfunctional, multistate education system. In this way, change was less threatening and radical, ideas and terminology could be accepted or absorbed, and capturing government support was less a matter of personalities than a product of national or district-level awakening.

A specific example of how Pratham strategically used its knowledge of the local and national environments is the story of how it stepped into and influenced the national discussion on learning, ultimately creating a more enabling environment for accepting that there was a massive learning crisis for India's children and that something urgent and critical needed to be done. This led to discussions in India moving beyond “schooling” to “learning.” The changing environment then meant that the ground became increasingly more ready for scaling up the impact of Read

India's efforts, and also those of others working on learning.

In 2004, a new 2 percent education tax was introduced to support and enhance government finances for providing children with access to basic education. This was followed by public pressure for accountability to be woven into the entire education system. Many government leaders, parents, and community members believed that it was time to find out what children were learning in school. Despite the broad interest in “quality,” the government's focus remained on access and provision, as well as on inputs and expenditures. At the time, the central government was also preoccupied with reforming the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), which absorbed the education establishment's attention. And regardless of the rhetoric about learning, state governments were mainly in charge of primary education in their own jurisdiction and most did not or could not measure learning.

However, in 2005 the parliamentary elections brought the United Progressive Alliance into power, and Pratham's founder, Chavan, was appointed to the National Advisory Council. As part of the council's deliberations, he suggested to the government that an annual report was needed to help quantify the problem of quality and learning in Indian education. With no reports on quality forthcoming from the government, Pratham took on the opportunity to devise a way to measure learning. In doing so, Pratham borrowed Gandhi's idea of going to the masses: Lead with a simple, doable idea, with the hope that millions will follow. While most key education players talked

about instituting major curriculum changes, Pratham focused its energies on changing ideas and integrating small innovations into the larger system. Describing this process, Chavan explained, “We are water slowly seeping in and breaking down walls by putting water in the cracks. No system reforms itself—let us not kid ourselves—unless it is in a crisis” (Madhav Chavan, interview by Shushmita Chatterji Dutt and Jenny Perlman Robinson, July 16, 2015).

Pratham's leaders began to shape the effort that would become ASER. They knew that the basic assessment tool needed to be something very simple so that ordinary citizens could use it and also understand the data that were generated. In 2005, the first ASER survey was carried out across the country in rural districts. For the first time in India, current data on children's basic learning levels (reading and arithmetic) were publicly available. Ultimately, the first report showed a shockingly low level of foundational skills, demonstrating that a vast majority of kids were far below their grade level in reading and mathematics. ASER's inception at this policy moment not only brought national attention to children's learning achievement and education quality but also proved to be a useful way to mobilize communities.

At the grassroots level, youth in rural areas began to respond to Pratham's idea that one could “pick up a book and change the history of India” (Madhav Chavan, interview by Shushmita Chatterji Dutt and Jenny Perlman Robinson, July 16, 2015). This simple idea brought large numbers of youth volunteers to Pratham, both to participate in ASER and also to be part of Read India. It is estimated

that in the summer of 2008, Pratham's massive mobilization across rural India for its summer camps program led to at least one village volunteer in more than 375,000 villages.

The annual ASER effort made people at the highest levels of government, especially within the education system, very uncomfortable because it repeatedly demonstrated that children were unable to read, write, or do simple arithmetic calculations. Due to the fact that results were analyzed state by state, a sense of competition seeped in among the various state players. After an initial period of criticism about ASER's minimalist methodology, tools, and analysis—especially in the face of the NCF reform's sweeping and lofty goals—states began to take notice of what the ASER report was saying about their learning levels. Soon, Pratham found that education ministers and other high-level officials were beginning to incorporate ASER into how they thought and talked about monitoring learning. For example, Rajasthan's education minister started urging officials to ensure that Madhya Pradesh's results improve in ASER rankings, as if ASER was like the Program for International Student Assessment (Madhav Chavan, interview by Shushmita Chatterji Dutt and Jenny Perlman Robinson, July 16, 2015).

Pratham's strategy to change ideas was working; scaling up learning was about scaling up ideas. In a short period, major national education policies, including the SSA initiative, which started in 2000 with a focus on improving universal primary enrollment, began to adapt a concern for student achievement and quality learning.

Scaling impact in small, doable steps

Closely related to Pratham's recognition that changing India's education system required simple innovations is Pratham's focus on scaling up its impact in small, doable steps. Indeed, what Pratham did was to take a very simple idea—teach at the right level—prove its efficacy, and inspire millions to follow. Banerji has explained that Read India was really about breaking down the learning process into simple steps that an ordinary person could follow. Sharing results with each other helped to build stakeholder and organizational confidence not only in the method but also in the goal of transforming kids in one month. From there, not only did the staff become inspired but whole communities came to see that change was possible in a short period. Furthermore, government officials in one state would see evidence from another state that Read India was improving their children's reading and arithmetic levels, making government officials more willing to support the introduction of Read India in their own state. In this way, the program's impact scaled up, even though the intervention itself was small.

From an implementation perspective, focusing on the small and doable made much sense. For example, the NCF was difficult for teachers to easily comprehend, and therefore was challenging to implement. Pratham's learning methodology, however, was easier to practice and had repeated evidence of success, having benefited from 10 years of field refinement. The biggest challenge, however, was adapting teachers and administrators to Read India's more egalitarian and

democratic system of values and practices—like viewing the teacher as a friend who sits alongside students; or providing older, more senior teachers with regular classroom-based teacher support from Pratham's growing cadre of young, trained resource persons and local youth volunteers.

Focusing on small, doable steps also meant that it was critical for government partners to see that Read India could use the existing government infrastructure efficiently, and that no new recurring government expenditures (i.e., salaries) were required. In fact, Pratham intentionally kept costs low and avoided creating parallel structures by trying to rejuvenate and optimize existing but underutilized positions and structures within the government. For example, Read India's teacher-led summer camps energized existing cadres of cluster resource center coordinators (CRCCs) to oversee teaching-learning activities. Traditionally, the CRCCs were considered fit only for administrative, inspectional, and regulatory tasks.² However, Pratham's attempt to institutionalize Read India through the CRCCs revitalized the CRCCs' roles. For example, Pratham trained CRCCs for four days and then allowed them to practice in the field for 20 days. After that, they trained teachers in the new methodology of grouping and teaching at the right level. In this way, Read India's teacher training activities became less radical, more cost-efficient, and more easily replicated.

From the perspective of scaling up, defining what constituted a small and

doable approach was a work in progress for Pratham's leaders. Because Pratham's leaders had recognized from the beginning that the problem of learning was big in terms of the sheer magnitude of children not learning, especially in rural areas, and also in terms of the implications of not learning, the leaders were able to see that the scope of their mission to reach all children who had been left behind needed to be carefully balanced with the need to achieve a large impact in learning rather than small-scale percentage changes. By 2003-4, after Pratham's rollout of its initial phases of this work for improving learning, it was working in 120 districts and five cities. Still, many questions remained: Could this be replicated on a wide and massive scale, as was required in India? Was the methodology correct? Reflecting on what could have been done differently, Chavan suggested that going to full scale at the start was probably not the best decision. If given the chance to start over, he would have started in a few states, rather than "dissipating energies around the country" (Madhav Chavan, interview by Shushmita Chatterji Dutt and Jenny Perlman Robinson, July 16, 2015). Pratham's purposeful integration of monitoring and evaluating efforts with new programs, however, ensured that their questions got answered, and that they could change course if necessary.

Indeed, by 2010, a change of course was necessary, for Pratham's focus on the doable and its commitment to measuring impact had led its leaders to decide to scale down in order to bring the program's focus back to strengthening the implementation model rather than scaling up the organization. Partnering with village communities and

government school systems, Pratham's Read India campaign was active in more than half of India's villages, reaching more than 30 million children between 2007 and 2008, with the spread coming through unpaid village volunteers' efforts (Banerji and Walton 2011). This size made monitoring activities and measuring impact extremely difficult, especially across India's massive geography. If Pratham wanted to continue to demonstrate strong evidence of its work's impact, it had to decrease its reach and work directly with schools and communities through better-trained, full-time team members and with its government partners.

As a result, in 2010, Pratham reduced the size of its interventions to close to one-tenth of its former reach. Although this meant smaller coverage, the organization was able to focus on demonstrating and generating evidence that Read India's activities were having a large impact on learning. From 2010 to 2012, Pratham concentrated the Read India model in a set of villages for a three-year period, during which village volunteers worked for approximately three to four months per year. From 2013 onward, further refinement was undertaken after pilot work that had been completed during the previous year demonstrated the effectiveness of shorter bursts of intense teaching-learning activities led by a full time team member—that is, the Learning Camps. As mentioned earlier in this case study, evaluations of the Learning Camps taught by Pratham's staff and assisted by village volunteers demonstrated the same if not better learning gains as did continuous instructional activity over the course of three to four months led by a village volunteer.

Engaging local champions

In India, any education initiative that wants to have a large-scale impact needs to partner with state governments, who run the largest education programs in the country. Similar to how Pratham used its knowledge of how change happens locally, its recognition of the importance of working with multiple levels of government also played a major role in its ability to develop successful education models and to achieve outcomes at full scale. Using evidence that proves its methodology works to ignite excitement, Pratham purposefully sought to identify and partner with local Read India champions within the government who could provide the support and political will necessary at the top to sustain ground-level action and impact below.

Cases in point are Pratham's partnerships with the Madhya Pradesh government in 2005 and later with the governments of Chhattisgarh and Bihar. When an official from Madhya Pradesh approached Pratham's leaders and asked to see what they could do, Pratham demonstrated its teaching-learning approach in locations close to the state capital. When senior officials saw change happening "under their nose," they enthusiastically decided to take the campaign to the entire state. With senior administrative officials supporting Read India and overseeing the active involvement of lower cadres, all hurdles with lower-level bureaucrats were quickly ironed out, and program messages were efficiently and effectively transmitted universally down the line to the classroom. In a short time frame, with all districts in the state adapting Pratham's teaching methodology, Madhya Pradesh witnessed a remarkable

30 percent increase in the proportion of children able to read the alphabet between ASER 2005 and ASER 2006 (Banerjee et al. 2007). Read India's experiences in Madhya Pradesh—and similar experiences in Chhattisgarh, where Maoist disturbances posed an additional but surmountable challenge, and in Bihar—taught Pratham that if the bureaucratic head was convinced that a certain intervention was beneficial, the intervention would subsequently be implemented. In fact, a committed leader could make even a dysfunctional system deliver.

Given Read India's strong pedagogic underpinnings and the supporting evidence of success, Pratham's leaders believed that there should have been greater uptake of Read India across the nation. However, they were aware that Pratham was not affecting the government system as preferred. There are several reasons for this, one of which was Pratham's dependency on a local champion within government to push a new program forward. Relying on government partnerships, though proven to help a program quickly achieve full scale, also had its downsides. Over the course of 20 years, Pratham found that partnerships could be tenuous and unsustainable—time and resources spent educating officials and cultivating relationships could be wasted with each government transition or bureaucratic reshuffle. Although successful partnerships should last well beyond the life of individual personalities in office, they seldom did. For example, in Maharashtra, a very-well-knit and successful Read India program was

dismantled because the new incumbent was not convinced of the validity of the methods being used.

Historically, Pratham found a way of working with local policymakers, “the street fighters, but not with the pundits” (Rukmini Banerji, interview by Shushmita Chatterji Dutt and Jenny Perlman Robinson, July 18, 2015). That is, based on Pratham’s experience, the people closest to the ground were easier to work with than the people at the state and federal government levels, because they understood the reality of poor learning and could see results from Read India’s activities.

Pratham’s preference for working with local “street fighters” reflects its democratic philosophy of inclusivity and its attention to grassroots-level change. Indeed, much of Pratham’s early stage success was made possible by its ability to channel energy among young people on the ground. Involving volunteers in Pratham’s activities not only benefited the organization by helping keep costs low but, more important, helped large numbers of young people understand what troubles primary education in India. This understanding came from personal participation and was, again, not a money-

Aligning with the right donors

The story of financing Pratham’s Read India campaign demonstrates that it is not just financing that is critical to sustainability and scaling but also *who* finances, *what* is being financed, *how* the donor finances, and *when* the donor enters the picture. Pratham’s independence has been made possible in large part by its strategic

intensive exercise. According to Pratham’s leaders, no number of sophisticated advocacy campaigns could have brought so many young people onto the “battlefield against poor learning,” as the Pratham strategy of involving volunteers as grassroots champions in action (Rukmini Banerji, interview by Shushmita Chatterji Dutt and Jenny Perlman Robinson, July 18, 2015). As is noted earlier in this case study, working on a village-to-village basis, Pratham mobilized volunteers in more than 300,000 villages across India (covering approximately 60 percent of India) from 2007 to 2008, and it has formed partnerships in the past 10 years with more than 15 state governments to improve the quality of teaching in schools.

This strategy’s challenge has been ensuring effective training and obtaining uniformly good-quality work by such a large number of volunteers. As mentioned above, the difficulties in monitoring and evaluating and therefore accurately measuring the impact of Read India’s activities across so many volunteer-led initiatives played a role in Pratham’s decision to scale back its campaign in 2010. This was part of Pratham’s lesson that scaling up learning is more about scaling up ideas and impact, rather than scaling up the organization itself.

alignment and identification with donors. Specifically, the organization has benefited throughout its history from a diverse set of supporters. These have included local and overseas donors that are committed for the long term and thus have invested in the organization and its core mission rather than in a specific project, and that

have been flexible and open minded, giving Pratham the space for growth and experimentation through multiyear core support.

For instance, Pratham’s first important champion was the former chairman of the Industrial Credit and Investment Corporation of India (ICICI) beginning in 1997, a few years after Pratham was established. The chairman of ICICI at the time had no background in education but understood the large scope of India’s education quality issue. India’s large population meant that the number of children not learning was large. Not wanting to “fool around with small numbers,” both the chairman of ICICI and the chief executive officer of Pratham agreed that there was a need to “hit a big number with big numbers” and to demonstrate along the way sound evidence of doing this honestly and well (Madhav Chavan, interview by Shushmita Chatterji Dutt and Jenny Perlman Robinson, July 16, 2015). After discussions, the chairman was convinced that Pratham could take on this task. This kind of core support from someone at the head of India’s financial industry gave Pratham the confidence to take risks and innovate. This support was also a key factor in building Pratham’s brand early on as a trustworthy partner, expert, and leader in the field of education in India. To this day, the now-former chairman of the ICICI is a strong champion of Pratham.

Similar strong support committed for the long term also came from individual donors of Indian origin who lived in the United States. Among the earliest champions was Vijay Goradia, a successful entrepreneur based in Houston. Goradia’s steadfast support for Pratham’s work in the early years helped build a strong fund-raising

base in the U.S., in the form of Pratham USA. To this day, like the former chairman of the ICICI, Goradia, and his family remain strong champions of Pratham’s mission.

According to Pratham’s leaders, the most helpful donors were those who were open minded in terms of what Pratham did on the ground but were systematic in holding its leaders accountable to what they said they were going to do. These donors had spent time with Pratham in the field and were along for the journey, keen to see results influence governments. Donors like Oxfam Novib in the early years and the Hewlett Foundation during the last decade have played catalytic roles by pushing Pratham just enough and at just the right time to help Read India follow its charted path, but they have not suffocated Pratham by questioning its every move. This relationship was particularly significant in Pratham’s experience with scaling up Read India starting in its early days.

In 2006, about the same time that Pratham was beginning to incite the enthusiasm of thousands of grassroots volunteers around India, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation put out a request for proposals and ideas and asked the hypothetical question: If there was money available, what would you do? Pooling funds from the Gates Foundation and Hewlett Foundation into what became the Quality Education for Developing Countries initiative and was eventually handled by the Hewlett Foundation, the two organizations were willing to invest a substantial amount of long-term funding for something ambitious that would have a wide impact on learning. Pratham responded with a proposal that outlined the first generation of Read India. It was appropriate for a number of reasons, including its ambition to go “for

all of India” (Madhav Chavan, interview by Shushmita Chatterji Dutt and Jenny Perlman Robinson, July 16, 2015).

Several key organizational features made Pratham particularly attractive to these two donors. During field visits to India and to Pratham’s work sites, foundation staff members were impressed that the entire organization seemed to have a shared vision of purpose about what they were doing and where they intended to go. Banerji, then head of the ASER Centre, credited this cohesion to the fundamental principles driving Pratham and Read India: Keep the process simple; know how to do it yourself; share learning; and develop a common terminology with each other (Rukmini Banerji, interview by Shushmita Chatterji Dutt and Jenny Perlman Robinson, July 18, 2015). Pratham was also able to demonstrate that it had sufficient experience on the ground and that Read India was based on a well-articulated pedagogy and an evidence-based model for teaching basic reading and arithmetic. In addition, Pratham’s leaders did not make any attempt to hide, camouflage, or avoid the idea of learning from evaluations, taking in feedback, and integrating changes into its programming. In fact, Pratham was open to bringing in a third-party evaluation team. Together, these factors not only left a strong impression on the two foundations but also convinced them to fund Pratham for several years, long enough to bring observable changes to the ground.

The Hewlett Foundation’s continued support for Pratham lies in its observation that Pratham’s work was “of an entirely different color compared to many government led programs” (Dana Schmidt, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson,

August 6, 2015). For example, in 2008, the Read India Summer Camps in Bihar introduced a large number of volunteers into the field, which created a strong community aspect and inclusive nature in Pratham’s work. Hewlett recognized that this democratic functioning within Pratham was unique and that its trust in its members had made it possible for the organization to draw so much attention and such a strong following to its social campaign, which no other campaign in India had been able to accomplish in recent years. Moreover, the Read India model allowed students to engage with learning out of the “restricted environs of a classroom and has freed [learning] to some extent from the tyranny of the curriculum” (Dana Schmidt, interview by Jenny Perlman Robinson, August 6, 2015).

Witnessing such huge accomplishments and Pratham’s rapid growth across more than half of India, the Hewlett Foundation also recognized the growing difficulty of demonstrating a large impact over such a vast coverage area. Strong evidence of the effectiveness of Pratham’s approach in making large gains in learning had been an important factor in the Hewlett Foundation’s initial decision to fund Read India’s expansion. However, it too, like Pratham’s leadership, felt that the next round of activities needed to be geographically concentrated and deepened, with a focus on achieving a large impact rather than small percentage changes. This view, along with internal organizational discussions, led Pratham to scale back its activities after 2010, downsizing Read India to one-tenth of its previous size, but becoming ready to focus on small steps, intensify its activities, and move beyond the basics.

Now, at another critical juncture of introspection, largely influenced by India’s shifting philanthropic climate, Pratham’s leaders are asking themselves: Where to, and what next? Should Read India be expanded to more schools, or should efforts be focused on deepening and improving cohorts’ learning during Pratham’s programming life cycle? Both directions entail further innovation and experimentation vis-à-vis programming, including the integration of digital learning components and an attention to soft skills and self-organized learning. Or should Pratham focus primarily on another round of efforts to massively scale up Read India’s core thrust on basic reading and arithmetic? If so, what mobilization strategies should be used, which of the models should be scaled up, and how should impact be measured? Read India’s prior experience with scaling was made possible in large part due to its alignment with the large-scale missions of and the influence of key long-term donors, such as the former chairman of the ICICI, the Hewlett Foundation, Oxfam Novib, and Pratham USA. These donors, however, contrast starkly with India’s newest financiers: corporations.

Since the introduction of a new law in 2013, the Companies Act, which made it compulsory for Indian industry and corporate houses to commit 2 percent of their profits to corporate social responsibility, new donors have begun to change the scope and scale of their projects. Corporations have tended to look for programs in the

hinterlands of their factories or plants or to geographies where companies have a particular stake. Although Pratham’s leaders have observed that some corporations are being persuaded to take action outside their immediate areas of interest, expanding their scale to whole districts, such efforts are still few and far between (Rukmini Banerji, interview by Shushmita Chatterji Dutt and Jenny Perlman Robinson, July 20, 2015). Perhaps strategic alignments can be made. For example, the support of 10 to 20 corporations over the next two years could be catalytic for moving Read India to larger scale.

With the rise of private, fee-charging schools in India, the needs and opportunities within the education environment where Pratham operates are quickly shifting. For example, 10 years ago, about 20 percent of children in Uttar Pradesh attended private schools. Today, the figure is closer to 50 percent. Many other states are also seeing similar trends. As a result, those children who remain in government schools are largely those from very vulnerable economic strata, the lowest social classes, and girls. India’s shifting education scene makes it even more urgent to address issues of quality and learning. Although many education programs are being implemented in India today, the lessons from Read India and Pratham’s experience point to the need to learn by doing; recognize how change happens; scale up a program’s impact in small, doable steps; engage local champions; and align with the right donors.

Lessons learned

- Pratham's *willingness to experiment* with and rigorously test new teaching-learning models provided state- and district-level partners with an evidence-based menu of program options, which enabled flexible, context-specific decisionmaking by partners to maximize a program's impact in the presence of competing needs and scarce resources.
- Mirroring its experiential approach to pedagogy, Pratham's philosophy of "learning by doing" among its staff and volunteers helped maintain the organization's focus on keeping Read India's learning methodologies, activities, materials, and assessment tools simple, so that individuals with a wide range of learning levels and governments with a wide range of resources could embrace the program.
- Pratham's *commitment to an evidence-based approach* ensured purposeful integration of monitoring and evaluation into its operations and decisionmaking. This commitment enabled the organization to learn regularly from the process of implementation and evaluation data, to have an honest awareness of achievements made and challenges remaining, and to plan for the necessary course corrections along the way. This included scaling down at one point during the program's history in order to strengthen the implementation model toward scaling up impact.
- Pratham's leaders *recognized how change happens locally*. Using this knowledge, they strategically institutionalized interventions by leveraging existing government infrastructure, resources, and policy opportunities when possible. This was important for capturing government support, because change was less threatening to the status quo, more cost-efficient, and more easily replicated.
- *Making small, incremental change visible at a large scale* was necessary to show stakeholders that change is possible.
- Identification of and partnerships with the *local champions* of Read India within the government—and using evidence from the Learning Camps to ignite their excitement—was critical for garnering the political will and support at the top to create the conditions needed to scale up ground-level action and have an impact from below. However, relying on government partnerships could be tenuous and unsustainable, where time and resources spent educating officials and cultivating relationships could be wasted with each change in government.
- Partnering with *flexible, long-term focused donors* allowed for the building of trust, which gave Pratham the organizational autonomy, space, and independence needed to experiment, take risks, and innovate.

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Endnotes

1. In the initial years, Pratham's teaching-learning method was referred to as "L2R," or learning to read. Later, it began to be called "CAMaL" (in English, this means Combined Activities for Maximized Learning, but in Hindi and in some other languages, it is read as "magic"). In recent years, the method has also been named "TaRL," or "Teaching at the Right Level."
2. A cluster is usually a group of 10 to 15 schools in a small geographic area. The cluster resource center is used for teacher meetings, teacher training, and administrative work. The coordinator is usually a senior teacher appointed to guide the activities of the center and to provide academic support to teachers.

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