

LEARNINGS FROM THE 'LEARNING GUARANTEE PROGRAMME'

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The Learning Guarantee Programme (LGP)¹ was a large scale student assessment based programme conceptualized and implemented by the Azim Premji Foundation across 5 states between 2003 to 2008. Implementing this programme for over five years across the country provided rich insights on a variety of educational aspects as the learning was not restricted to getting only a macro-level picture. Hence, the learnings were far deeper than what large scale assessments are believed to provide. The criticisms of large scale assessments range from outright rejection of the concept due to its' summative nature to its' ineffectiveness in contributing to improve student learning. Interestingly, by incorporating certain innovations and research within the assessment design, LGP not only avoided the pitfalls of large scale assessments, but was even able to extract far more than what is traditionally expected from assessments of this kind.

LGP had a key objective of identifying and rewarding outstanding schools that were achieving expected learning competencies, and it incorporated into this conceptual objective two related positions, that of using summative assessment data for:

- a. formative purposes (that is to improve teaching practices and classroom transactions), and,
- b. not only to provide feedback but also a feed-forward to the teachers.

'Hence, the LGP assessment, may be seen as summative but is not restrictive to being only an assessment of learning since the feedback from such assessment forms a crucial link to the process of initiating improvements in the class

room pedagogy, both at the individual school level as well as at the systemic level. To illustrate, if we are testing the third standard students at the end of the year, the results will feedback to the teachers who handle third standard class as well as the teachers who handle the fourth standard classes. The rationale behind the feed forward is the notion that competences are continuous and so teachers will gain insight into the problems generally faced by students in acquiring a particular competence' - this simple change of positioning by incorporating the feed-forward mechanism help address the criticism that teachers invariably find large scale summative assessments used for ranking as useless because it is held at the end of the academic year with the concerned students moving away to another class. In fact, the programme tackled this issue in another way as well as it incorporated the voluntary component by which the schools were allowed to identify the time of the year that they wanted the assessment to be conducted in their school. And to fix any complication arising out of this, the assessments were so designed that the previous years' competencies were what was tested of the students rather than the current grade / year. So, if a fourth standard class was being assessed, the students were answering questions that were related to competencies of the third standard class; given that the testing instrument had items based on competencies and not on any specific text book content, it did not provide for any bias and this also overcame the other criticism of large scale assessments which is said to result in teaching to the tests.

LGP experience shows that in spite of similar challenges such as infrastructure deficiency, lack of adequate number of teachers, and other requirements that form the basic hygiene levels for a school, there are some schools that do a very good job of ensuring student learning outcome. Understanding the reasons behind such differences in student learning outcomes in schools with similar challenges (by documenting the factors and practices that enabled these schools to perform well) was a follow-up activity of this assessment programme. Thus, LGP was not only a programme based on large scale assessment, but one that was backed up with both small scale and large scale research studies resulting in tremendous learning.

‘The performance of a school is a result of complex interplay of several social, economic, infrastructure and schooling quality related issues; one school of thought suggests that socio-economic factors including, caste, household income and occupation, education levels of the parents etc. is largely responsible for children dropping out of school and consequently demonstrating poor learning levels, while the other line of thinking suggests that irrespective of socio-economic issues, the quality of teaching is the major determinant of attendance of children in school (and consequently learning achievements)’. Therefore, the relative success or failure of a school can be attributed to two distinct aspects - the socio-economic, demographic and environmental indicators on the one hand and the in-school processes on the other. The research studies based on the LGP provided findings that disprove some of the commonly held perceptions while reinforcing some others. The findings show that the infrastructure facilities and the teacher profile seem to be largely non issues when it comes to student learning outcomes of schools; thus they appear to be desirable aspects but not critical in achieving success.

The key differentiator, between schools that do well on learning outcome versus those that do not, appear to be aspects related to school management and practices. Schools that do well display significantly higher level of discipline, commitment and teacher involvement. The manifestations of this are Head teacher and teachers’ presence, maintenance of good records, good teaching-learning materials in the school, cleanliness and good appearance of the school. The teachers in these schools seem to have traveled that extra mile by spending extra time (even on holidays, at times) with the children, encouraging them to practice, identifying weak children and given them special attention by way of remedial teaching, etc.

‘By far, the most critical differentiators are an ‘efficient teacher system’ comprising the commitment, discipline and efforts of the head teacher and other teachers on the one hand and an ‘involved community system’ comprising active and supportive SDMC and parents.

Moving on from the non-academic parameters to academic aspects², the LGP provided insights that very few expect from large scale assessments. Though the student assessments across the different States did not cover identical competencies, the learning areas covered in the assessments did overlap allowing for analysis at a pan-India level.

‘*Writing*’ clearly emerged as a weak area across the country. The other weak³ learning area in Languages is ‘*functional grammar*’. ‘*Comprehension related aspects*’ is the third area in which competencies such as ‘understanding the central theme of a passage’ or to ‘sequence words in a sentence’ were found to be weak. Some of the specific competencies identified as weak are, ‘taking dictation of unfamiliar words’, ‘understanding picture sequences and stringing together a story’, ‘writing guided composition using punctuation marks’, ‘knowing the functional

rules of sentence construction’ and ‘to make sentences understanding the tenses’

In Mathematics, the learning area involving ‘fractions, decimals and percentages’ is a weak area. ‘Solving of daily life problems’ and ‘problems related to currency, capacity, mass, area and volume’ is the other weak area with the following key competencies such as ‘conversion of rupee into paisa’, ‘solving currency problems (simple practical problems involving money) using basic operations’, ‘to measure volume’ and ‘calculating GCD and LCM’ identified as weak.

In the area of environmental science, ‘observing simple phenomenon on the Earth and the sky and drawing inferences’, ‘understanding and interpreting the spatial and interactive relationships between man and his environment’ and ‘awareness about one’s well-being in the context of the social and the natural environment’ are identified as weak learning areas; under these areas some specific competencies are identified as weak such as, ‘ability to read maps and identify directions in a map’, ‘to identify one’s own District, State, etc. on a map’, ‘knowledge of immediate environment such as different occupations in the region’, ‘awareness of socio-economic conditions such as the need for small families, difficulties of large families in small houses, and so on.

Though many commonalities emerged across the 5 States where LGP was implemented, there is also a great degree of variation that has emerged as well. These state specific variations provide deeper insights, however, to maintain the word limit of this article only the common trends have been listed.

There is evidence that large scale assessments not only have their place ‘under the sun’, but if conceptualized and implemented intelligently will always provide tremendous insights that are highly beneficial, not only at the policy framing level, but even at the classroom transaction level!

I conclude by quoting Geoff Masters, the head of Australian assessment giant, ACER (Australian Council for Educational Research), “If school assessments in the 21st century are to contribute to improved learning and better outcomes for all students, then a change in approach is required. Assessments must be designed for the fundamental purpose of establishing and understanding where learners are in their long-term progress in an area of learning at the time of assessment”. Therefore, with a few changes in our approach, all school level student assessments, which are invariably large scale, can become beneficial at multiple levels. LGP has successfully demonstrated a model.

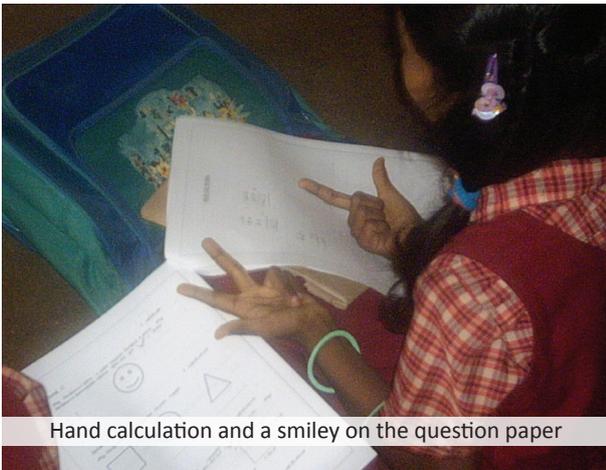




Enjoying assessment



Friendly oral assessment in process



Hand calculation and a smiley on the question paper



Smiling bright inspite of the approaching exam

¹Launched in November 2002 in Karnataka, the Learning Guarantee Programme (LGP) was the flagship programme of the Azim Premji Foundation; it spread to Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan Gujarat & Uttarakhand in a little over 2 years time.

²LGP assessment focused on the lower primary classes; the analysis of academic aspects in this article is based on classes 3 and 4

³A competency or a subject area is identified as 'weak' if more than three quarters of the students assessed have not attained the competency across all the States

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Using Data to Improve Student Achievement Pages 6-11

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