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Nidhi Panchal

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Teachers' Perceptions About the Mission Buniyaad Programme – A Large-Scale Foundational Literacy and Numeracy Initiative in Delhi Government Schools

Nidhi Panchal

University of Cambridge

ABSTRACT

There is a prominent shift in the discourse surrounding education policy and practice in India, specifically addressing the need to improve students' learning outcomes. Several national and global reports have pointed out students' dismally low foundational learning levels across India. In a bid to improve the learning levels of the students, the government runs national, as well as state-level intervention programmes. This study explores the perceptions of teachers and mentor teachers regarding one such state-level intervention programme: the Mission Buniyaad programme, a foundational literacy and numeracy improvement initiative implemented by the Delhi Government in its Directorate of Education (DoE) schools from 3-8 grades. It is grounded in qualitative research design, employing semi-structured interviews with 10 teachers and 5 mentor-teachers actively involved in the programme. The data is analysed via Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. The following four major themes emerged from the interviews, providing a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives – the programme's need, its design and pedagogical approach, its impact on students' learning outcomes, and implementational challenges and improvement suggestions. The findings from this study summarize the process, complexity, and overall dynamic nature of implementing the Mission Buniyaad programme. By analysing teachers' and mentor teachers' voices and thematically decoding their experiences, it presents a comprehensive understanding of the Mission Buniyaad programme and its impact on learning outcomes against the everyday realities of government schools in Delhi. The key findings pointed towards improvement in foundational learning of children who participated in the programme, inconsistent cascading of the programme, teacher shortage, and resource and infrastructural constraints. Overall, the insights gained from this study hold significant potential to inform policymakers, educators, and programme designers in refining and enhancing the FLN programmes.

KEYWORDS

FLN, foundational literacy and numeracy, policy, learning outcomes, implementational challenges

Introduction

Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) are critical skills that lay the groundwork for an individual's learning journey. The attainment of FLN is central to the discourse of education as well as the development of the nation. FLN impacts, at an individual level, the trajectory of the individual and his/her quality of life, and at a national level, the economic growth and GDP of the country. As evidenced in a study by Hanushek et al. (2008), each additional year of schooling can positively impact and increase an individual's income by 10% and contribute to a 0.37% average increase in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 of India recognizes the need to successfully acquire literacy and numeracy to support learning in school and throughout one's life. Section 2 of NEP 2020

explicitly focuses on FLN and posits it as a national priority, stating,

Attaining foundational literacy and numeracy for all children will thus become an urgent national mission, with immediate measures to be taken on many fronts and with clear goals that will be attained in the short term (including that every student will attain foundational literacy and numeracy by Grade 3). The highest priority of the education system will be to achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy in primary school by 2025. The rest of this Policy will become relevant for our students only if this basic learning requirement (i.e., reading, writing, and arithmetic at the foundational level) is first achieved. (Section 2.2, p. 8)

As a follow-up for attaining the goals of FLN as envisioned in NEP 2020, NIPUN (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy) Bharat initiative was launched in 2021. NIPUN Bharat aims to achieve FLN by 2026-27 for all children in the country by Grade 3. However, Mission Buniyaad¹, run by Government of Delhi, predates this recent pan-India FLN initiative.

Yet, in this study, the researcher will focus on only Delhi's FLN initiative, Mission Buniyaad, instead of the National level initiative, NIPUN Bharat initiative launched by the central government to achieve the national mission delineated in the National Education Policy 2020. The further sections will trace the need of the FLN, especially focussing on the need for this programme in the context of Delhi and how the programme was conceptualised and eventually evolved from 2018-2023. The rationale of the study section will briefly discuss the available literature and the gap that this study attempts to fill. The next section will delineate the choice of interpretative qualitative method approach undertaken to study the perception of the teachers and mentor-teacher about this programme and its impact on the learning outcomes of the students. Finally, the paper will thematically posit the results and limitations sections, followed by the conclusion.

Why Foundational Literacy and Numeracy?

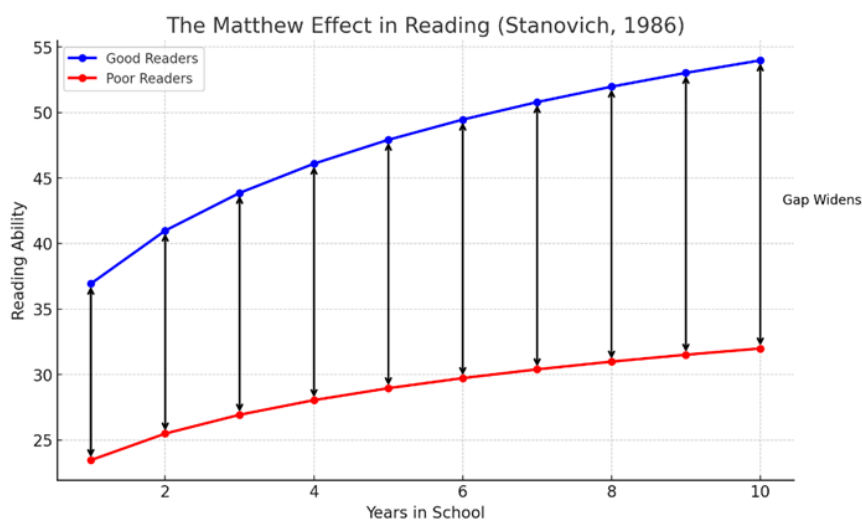
The significance of mastering foundational literacy and numeracy is evident in the fact that children who do not acquire these skills in the early years often struggle to catch up in later years. The "Matthew Effect" is a term used in popular literature to illustrate how once children fall behind, they are likely to keep falling behind, causing a widening gap between struggling readers and their peers (Stanovich, 1986). Children who quickly acquire foundational skills tend to feel motivated to read and learn more, leading to increased progress in their reading levels. Conversely, children who struggle to learn these skills may become demotivated when comparing themselves to proficient readers and make little progress as they advance through the curriculum. As a result, the gap between struggling readers, proficient readers, and those in between continues to widen as the grade level curriculum moves forward while some children fall behind (see figure 1) (Kapoor et al., 2021).

Further, the successive ASER (Annual Status of Education Report) surveys and National Achievement Surveys (NAS) have provided evidence of the dismal state of foundational learning skills across India for years (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2019). In fact, even after years of increasing gross enrolment ratios (GER), this positive trend means nothing in the face of students who reach class 9 sans basic learning skills, promoted due to the Right to Education (RTE), 2009 Act's No Detention Policy (NDP). Thus, an education system built on shaky foundations is bound to create an army of educated unemployable youth who lack basic learning skills and have a mere school certificate (Kapoor et al., 2021). Moreover, globally, according to World Bank's *Learning Poverty Brief* in 2019, in India, 54 percent of children do not achieve the Minimum Proficiency Level (MPL) at the end of primary school. All the data from these surveys continuously reiterate the dire need to improve foundational literacy and numeracy skills in India. This need was picked up and acknowledged in India's New Education Policy 2020. Therefore, FLN intervention programmes at the national

¹ Buniyaad is a Hindi word which means Foundation in English.

level, the NIPUN Bharat initiative, and Mission Buniyaad at the state level are welcome steps towards the attainment of the universalisation of foundational skills in Indian school children.

Figure 1
Matthew Effect in Reading



While these national and state-level initiatives aim to improve and monitor the FLN skills of Indian children, home environment factors, which vary among Indian children, can also explain the low performance in literacy and numeracy. Gruijters and Behrman in 2020 explored the link between family socio-economic status (SES) and the learning outcomes using data from a standardised assessment of students' math and literacy competencies. In their study, they found three main SES factors contributing to learning - educational resources at home, health and well-being, and school quality. In Asia, many studies have also linked the home environment to the attainment of foundational skills. For instance, Banerji et al. (2017) discovered in the South-Asian context that initiatives intended to improve mothers' literacy levels and increase their awareness and involvement in their children's education at home can have little yet statistically significant positive effect on the learning outcomes of the children. In 2022, Kumar and Behera, in a systematic meta-analysis of 38 primary studies from 2013-2022, identified that home environment factors affect literacy and numeracy learning. However, there is still insufficient empirical research in lower-middle-income countries that conclusively delineate the impact of SES on children who are first-generation learners (Banerji et al., 2017; Middha, 2022).

Overall, the low foundational skills in India found in the successive national and state-level surveys are not exclusively linked to just poor educational quality but a range of competing inside and outside school factors that contribute to these national learning crises.

Background of the Study

In the context of Delhi, the seeds of this emphasis on FLN were sowed through the Chunauti initiative that primarily aimed at improving the grade 9 deteriorating results. Among the many reasons for the decline in the results was the lack or variation in the students' basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills. Finally, in 2018 Mission Buniyaad was launched against the backdrop of successive Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER) pointing towards the dismal state of literacy and numeracy skills of the children nationally, and the National Achievement Survey (NAS) 2017 survey and Government of Delhi's own survey (2016) results mirrored the ASER surveys' findings. All the data was directed at improving FLN for future success in learning in the school setting.

After a rigorous literature review and several rounds of consultation with the stakeholders and experts,

Mission Buniyaad's conceptual framework was developed. Pratham's "Teaching at the Right Level" (TaRL) approach was adapted to build the FLN competencies in government schools in Delhi. This approach assessed the learning levels of the children using a simple tool, according to which the children were later grouped based on their learning level rather than their grades. Further, presently, various engaging and interactive teaching-learning activities are employed, and the students' progress is continuously tracked (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2019).

Mission Buniyaad Program - Overview

2018-2019

The official press release of the Delhi Government stated, "The immediate reason of launching Mission Buniyaad was the National Achievement Survey, 2017 report which pointed out that a large proportion of Government school students of classes 3, 5, and 8 are way below their class level." This, along with ASER survey reports and Delhi governments' baseline and end-line assessments in Delhi Government schools for programs like – Chunauti, helped to bring the significant learning gaps of students into focus. The picture painted by the data from these surveys pointed towards a need for an intervention program that not only focussed primarily on the 6-8 grade for improvement of results in classes 9 and 10 but also solved the problem at the root, that is, at the primary and upper-primary level, where the intervention can have an impact that resolves the learning gap for future learning in the school setting.

A circular by the Department of Education, Delhi, dated 26th March 2018, explains the rationale behind launching Mission Buniyaad –

There are still about 2.5 lakh students of classes 6 to 8 who need support to develop fluency in reading class-level text and about 2.2 lakh students need more focused practice to solve basic Math operations with confidence. In order to bring alive, the vision, with effect from 1st July 2018, there would be no child in DoE schools who is not able to read fluently or solve basic Math operations, and it has been decided to launch 'Mission Buniyaad.

Central to this circular was that it defined learning goals in terms of student competencies. Therefore, the main objective of the Mission Buniyaad was that all students reach the 'advanced story level' in the first language and 'division level' in mathematics in Delhi Government schools from 3-8 grades, preferably gaining the FLN competencies in primary and upper primary grades.

Post-Covid

Like everything in the world, Mission Buniyaad was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. After two years of running during summer vacation in 2018 and 2019, it was not held in 2020 and 2021. However, with the reopening of the schools, Mission Buniyaad had to fill bigger shoes and, this time, bridge the learning gap caused by two years of school closures. According to the circular dated 12th April 2022 for all the stakeholders of Mission Buniyaad Program, the following are the goals of the campaign –

- All students can fluently read short stories with comprehension in Hindi/Urdu/English.
- All students can write a short sentence in Hindi/Urdu/English.
- All students can solve operations involving subtractions with borrowing and simple two digits by one-digit division in numerical and word problems.

Structure of the Program

According to the School Education Reforms in Delhi 2015-2020 Interventions Handbook, Mission Buniyaad is structured in the following seven steps (figure 2). While the program's key design elements remained similar to the 2019 version, there was a slight change in the 2022-2023 version. Along with the addition of the English language, in the 2023 summer vacation, all students from all levels, even the advanced

levels, were called to school rather than just those with low foundational skills. The impact of this is discussed further in the results section.

Figure 2

Key Design Element of Mission Buniyaad



Source: Mission Buniyaad Key Elements adapted from School Education Reforms in Delhi 2015-2020 Interventions Handbook, p. 37

Rationale for the Study

This study aims to provide insights into the perceptions of teachers and mentor teachers involved in implementing this programme as limited research is available on FLN intervention programmes at such a large scale until grade 8 in India. So, it aims to address this gap and add to the existing literature.

Most of the available external research on programme effectiveness, particularly in the area of improving foundational skills, has been conducted only by Pratham, an NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) in India, in collaboration with the Abdul Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) headquartered in MIT for their FLN intervention approach TaRL. Since the early 2000's, a dozen impact evaluations employing randomised controlled trials (RCTs) as research methodology were conducted by Pratham to evaluate its FLN intervention programmes in different parts of India to test "what works" to improve the learning outcomes of children. Their studies evaluated both – volunteer-led interventions held during summer camps or as out-of-school remedial classes to state-wide government partnerships across India (Banerji & Chavan, 2016; Banerjee et al., 2015).

The findings from these studies have consistently pointed towards improvements in children's foundational skills if their Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach is effectively implemented, mainly if the assessment data is used to drive concrete action, ability grouping is used, and instructional methods are tailored for each context. The evidence from these trials also suggested that short instructional periods and ongoing support for teachers were crucial and that simply providing materials or training without follow-up has little impact (Banerjee et al., 2017)

However, critics within and outside the government have criticised Pratham and ASER's reductionist view of education. They claimed that this view reduces learning to a "minimalist level" (Raina, 2013; Kumar, 2015), prioritising the ability to perform basic reading and numeracy skills rather than seeing it as a multifaceted and dynamic process (Banerji & Chavan, 2016). Moreover, many people involved with teaching and pedagogy have also raised concerns over the hyper-focus on assessments, measurements and outputs as it runs the risk of creating an accountability culture in schools where the focus will be to present evidence which will make them 'look like' good school rather than focussing on the student learning (Pritchett & Beatty, 2012).

In fact, the critiques of this TaRL model of Pratham have further iterated that it only treats a symptom of a larger disease by raising all children to a common baseline. It does not help the children catch up to the grade-level curriculum, leaving the children still behind (Beery, 2018). Moreover, in India, like in many developing countries, as the grade progresses, the learning expectations increase, and the curriculum becomes

more demanding. Pritchett and Beatty's 2012 working paper provides evidence that the curriculums of developing countries are extremely demanding and overambitious. In the end, the teachers have to teach the stipulated grade curriculum even when the children might not have the requisite preparation to understand it. Therefore, the children who are left behind in their early years can never catch up (Muralidharan, 2017) and the expectations of the demanding curricula are never met by just achieving the foundational skills.

Despite these arguments, Pratham has legitimised and evolved this pedagogical approach through continuous monitoring and evaluation using RCTs in India and even in Africa. It is argued that evidence from RCTs may not be significant enough to apply to scalable government policies (Deaton, 2010). Pratham's TaRL approach failure in the states of Bihar and Uttarakhand is a classic example of how small 'proof of concept' evidence produced by RCTs might fail when scaled in the government ecosystem (Banerjee et al., 2017).

Between 2008 and 2010, the government partnerships that scaled TaRL approach within the states of Bihar and Uttarakhand showed disappointing results. The approach failed when implemented within the government public school ecosystem through teachers. Teachers' non-compliance to use the approach was stated as one of the core reasons for its failure. The teachers believed the approach was effective, but it was time intensive, and they did not have time as they had to complete the syllabus on time (Banerjee et al., 2017). In Bihar, when implemented during the summer camp by the teachers, the approach worked rather than when integrated during the school year (Banerji & Chavan, 2016).

The failures in scaling in the government ecosystem led Pratham to refine and develop two further scalable iterations of this programme in Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, which showed significant improvement in students' learning outcomes (Banerjee et al., 2016).

However, in the Delhi education system, the TaRL approach has been adapted by the Delhi state government in the form of Mission Buniyaad in 2017. Unlike previous RCTs carried out by Pratham and J-PAL, the research evaluating this initiative has been limited to a single case study before COVID-19 or to larger studies that have examined the evolution and impact of all the reforms introduced by the Delhi government to improve the public education system in Delhi. The Case Study on Mission Buniyaad in 2019 by the Government of NCT of Delhi was only limited to the Northeast district schools out of the 13 districts in Delhi. Therefore, the evidence from the study cannot be considered representative of the initiative all over Delhi.

On the other hand, in 2021, the report by Boston Consulting Group (BCG) delineates all the educational reforms undertaken by Delhi government from 2015-2020. Aiyer and colleagues' (2021) study was conducted from 2016 to 2018 as the Mission Buniyaad programme was still evolving, so it does not explicitly focus on this programme. Meanwhile, the study by Anand and Lall (2022) was a qualitative study that was an appreciative enquiry in which the sampling only included the highest-performing schools in Delhi. Though, Anand and Lall employ a critical lens in the research but lack of diversity in sampling still skews the data, effectively marginalising the voices and experiences of teachers from diverse educational contexts in Delhi. But, all these three studies largely provide insights into the whole public education system rather than solely on Mission Buniyaad. Therefore, giving limited insights about the Mission Buniyaad programme.

Nonetheless, the evidence from all the studies conducted on Delhi reforms point towards a significant improvement in foundational skills. They all have analysed the quantitative data from the baseline and end-line assessments in Mission Buniyaad, showing significant learning gains. Therefore, at the core, these studies have focussed on the overall success of this programme; they have, on the fringes, mentioned the issues of inconsistent implementation of the programme, issues of teacher shortage, student absenteeism, and conflict due to ability grouping. (Aiyer et al., 2021; Boston Consulting Group, 2021; Anand & Lall, 2022).

Also, none of the studies have been conducted after COVID-19, which exclusively amplifies and brings to the fore the voices and experiences of two critical actors in the programme's implementation – the teachers and mentor-teachers. By exploring their perspective about the strengths, weaknesses, and barriers faced during implementation and their impact on the learning outcomes, the insights emerging out of this study can provide recommendations for evidence-based decision-making at the policy level.

In addition, since education reforms are iterative in nature, the findings from this study can be used to improve future FLN intervention programmes in Delhi and add to the research on TaRL approach.

Research Method

The present study is based within the interpretivist research paradigm. This paradigm's core ontological and epistemological assumptions delineate the idea of multiple socially constructed realities. This aligns with the central aim of this research to understand the socially constructed realities and subjective interpretations of the teachers and mentor-teachers² (MTs) of their experience of Mission Buniyaad (Cohen & Manion, 1994). Therefore, the interpretive paradigm allows for an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the main unit of the analysis of this study, that is, the Mission Buniyaad programme through the eyes of the teachers and MTs involved in its implementation in Delhi.

Moreover, this study adopts the qualitative research design in line with its underlying philosophical assumption of the interpretivist paradigm. The qualitative design offers a way to explore and understand the meanings individuals or groups give to their experiences and reality (Creswell, 2014) but also helps to answer the main research question of this study –

- What are the perceptions of teachers and mentor-teachers about the Mission Buniyaad Programme and its impact on the learning outcomes?

Moreover, consistent with its interpretive paradigm, this study's research methodology is based on a phenomenological approach. The researcher chose this method to explore the participants' lived experiences regarding the Mission Buniyaad programme. By employing phenomenology, this study aims to unravel the essence of these experiences and the meanings participants ascribe to them.

To achieve this, in-depth semi-structured interviews were employed because they were the most appropriate for answering the main research question and aligned perfectly with the paradigmatic and methodological assumptions underpinning this qualitative study. They allowed inquiry into the participants' individual feelings, opinions, and experiences, recognising them as credible experts (Goodman, 2001) about the Mission Buniyaad programme.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The sample (N=15) for this study includes – 10 teachers and 5 mentor-teachers from government schools in Delhi (see table 1). The participants for this study were selected using a purposive sampling technique that is “used to select respondents that are most likely to yield appropriate and useful information.” (Kelly, 2010, p. 317). Since Mission Buniyaad was conducted during the summer vacations, not all the teachers were involved in the programme. For this study, purposive sampling ensured that participant teachers and MTs were involved in implementing the programme and had the requisite knowledge and insights about the Mission Buniyaad programme.

All the participants' rights, privacy, and confidentiality were ensured in this study. Prior consent was obtained from all of them, informing them about the objective of the research in detail, the voluntary nature of the participation, and assurance of anonymity.

Data Collection Instrument - Semi-structured Interview Schedule

Two different semi-structured interview schedules were designed—one for teachers (appendix 1) and the other for mentor teachers (appendix 2)—to collect their responses and experiences about the Mission Buniyaad

² The Mentor-Teacher cadre was created by Delhi Government in 2016, selecting them from the existing pool of 200 teachers. In Mission Buniyaad, they are an essential part of the implementation process as they guide teachers, observe classes, develop materials, and propose changes, playing a key role in policy and programme execution. This study includes them under the term “teacher” in the title because these mentor-teachers are also essentially teachers.

programme.

Two education experts reviewed these semi-structured interview schedules to ensure they adequately covered the content they intended to measure, assessing aspects like clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness. They were modified and edited according to the suggestions. This validation step was critical for establishing the schedules' validity before they were used for data collection (Creswell, 2014).

Table 1
 Interview Sample Groups

Participant	Participant IDs	Condition of Participation
10 Teachers (5 Primary, 5 Elementary)	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8, T9, T10	Anonymous
5 Mentor-Teachers	MT1, MT2, MT3, MT4, MT5	Anonymous

Data Analysis

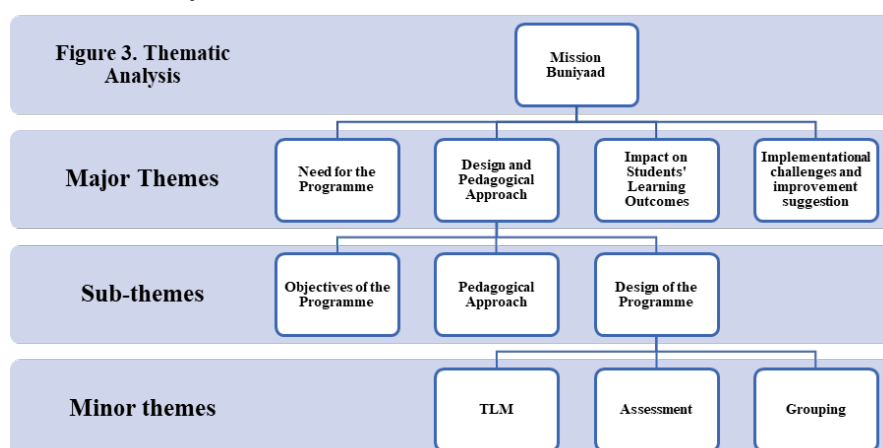
Transcription: With prior consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of the data. The transcription allowed a textual representation of the data, making it easier to identify key themes and patterns for the analysis of the data.

Thematic Analysis: In this study, the interview data was thematically analyzed by adapting Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide, which involves a systematic familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes and writing the analysis. Therefore, this study involved – identifying, organizing, and interpreting the patterns, themes, and categories within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) The transcripts of the data were read and re-read to generate initial codes that captured significant ideas, concepts, and recurring patterns in the data. The codes were finally grouped into broader themes and sub-themes. Overall, the data analysis went through iterative cycles of coding, theme development, and analysis.

Results

This section will provide an overview of the key findings that emerged from the teachers' and mentor teachers' perspectives and experiences, grouped under four major themes. Through their voices, this section sheds light on the various dimensions of the Mission Buniyaad programme through the major four themes – the need for the programme, its design and pedagogical approach, its impact on students' learning outcomes, and implementational challenges and improvement suggestions (see figure 3).

Figure 3
 Thematic analysis



Theme 1 - The key underlying reasons that teachers and mentor-teachers cite for the need and implementation of the Mission Buniyaad Programme

The findings reveal several key factors that contribute to the perceived need and implementation of the programme from the perspective of the teachers and mentor-teachers. The mentor-teachers traced the need for this programme to the Chunauti programme of 2016 that brought the alarmingly low foundational learning levels of students in elementary school and especially grade 9, to the forefront. In this programme, students' assessment and ability grouping according to their learning levels served as an 'eye-opener' for teachers and parents, revealing the government school students' sub-optimal learning levels. This programme suffered initial pushback due to significant barriers of limited infrastructure, syllabus restructuring, and unfamiliar pedagogical practices. Since this programme was run for 6-9 grade students, Mission Buniyaad was launched in response to address the need to improve learning levels from grade 3 onwards.

Further, the MTs and teachers identified the urgent need for this programme in the wake of the Pandemic-related learning loss. According to them, the school closures adversely affected the students as the lack of resources completely cut them off from learning, resulting in huge gaps in their knowledge and skills.

Moreover, the RTE Act's admission in age-appropriate class (AAAC) and the No-detention Policy (NDP) were emphasized by teachers and MTs as critical factors that have caused the need and implementation of this programme. They unanimously agreed that these two were the leading reasons for the low learning levels of the students and were generating a recurring need for this programme. Through AAAC, students with little or no prior schooling were admitted to their age-appropriate grade level at various times during the school year. These students often struggled to cope with the grade-level curriculum. One MT states that:

children are taking admission at any time of the session – some come during mid of the session, so how do we integrate that child? Sometimes, the child has not studied in 1st or 2nd grade but is admitted straight away in 3rd grade. Similarly, there are cases where the child has been admitted to 6th grade and has never attended school before that. (M3)

In addition, the teachers and MTs expressed significant concern about promoting students to the next grade despite low learning levels and the need for foundational skills due to the NDP. They believed that a combination of AAAC and NDP engineered a vicious cycle for the recurring need for such an intervention programme because students with substantial learning gaps are continuously promoted until grade 9. However, they said that these students are eventually pushed out of the education system sans NDP post-8th grade.

The teachers also recognised that public education quality was not optimal. According to them, the quality of education was sacrificed at the altar of achievement of high enrolment rates and the promise of universalisation of education. Echoing this, a teacher mentioned, "We have attained the 'quantity' part, but we have neglected the quality of education. Therefore, we need a programme like Mission Buniyaad." (T9)

They also pointed towards the quality of teacher education programmes and lack of research in literacy, especially FLN, further impacting the educational quality and creating the need to implement such programmes to improve the learning outcomes.

The teachers discussed parents' lack of support and involvement in the child's learning as a potential factor contributing to the need for this programme. The teachers emphasised the parents' critical role in the children's educational achievement and their role in providing an enabling learning environment to the students at home. The teachers stated that the students who lacked parental support and guidance or were first-generation learners were often with low learning levels. Thus, they put students' time spent studying after school as a crucial factor for their learning outcomes.

Theme 2 - Perceptions of teachers and mentor-teachers about the overall design of the Mission Buniyaad Programme and its pedagogical approach?

The findings suggest that the teachers and MTs positively perceive this programme's design and pedagogical approach. However, both agreed that this programme is ill-fitted for the classroom realities of Delhi's Education system.

Objectives of the Programme

The MTs and teachers understood the main objective of this programme as improving the basic literacy and numeracy skills of the students who are academically weak, slow learners, or left behind in the classroom. The MTs further included bridging the Pandemic-induced learning gap as another significant objective of the programme. Also, MTs mentioned the new additions in the programme – the end-line writing assessment because it was felt that only the oral assessments were not reliable enough and the inclusion of writing skills for the holistic development of language was needed; moreover, many schools taught the other subjects in English, the need for the English language was acknowledged, and it is added to the programme.

Pedagogical Approach

The pedagogical approach used in this programme – TaRL- was perceived positively by the MTs and teachers. They understood that this approach promoted teaching at the child's learning level using an activity-based learning approach. Also, MTs and teachers recognized that this pedagogical approach significantly differed from the pedagogical approach they employed in their regular classrooms to complete the syllabus. This approach provided an exclusive opportunity for the teachers to focus on developing basic foundational literacy and numeracy competencies. The curricular expectations did not allow them to slow down or focus on the students who were unable to cope with the curriculum in the regular class. According to them, the approach allowed them to tailor their instructions as per the level and needs of the students during summer vacations without curricular expectations and less administrative work.

However, the findings further revealed that even though the teachers liked the thought behind the approach, they did not think it was a practical approach that would work in the public education system of Delhi. They all agreed that this approach only works well with small class sizes, without infrastructural constraints, and with motivated teachers. The only teachers who successfully implemented and yielded massive learning gains using this pedagogical approach were those with less class size, were motivated to teach, were supported by the school leadership, and had a good infrastructure in their schools. Further, all the teachers denied any impact of this approach in their pedagogy used in regular classroom teaching.

Design of the Programme – TLM, Assessment, and Grouping

TLM: The findings reveal divided perceptions of the teachers and MTs about the teaching-learning material (TLM) provided in this programme, mainly – the teachers' manual, textbooks, cue cards, and sample lesson plans (LPs). MTs held the view that these TLMs were beneficial for teachers who could not or did not want to put a lot of effort into pre-planning everything for their classroom teaching. These TLMs were easily adaptable to all the contexts with little preparation for arranging resources for activities. They further discussed elementary school teachers' resistance and lack of familiarity in employing these TLMs that centred on activity-based instructional strategies to teach low-level skills.

On the other hand, the findings unveil teachers' diverse opinions about the employability of the TLMs in their classroom context. Few teachers liked the TLMs and used them extensively in their teaching-learning process. They reported that these TLMs were easy to follow and adapt, and the curricular load in the textbooks was significantly less, which did not intimidate the students. Many other teachers felt the TLMs were insufficient and inappropriate for their students' needs, so they planned their lessons personally.

Assessment: The findings suggest that both the teachers and MTs felt that the assessment practices in this programme helped diagnose the learning level of students. Many believed that the tool did not comprehensively evaluate the learning levels of the students and needed to include more dimensions.

According to them, there were certain critical competencies and skills that this tool did not test as it moved from one level to another. A few MTs and teachers also discussed that for the first stage, the tool should test all the alphabets/letters instead of just 4-5 as they could have been more representative of the learning gain of the students. In addition, they both have significant concerns about repeatedly using the same tool for assessing the students through the programme. They discussed incidences where the accuracy and effectiveness of the tool were compromised because the students had almost memorised the tool. Moreover, many teachers emphasised that the assessments were held too soon to report or observe any tangible signs of improvement in the students' learning outcomes.

Grouping: The findings derived from the teachers' narrative pointed towards the positive and negative impact of ability grouping. On the one side, the grouping motivated students to work hard and gave them a sense of accomplishment when they reached the next level; on the other hand, there were incidents of bullying and low self-esteem among Level 1 students with changing friendship patterns.

Support and Training: The findings illustrate that all the MTs were sufficiently trained and supported for their role. However, many teachers revealed that they were not sufficiently trained and lacked support to implement this programme. Pre-dominantly, their trainings with Mission Buniyaad Coordinators (MBCs) or MTs lasted 15-20 minutes, focusing on assessing the students and maintaining regular data records. The lesson plans were just circulated. Only a few teachers said their MTs, MBCs, and HoS (Head of School) supported and guided them. Further, few teachers felt pressured to put a show or performance of teaching under the pressure of the school leadership.

Theme 3 – The perceived impact of the Mission Buniyaad Programme on students' learning outcomes according to teachers and MTs

The findings establish that the teachers and MTs perceive the impact of the programme beyond the quantifiable data. They see the impact of this programme in a range of variables.

The MTs and teachers report that this programme does improve the foundational learning levels of the students who attend it regularly. The learning gains are not massive and often unequal due to the learning environment, teacher motivation, and parental support. However, they observed learning gains in dimensions that were beyond the baseline and end-line data, like an increase and improvement in – classroom participation, attendance, confidence, interest in the subjects, and a decrease in problematic behaviour.

The teachers further found that this programme has generated awareness among parents about their children's learning level, which has increased parental involvement in some cases. The MTs also report similar findings in the context of teachers, where they said that due to this programme, there is increased interest and awareness about the learning levels in the schools and among teachers. However, according to both, teachers and MTs, the impact of this programme cannot be measured by the projected data as it is plagued by several inconsistencies caused due to a hierarchical accountability culture that has instilled fear and pressured the teachers into reporting certain types of learning improvements. There is fear in teachers of the authorities who would likely question them if the learning level does not increase. Everyone in the hierarchical chain can feel pressure. When the HoS is questioned, they, in turn, question the teacher why the data does not improve. This type of accountability culture has instilled fear in teachers. For instance, M2 states,

A lot of time, the department questions why the data is not improving. So, when there is so much pressure from the authorities, the teachers manipulate the data. Unfortunately, the data is not just for the official purpose but for the teachers to tailor their pedagogy according to the needs of the children. The department should understand that if they depend on the teachers' data, then they should give teachers some autonomy. They should not pressure the teachers and understand that if the data is not increasing, there can be many factors behind it. However, since the HoS has a lot of pressure from above and is answerable if the data does not improve, that pressure is transferred to the teachers in the hierarchy. But this is not true for all schools or teachers. Many teachers utilize this time judiciously and are motivated to teach, which ultimately positively impacts the students' learning outcomes. (M2)

Furthermore, in the eyes of the MTs and teachers, this programme has been insufficient in bridging the huge learning gaps that exist between the regular curriculum and the learning levels. They acknowledge that the curricular expectation is way too expansive for them to be bridged by merely mastering low-level foundational skills. Even after mastering the FLN skills, many students cannot cope with the curriculum and are eventually pushed out of the system after grade 9.

Overall, the findings suggest improvement in the FLN skills of the students who attend this programme regularly. However, the effectiveness of this improvement remains questionable as it barely translates in regular classrooms and fails to overcome the learning gaps to achieve the grade-appropriate learning level. Thus, having negligible/minimal impact on the overall educational outcomes of the students.

Theme 4 - The implementational challenges of the Mission Buniyaad Programme, and suggestions offered by teachers and MTs for its improvement.

The findings that emerged from the narratives of MTs and teachers point towards certain barriers that pose major challenges in implementing this programme in the Delhi Government schools. Firstly, the large class size and extremely skewed student-teacher ratios present a major challenge in implementing this programme. This replicated the regular classroom conditions where the teachers cannot give individual attention to all the students who need it. Further, there is low teacher attendance and a shortage of teachers because of summer vacations.

A teacher explains the challenge of class size, teacher shortage, and infrastructure in implementing this approach, stating,

A big loophole is that they have called all the students in Mission Buniyaad this time. They should just call the students who need it. Now, level 1 and level 2, both students are coming. We do not know how to cope. The guidelines are not clear. This year we are not able to understand how even to divide the students. On what basis should we divide them, Hindi, English, or Maths? We have just divided them within the classrooms, with level 1 at one side and level 2 at one side. At whose level should I teach now? TaRL looks good on paper, but it is impossible to implement in classrooms. It will only be possible when we have enough rooms and teachers available to implement it. For instance, we have three subjects. According to the calculations, we need 27 sections to follow this approach. But neither we have space nor teachers to implement it properly. TaRL is a good approach but is not implementable in reality. (T6)

Due to summer vacations, the MTs and teachers also discuss how this programme does not reach the students who really need it because of rampant absenteeism and reverse migration. The major demographic of students who study in the Delhi government schools is of children of migrant workers who go back to their villages during summer vacations. Also, the extreme weather conditions in Delhi and the infrastructural constraints provide a less-than-ideal learning environment in which both the students and teachers are unable to focus on studying. Many teachers mentioned the heat wave and multiple students falling sick during classes. A MT narrates,

It is very hot in the summer. It is uncomfortable for the children and teachers to come in this weather and sit. You cannot imagine, but some schools run in tents and do not have proper infrastructure. Some school buildings are under construction, and it is very difficult to organize the seating of different groups. In some schools, fans do not work. So, I think it is a major challenge. If students and teachers are not feeling physically and mentally well, they cannot even study under such circumstances. In such a case, the programme becomes a burden and, therefore, is ineffective. It will be better to conduct it under better conditions. (M1)

The MTs recognize the lack of supportive school authorities and Head of School (HoS)/Principal as another

hurdle in implementing this programme. One MT mentioned,

Sometimes, the school authorities are not supportive, and teachers face a lot of challenges accessing material for classroom teaching. They do not get the required TLMs on time or at all. However, there are places where the HoS are supportive and provide the materials. At some places, the HoS does not provide material on time, and the teachers are either forced to spend their own money or feel that they should not invest their own money for it. (M3)

Moreover, the findings from the narrative of MTs and teachers outline the following suggestions to overcome these barriers and improve this programme:

- Rethink the timeline of this programme in light of reverse migration patterns, absenteeism, extremely hot weather in Delhi, low teacher attendance, and a shortage of teachers during summer vacations.
- To only employ motivated teachers who volunteer to participate. Further, the employment of guest teachers for this programme was suggested.
- Competitions should be organized to make the programme more attractive for the students.
- The frequency of assessment should be rethought, and a new assessment tool should be given for each assessment.
- All the students should not be called, especially story and advanced story level students in Level 2 should not be part of this programme.
- Mid-day meals should be provided instead of meagre refreshments.

Limitations

Firstly, this study's sample size is small, restricting the generalisability of its findings to a broader population. Further, the participants were only chosen from the Directorate of Education, Delhi schools, not Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) schools. This limits the transferability of its results to the MCD context, where this programme is also running. Also, this study could have used additional data elicitation methods, such as focus group discussions, classroom observations, and document or curriculum analysis. This would have led to methodological triangulation (Barbour, 2018), where multiple forms of data confirm findings. Finally, this research could have benefitted from including a more diverse set of stakeholders as data sources, such as the students, parents, school principals, programme designers and policymakers.

Therefore, to strengthen the quality of this interpretive qualitative study and increase its validity, the research drew on Yardley's (2008) four key dimensions - sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. In this research, the researcher is flexible and sensitive to the context. The researcher acknowledged and accepted that the participants in the study might construct a reality about the Mission Buniyaad programme that differs from others. Moreover, the researcher described and explained the research process and context in this study to increase the overall rigor and transparency. In fact, each theme is also supported by direct quotes from the participants to avoid researcher bias. Finally, the research fills a significant gap and adds to the existing literature on foundational skills interventions.

Conclusion

This study attempts to understand the impact of the Mission Buniyaad programme on the students' learning outcomes. Further, it also attempts to outline a descriptive account of this programme's implementation against the backdrop of the everyday realities of Delhi's public education system and how the MTs and teachers have interpreted, accepted, and translated this reform into action. By engaging with the core actors of this programme – the MTs and teachers, this study sheds light on the dynamic interplay

between the individual actors, the education system, and programme implementation.

The MTs and teachers reported improvement in the foundational learning skills of the students who regularly attend this programme. However, these learning gains are small, and their effectiveness in helping the students overcome the ‘Matthew Effect’ is deemed difficult (Stanovich, 1986). According to the MTs and teachers, this programme has yet to be able to successfully pull out the students from the downward spiral of being left behind as their grade-level curriculum keeps moving forward. This programme is insufficient to bridge the learning gap between the child’s level and the grade-level curriculum which is consistent with the existing criticism of the TaRL approach. The pace of the curriculum is way faster than the student’s learning level (Banerjee et al., 2017; Pritchett & Beatty, 2012). Also, the MTs and teachers have reported that this programme has not been able to drive change in the traditional classroom pedagogy. The teachers revert to their traditional pedagogical approach that focuses on completing the syllabus (Anand & Lall, 2022).

Moreover, this study also exposes how the learning gaps begin early in the life of government school students and point toward larger systems of economic and social inequalities. These systems of inequality disproportionately impact the students’ learning outcomes in public education systems as these children are often caught up in the complex web of reinforcing circumstances related to poverty, family instability, and uneducated parents. The public education system needs to alleviate these problems but compounds these issues with large class sizes, teacher shortages, low-quality education, and poor infrastructure. Therefore, these issues inside and outside the school do not create an enabling learning environment for the children but rather perpetuate the vicious cycle where the child is left behind and is eventually pushed out of the education system. Therefore, along with the school quality, the family socio-economic status (SES) can play a critical role in the learning outcomes of the students in the public education system (Gruijters & Behrman, 2020; Kumar & Behera, 2022).

Further, the adaptation of the TaRL approach seems incompatible with the larger classroom realities of government schools in Delhi. According to all the MTs and teachers, this approach works well with a low student-teacher ratio. Due to large class sizes, infrastructural constraints, and teacher shortages, the learning gains from this approach are minimal.

In addition, the ability grouping of the students has also shown a negative impact on the students’ self-esteem and overall learning motivation. These ability labels in this programme are not harmless and reflect the lack of social, cultural, and economic capital that has contributed to the low learning levels of the students. However, it is reported by the teachers that the students become aware of their positions within the hierarchy due to the labels of Level 1 and Level 2, thereby sometimes leading to incidents of bullying those who they think are lower than them. This is consistent with the finding from the report of Boston Consulting Group (BCG) on the Delhi’s educational reforms where it found that in Chunauti programme, which was also based on TaRL approach, that “The Delhi-model’s choice to use year-round, all-day grouping has led to significant resistance from both teachers and parents, as students in lower learning groups may feel discriminated against and demotivated. 55 percent teachers out of ~3,800 upper primary teachers in our survey asserted that students in Nishtha and Neo-Nishtha feel discriminated against, indicating that this is an issue which needs to be addressed over time.” (BCG, 2021, p. 32).

Furthermore, the cascading of this programme is inconsistent, and there are significant gaps in what the teachers understand about the programme and what the MTs understand. In a top-down cascading training model, many teachers feel that they are not trained and supported to implement this programme. At every step, there is dilution in what type of knowledge is cascaded forward. Some of the teachers in this programme feel utterly helpless and believe that the assigned tasks take them away from the classroom and overburden them. They report that their trainings are focussed more on record-keeping, data reporting, and trying to put up a performance that is not related to the actual classroom teaching-learning processes. The MTs further discuss the inconsistencies in real and projected data due to the fear and pressure the teachers feel in reporting data.

Overall, the adaptation of this program’s design and pedagogical approach varies from school to

school. The schools have the flexibility to adapt this programme. However, this flexibility, combined with a lack of - awareness, expertise, training, and motivation, leads to the implementation of this programme for the sake of performance. The implementation of this programme seems to be affected by an entrenched belief in “isomorphic mimicry,” where schooling systems are rewarded for ‘looking like’ good schools instead of focussing their efforts towards actual learning. In the context of this programme, the educational hierarchy also demands and has perpetuated an accountability culture of compliance and inputs that does not care about the realities of learning but instead focuses on being rewarded for ‘looking good.’ So, in this programme, a good school is akin to a school that provides data that shows improved students’ learning levels. In the end, the teachers are forced to maintain this camouflage to not attract backlash from the above hierarchy. Therefore, in order to see the real impact of the programme, there is an urgent need to sabotage the camouflage many schools in this programme seem to hide behind (Pritchett & Beatty, 2012).

In conclusion, at its core, this study is not an evaluative study undertaken to determine whether this programme is a success or failure; rather, this study perseveres to build a richer understanding of the dynamic nature of rolling out such large-scale intervention programmes and how different actors perceive the impact of this programme on the learning outcomes of the students.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Interview Questions - For Mentor Teachers

1. Can you describe your experience with the Mission Buniyaad programme? What was your role in implementing the programme?
2. What do you think are the key objectives of the Mission Buniyaad programme?
3. How do you see the Mission Buniyaad programme impacting student learning outcomes, particularly in terms of foundational literacy and numeracy skills?
4. How do you assess and measure the effectiveness of the Mission Buniyaad programme in improving students' foundational literacy and numeracy skills, as well as in supporting teachers' professional development?
5. Can you describe the impact of the Mission Buniyaad programme on the students' foundational literacy and numeracy skills, as well as on the teachers who implement the programme?
6. What are the key components of the programme that you think have been most effective in improving student learning outcomes?
7. In your opinion, how effective has the programme been in achieving its goals, and how do you measure success?
8. TaRL relies heavily on assessments to determine the learning levels of children and group them accordingly. Over-reliance on testing and grouping based on test scores can create a sense of competition and comparison among children, leading to feelings of anxiety, stress, and low self-esteem. Have you encountered such cases?
9. How have you supported teachers in implementing the programme in their classrooms, and what challenges have you encountered in doing so? How do you support and guide the teachers in implementing the Mission Buniyaad programme?
10. How have you monitored student progress throughout the programme, and what tools have you used to do so?
11. Can you describe any challenges you have faced in mentoring and supporting teachers in implementing the Mission Buniyaad programme?
12. How have you collaborated with other stakeholders, such as parents and community members, to support the implementation of the programme?
13. What recommendations do you have for improving the programme to better meet the needs of students and teachers in your school?
14. What feedback have you received from teachers regarding the effectiveness of the TaRL approach in improving students' foundational literacy and numeracy skills?

Appendix 2

Interview Questions - For Teachers

1. How has the Mission Buniyaad programme impacted the way you teach foundational literacy and numeracy skills in your classroom?
2. What specific changes have you made to your teaching approach as a result of the programme?
3. How familiar are you with the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach?
4. Have you received any training on the TaRL approach, and if so, how has this impacted your teaching?
5. How has the TaRL approach influenced the way you design and deliver instruction in your classroom?
6. TaRL relies heavily on assessments to determine the learning levels of children and group them accordingly. Over-reliance on testing and grouping based on test scores can create a sense of competition and comparison among children, leading to feelings of anxiety, stress, and low self-esteem. Have you encountered such cases?
7. Have you noticed any improvements in your students' literacy and numeracy skills since the programme was implemented?

8. How have your students responded to the programme?
9. Have you received any additional support or training as a result of the program? If so, how has this impacted your teaching?
10. Have you noticed any changes in the level of student engagement since the program was implemented?
11. In your opinion, how effective has the programme been in achieving its goals?
12. Have you noticed any differences in the achievement levels of students who have participated in the programme compared to those who have not?
13. What challenges have you encountered while implementing the program, and how have you addressed them?
14. What suggestions do you have for improving the programme to better meet the needs of students and teachers in your school?