

Assessing Foundational Literacy and Numeracy

What is Foundational Literacy and Numeracy?

The early years (0 to 8 years) are the most significant period of growth and development in a child's life because this is when the foundations are laid for holistic development and all learning. Therefore, building children's foundational literacy and numeracy skills in their early years is important to help them progress in school and deal with day-to-day tasks in life. But how can we define the term 'foundational'?

The literature review of this terminology suggests that there are different ways of defining this term. Some define it by grade, while others specify a set of skills children should learn in primary school years. For example, the [Global Proficiency Framework for Reading and Mathematics](#) (GPF) defines the minimum proficiency levels learners are expected to obtain at the end of each of grades two through six.

Pratham believes that building a learning 'foundation' involves unlocking a child's potential to (1) meaningfully engage with written texts and (2) understand or manipulate numbers. We define these two skills as 'foundational.' Foundational skills are building blocks to other skills. They give children the foundations (hence the term "foundational literacy and numeracy") to access higher-order skills and other parts of the curriculum.

Foundational literacy can be defined as inclusive of listening and speaking with comprehension and ability to read and understand simple text. **Foundational numeracy** can be defined as inclusive of knowledge of number sense, competence in counting, basic operations, and mathematical thinking.

Assessments of Foundational Literacy and Numeracy

Children are expected to acquire a set of competencies in content areas in the early grades and move to more demanding competencies in subsequent grades. This is how learning trajectories are organised in most curricula around the world. Thus, national assessments and other globally recognized measurements are usually defined by grade expectations and by competencies in different domains.

However, the global evidence is clear — a large proportion of children are several grades below their grade level, even when it comes to basic reading and math. In many contexts, this is the case for the majority of students. Commonly used pen-paper assessments pegged to grade-level expectations fail to capture the variations in children's learning, especially for those who are well below grade-level expectations. Hence, these assessments are not useful for informing or guiding appropriate action.

At Pratham and the ASER Centre, we believe that it is important to articulate the following:

What are the basic or foundational skills that all children need to acquire in primary school? What should learners be able to do after 2-3 years of schooling and at the end of the primary stage (5 years or more)? It is also important to ask: What is realistically possible to achieve in a set timeframe, given children's current learning levels?

Pratham's decade long work with young children under the banner of 'Read India' was focused on helping children master basic skills in reading and arithmetic. This program helped children with listening comprehension, speaking, and developing their ability to read and understand a simple text. For numeracy, children were given support to develop their mathematical thinking, develop number sense, counting and application of simple operations using numbers. Learnings from this program served as a backbone for foundational tools.

Pratham's foundational reading tool attempts to understand whether a child is able to (1) recognize letters/ symbols; (2) decode words; (3) read a short text (grade 1 and grade 2 level); and (4) comprehend the short text. The math tool assesses children's abilities on the following: (1) number knowledge, (2) performing numerical operations, and (3) applying what they know to real-life problems. These are the basic or foundational skills that we believe every child must acquire before moving further in the grade-level curriculum.

The 'Read India' program generated strong evidence that these foundational skills can be acquired over a span of 40-50 days, with targeted instruction and support.

Beyond this basic assessment framework for foundational skills, 'Bonus tasks' can be added as appropriate, depending on the context. The design and the method of the assessments, including the style of recording data, are a result of many years of experiments and experiences on the ground. The focus of these efforts has been on how assessment data can be used for action not only by policymakers and planners, but more importantly by teachers and parents.

To build and sustain capability for using evidence for decision-making on a large scale, tools are simple, easy to use, fast and frugal. The public goods on assessments include a variety of resources for

- a) teachers/ instructors, to learn how to use these assessment tools in the classroom, interpret the results, and to use assessment results to guide the next steps in their teaching.
- b) policymakers, government officials, and other education leaders and practitioners to guide their thinking around FLN assessment strategy and the development of assessment tools.

Contact Us

To learn more about the assessment resources visit the FLN Resource Hub. For further information and guidance on the development and use of these resources kindly contact us at international@pratham.org.