

English Learning among Children Living in Interior Pockets of Rural Bengal: Factors Inside School and Beyond

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ABSTRACT: *The utility of English language, being the lingua franca of millions of people, is indisputable in everyday communication and job market. Nevertheless, the quality of English learning among children from poor families living in rural interior areas has seldom been studied by scholars. This paper aims to measure the English Reading Ability of primary school-going children living in interior rural area and understand how selected inside-school and outside-school factors influence their English reading ability. Data for this study were collected from 102 children enrolled in eight (8) Government-funded primary schools located in West Bengal. The assessment results indicated a general deficit of English reading and comprehension skill among these children. Out of six independent variables, three (3) variables (namely, total working hours of the schools, educational status of mothers, and private tuition) were found to have statistically significant influence over English learning level*

KEYWORDS: *Education Quality, English Reading Ability, Primary School, Human Capital, Accountability*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The utility of English language, being the lingua franca of millions of people, is indisputable in everyday communication and job market. It is most unlikely that the utility of English will wane in the near future (Crystal, 2003). Not learning English may put one in a disadvantaged position in a globalized market economy. British colonialists initiated various reforms in the Indian education system. One of the reforms was introducing English as the medium of official work by replacing Parsi language (Hunter, 1876).

Once colonial rule ended in 1947, the Three Language Formula (TLF) was adopted by the Government of India. TLF was proposed in the National Education Policy of 1964. It was re-endorsed by the National Education Policy of 1986 and the Programme of Action in 1992 (Vaish, 2008). However, TLF was not enough to cure the rural Bengali children's weakness in English language. The situation was actually worsened by a decision of the ruling Left Front government in the State of West Bengal, taken in 1982, to abolish the teaching of English at the Government primary schools (Acharya, 1982). The lack of good English teachers in the schools located in rural areas continued to aggravate the situation even after 30 years of implementing TLF (Siddiqui, 1999).

In 2007, a new-look Left Front government reversed the decision to abolish English teaching taken 25 years ago and re-introduced English into primary schools (Sen, 2015). Government of West Bengal decided to take assistance from British Council to improve English language teaching and learning standards by designing an English syllabus and rewriting the textbooks for primary levels. An evaluation study conducted in 2011 found that the newly introduced English textbooks were well accepted by teachers. The textbooks were being widely used by teachers and children (PRATHAM, 2011).

A study on the abolition of teaching English language at the primary schools of West Bengal estimated that a 10 per cent lower probability of learning English in primary schools would lead to a decline in weekly wages by 8 per cent. On average, the authors estimated, cohorts which did not learn English at primary schools received 26 per cent lower wages than the cohorts which learned English at the primary level (Chakraborty & Bakshi, 2012).

Another study, jointly conducted by the British Council and PRATHAM, analyzed Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) data regarding English reading abilities of primary-level school-going children. The study found a strong positive relationship between the students' English language performance and the level of reading performance in the language of school instruction. The study reiterated that being multilingual brought various social, educational, and long-term cognitive benefits for a child. The study asserted that the actual value of English language should be seen in terms of its role in India's multilingual society (O'Sullivan, 2013).

Successive Annual Status of Education Reports (ASERs) have also indicated towards poor level of English learning among children especially those who belong to rural areas.

Nevertheless, the quality of English learning with a focus on children living in interior pockets in rural areas has seldom been studied by scholars. With this background, the current paper aims to fulfil the following research objectives:

- a) To measure the English Reading Ability of the children who are living in interior pockets of rural areas.
- b) To understand how various inside-school and outside-school factors influence the English Reading Ability of children.

II. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Study Area and Sampling

The data used in this paper were collected from 102 children living in interior pockets of rural areas and were enrolled in government primary schools of West Bengal. The sample districts were Uttar Dinajpur and Hugli. These two districts are respectively located in the northern & southern zones of the state of West Bengal. The names of selected districts, blocks, and villages are given in Table I:

Table 1 : Study Area

District	Block	Villages
Uttar Dinajpur	Goalpokhar - I	Dharampur, Panjipara
	Kaliaganj	Tilgaon, Paligaon
Hugli	Chanditala - I	Patul, Ajabnagar
	Singur	Bajedhanyahana, Mollasimla

Eight (8) schools located in areas which are not easily accessible through publicly available transport like bus or train were identified. With help of the teachers, 102 children who were studying in Standard III or Standard IV, but living in the interior pockets were selected. The final selection criteria of these children was that had to walk more than 1 KM to reach their school.

2.2 Tools of Data Collection

Two types of tools were used for collecting primary data. The first tool was a semi-structured interview schedule which was used to collect data from parents of the children. The second tool was a standardized learning assessment tool which was used for the preparation of the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER). This tool was developed and standardized over the years by PRATHAM, an internationally reputed NGO, to assess English reading ability of the children. The same tool was used to assess the learning level of sample children. The learning assessment tool puts each child into any one of the five levels of English reading ability: Not even capital letters, capital letters, small letters, words, and simple sentences.

2.3 Variables for Statistical Analysis

The learning level of a child depends on various inside-school factors as well as outside-school factors. Three (3) Inside-school factors and three (3) outside-school factors for analysis. The selected factors are as follows:

- Inside-school factors: Student-Classroom Ratio (SCR), Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR), and total working hours of the school.
- Outside-school factors: Educational status of the mother, educational status of the father, and private tuition,

These six (6) factors were selected as independent variables (IVs) as these factors could influence the learning process and learning outcome of children. We treated English reading ability as the dependent variable. Statistical tests were conducted to test hypotheses regarding the relation of each combination of independent and dependent variables.

III. FINDINGS

3.1 Profile of the Teachers & Functioning of the Schools

A profile of the teachers containing data regarding their age, sex, and social category is shown in Table II. Age group-wise distribution of teachers showed that 27.6 per cent of the teachers were aged 50 years or more. During fieldwork, it was observed that two of the teachers were on the verge of retirement in two schools

in Hugli district. Other teachers were very much worried after thinking about the work pressure in the coming days. According to their previous experiences, the replacement of teachers was a time taking process.

Table II: Profile of Teachers

Socio-Demographic Characteristics	Category	Number of Teachers (N=29)
Age	Below 30	3 (10.3)
	30-39	8 (27.6)
	40-49	10 (34.5)
	50 and more	8 (27.6)
Sex	Female	7 (24.1)
	Male	22 (75.9)
Distance from school to residence	Less than 10 Km	16 (56.1)
	10 Km to 14.9 Km	8 (27.6)
	15-19.9 Km	1 (3.4)
	More than 20 Km	4 (13.8)

(Figures in parentheses are percentages)

As indicated earlier, the distance of the school from a bus stop or train station was a criterion for the selection of the schools. It was found that 56.1 per cent of teachers resided within a 10 KM radius of the school. The rest of the teachers lived at a distance which was more than 10 KM. The teacher who had to cover the longest distance travelled roughly 64 KM every day for which he needed to journey for more than 5 hours every day.

Parents reported instances of teachers arriving late and leaving early, resulting in reduced instructional time. Some teachers were found to regularly reach school late, dedicating less time to teaching. During our visits, we observed similar patterns—18.5% of all teachers (excluding those on leave) arrived at school at least 30 minutes to an hour late.

In one sample village in Kaliaganj block of Uttar Dinajpur, it was almost 11 AM when we reached the school. We met some of the children on the road, who guided us to reach school. The school area was big, surrounded by a brick wall and there was a small playground in the middle. The classrooms were almost full, but there was no teacher. Crossing the ground, we entered the teachers' room. There were just three teachers. It was almost 12 noon when two other teachers including a female teacher reached the school. They pointed out that the infrequent availability of public transport was a reason for being so late.

3.2 Profile of the Sample Households

Most of the sample households exhibited characteristics indicative of economic hardship. The study found that 80 households (78.4%) did not own any land, while the remaining 22 households (21.5%) possessed small plots of 0.5 acres or less. However, these limited landholdings were insufficient to generate adequate income to meet the financial needs of the households. Among the 102 surveyed households, 29 (28.4%) had at least one adult member who had to migrate to other states for employment. Only 14.7 per cent were cultivators, 7.0 per cent worked as skilled professionals and just 1.5 per cent of main earners were serving in government or semi-government organizations. The remaining primary earners were engaged labourers in various other sectors including agriculture, jewellery shops & transport sectors.

In 10 households (9.8 per cent) there was someone in their family who completed higher secondary level education. In 32.4 per cent of households, the member having the highest educational qualification completed secondary-level education. In 18.6 per cent of households, the member having the highest educational qualification did not study beyond the primary level. In another 44.1 per cent households, the member having the highest educational qualification did not study beyond upper- primary level.

3.3 English Reading Ability of Children

Data on English reading ability of the children in the study area are presented in Table III. Out of 102 students, only 22.5 per cent of students could read simple sentences written in English. There were 26.5 per cent students who could read simple English words but could not read sentences. On the other hand, 11.8 per cent of students could not even recognize capital letters.

Table III: English Reading Ability of Standard III and Standard IV Students

English Reading Ability Level	Number of students (%)		
	Standard III	Standard IV	Total
Simple Sentence	12 (24.0)	11 (21.2)	23 (22.5)
Word	15 (30.0)	12 (23.1)	27 (26.5)
Small letter	7 (14.0)	8 (15.4)	15 (14.7)
Capital letter	12 (24.0)	13 (25.0)	25 (24.5)
Not even capital letter	4 (8.0)	8 (15.4)	12 (11.8)
Total	50 (100.0)	52 (100.0)	102 (100.0)

(Figures in parentheses are percentages)

The deficit in English reading and comprehension skills is evident from the data presented in Table III. Interestingly, the deficit was more among Standard IV students than the Standard III students even though it was rational to expect that Standard IV students would perform better than Standard III students. At the lowest level of English reading ability, there were 8.0 per cent Standard III students and 15.4 per cent Standard IV students. They could not recognize all the capital letters correctly. On the other hand, 24.0 per cent of Standard III students could read simple sentences, while 21.2 per cent of Standard IV students could do so. This finding implied that Standard IV students and Standard III students might not have received similar learning inputs and learning environments.

3.4 Inside-school factors

Table IV shows data on the SCR and PTR. There was much variation among the schools in terms of the SCR and PTR.

Table IV : SCR, PTR, and Total Working Hours of the Schools

Value of the Indicators	No. of schools (N=8)
Student-Classroom Ratio	
Less than 20	3 (37.5)
20.1 to 40	3 (37.5)
40 - 60	1 (12.5)
More then 60	1 (12.5)
Pupil-Teacher Ratio	
Less than 20	2 (25.0)
20.1 to 40	5 (62.5)
40 - 60	0 (0.0)
More then 60	1 (12.5)
Total Working Hours per Day	
Less than 4 Hour	2 (25.0)
4 hour to 4.5 Hour	4 (50.0)
More than 4.5 Hour	2 (25.0)

(Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages)

From the data, we calculated the average SCR of eight (8) sample schools which stood to be 30.0. The standard deviation of SCR for all of the sample schools was 28.9. The average PTR of eight (8) sample schools was 29 only. The standard deviation of PTR for all of the sample schools was 16.8.

Table IV also shows data on total working hours per day, i.e., total hours for which the school remained open. In the sample villages, parents reported late attendance and early departure were found in the study areas. As a result, schools started late, and less time was devoted to teaching. Parents could indicate the approximate working hours of school since they could observe the starting time of school and the closing time. These figures were averaged to estimate the actual working hours per day for each school. As per the official records, however, all the schools were operational for five hours per day.

3.5 Test of hypotheses regarding inside-school factors

As there was much difference among the schools in terms of SCR, PTR, and actual working hours, it was natural to assume that these factors would influence the learning level of the students of different schools. Hence following hypotheses were formed:

- Children of schools with a lower value of SCR would have a higher level of English Reading ability.
- Children of schools with a lower value of PTR would have a higher level of English Reading ability.
- Children studying in schools with longer working hours would have a higher level of English Reading ability.

Independent Samples Jonckheere Terpstra Test (JT Test) was conducted with a threshold significance level of 0.05 to test these hypotheses. For this purpose, all of the independent variables were sorted and categorized to treat them as ordinal variables. The result summary is shown in Table V.

For SCR and PTR, the 2-tailed p-value(s) were greater than the threshold significance value. Hence the null hypotheses regarding SCR and PTR were retained. The result shown in Table V indicated that the distribution of children having different English Reading Ability levels across schools having different categories of SCR or PTR was similar.

Table V : JT Test Summary for English Reading Ability (DV) and Inside-school Factors (IVs)

Particulars			Grouping Variable		
			SCR	PTR	Working Hours per Day
No. of Levels in Grouping Variable(s)			4	3	3
N			102	102	102
Observed J-T Statistic			1907.50	1502.00	2013.50
Mean J-T Statistic			1900.50	1363.50	1638.00
Std. Deviation of J-T Statistic			161.764	143.468	155.041
Std. J-T Statistic			.043	.965	2.422
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)			.965	.334	.015
Monte Carlo Sig. (2-tailed)	Sig.		.965 ^a	.340 ^b	.016 ^b
	99percent Confidence Interval	Lower Bound	.961	.327	.014
		Upper Bound	.970	.352	.019
Monte Carlo Sig. (1-tailed)	Sig.		.479	.169	.007
	99percent Confidence Interval	Lower Bound	.466	.160	.006
		Upper Bound	.492	.179	.009

However, for the total working hours, the 2-tailed p-value (.007) was less than 0.05, which was the threshold level of significance. Hence the null hypothesis, that 'the distribution of English reading ability of the students is same across categories of schools having different total working hours,' was rejected. Since the corresponding 1-tailed p-value was also less than the threshold significance level (.05), it was concluded that children's English reading ability level would most probably be higher if the school was open for longer hours.

3.6 Outside-school factors

3.6.1 Educational Status of Mother and Father

Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the students' English reading ability level vis-à-vis their mothers' and fathers' educational status, respectively. In Figure 1, it could be observed that the proportion(s) of the students having the highest level of English reading ability (i.e., ability to read simple sentences) increased consistently as the educational status of mothers increased. Simultaneously, the proportion(s) of students, who could not even read capital letters, decreased as mothers' educational status increased.

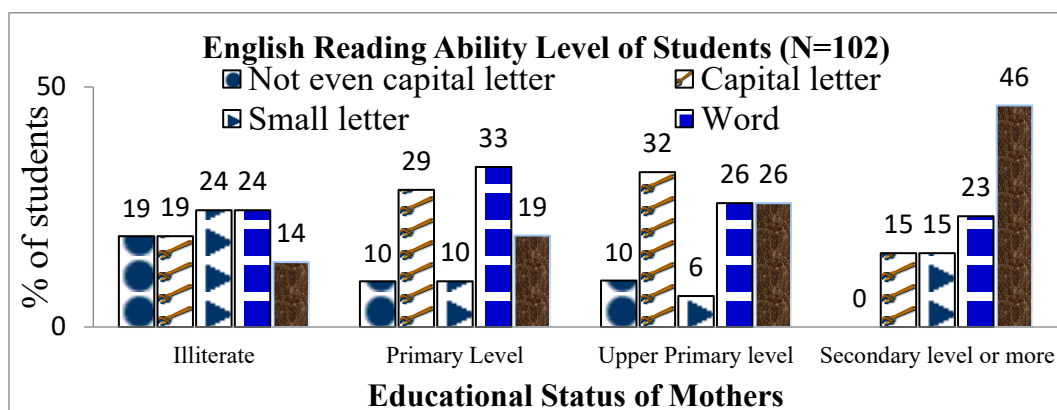


Figure 1: Distribution of Students Having Different Levels of 'English Reading Ability' across Categories of 'Educational Status of Mothers'

Similarly, Figure 2 shows the students' English reading ability level vis-à-vis their fathers' educational status. However, no consistent trend could be observed for any of the levels of English reading ability across the categories of fathers' educational status.

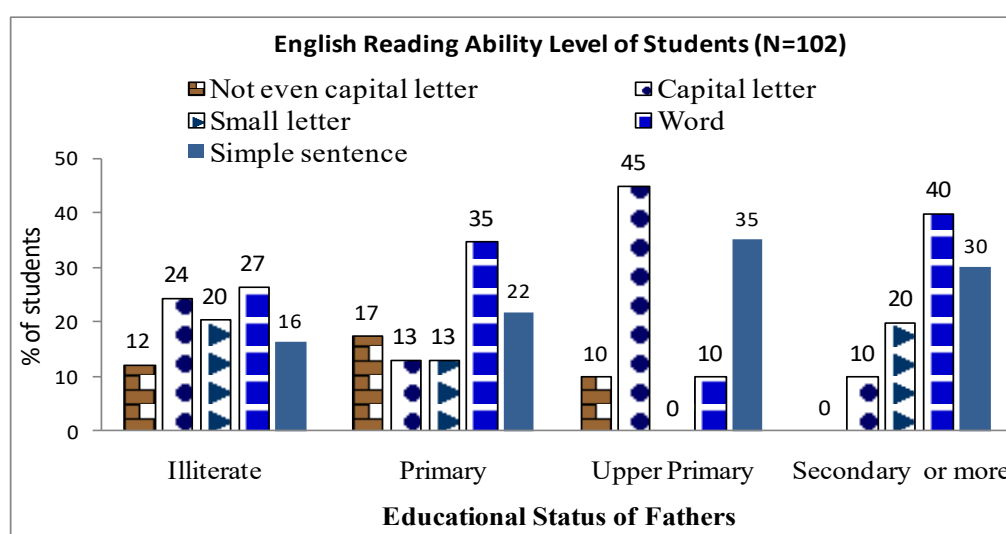


Figure 2: Distribution of Students Having Different Levels of 'English Reading Ability' across Categories of 'Educational Status of Fathers'

3.6.2 Private Tuition

There were two categories of children: those who took private tuition and those who did not. The distribution of the students having different ability levels across the two categories is shown in Table VI.

Among the students who took private tuition, 31.7 per cent could read simple English sentences, but 10.0 per cent could not recognize English capital letters. Among the students who did not take private tuition, these figures were 9.5 per cent and 14.3 per cent, respectively.

Table VI : Different Levels of Ability across Two Categories of Students in terms of Private Tuition

English Reading Ability Level	Taking Private Tuition (N=60)	Not Taking Private Tuition (N=42)
Not even capital letter	6 (10.0)	6 (14.3)
Capital letter	11 (18.3)	14 (33.3)
Small letter	8 (13.3)	7 (16.7)
Word	16 (26.7)	11 (26.2)
Simple Sentence	19 (31.7)	4 (9.5)
Total	60 (100.0)	42 (100.0)

(Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages)

3.7 Testing of hypotheses regarding outside-school factors

Based on the observations described above following hypotheses were formulated:

- 1) Children of mothers with higher educational status would have higher English reading ability levels.
- 2) Children of fathers with higher educational status would have higher English reading ability levels.
- 3) Children who take private tuition would have higher English reading ability levels.

To test these hypotheses, independent variables were transformed into ordinal variables. For example, students receiving private tuition were indicated as of *higher order* in SPSS, and the students who did not receive private tuition were considered as of *lower order* in SPSS. The Jonckheere-Terpstra Test was conducted with a threshold significance level of .05. The summary of test results is shown in Table VII.

Table VII : JT Test Summary for English Reading Ability (DV) and Outside-school Factors (IVs)

Particulars			GROUPING VARIABLES		
			Educational Status of Mother	Educational Status of Father	Private Tuition
No. of Levels in Grouping Variable(s)			4	4	2
N			102	102	102
Observed J-T Statistic			2210.000	1938.000	1629.000
Mean J-T Statistic			1866.000	1743.500	1260.000
Std. Deviation of J-T Statistic			160.830	156.882	143.389
Std. J-T Statistic			2.139	1.240	2.573
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)			.032	.215	.010
Monte Carlo Sig. (2-tailed)	Sig.		.030 ^a	.223 ^b	.009 ^c
	95percent Confidence Interval	Lower Bound	.027	.215	.007
		Upper Bound	.034	.231	.011
Monte Carlo Sig. (1-tailed)	Sig.		.016^a	.111^b	.004^b
	95percent Confidence Interval	Lower Bound	.013	.104	.003
		Upper Bound	.018	.117	.005

For *Educational Status of Mother*, the 2-tailed p-value was 0.032. This value was less than the threshold level of significance (.05). Hence the null hypothesis, that ‘the distribution of *English Reading Ability* is same across categories of *Educational Status of Mother*’, was rejected. Since the 1-tailed p-value for English Reading Ability (0.016) was less than the threshold significance level (.05), it was concluded that *the child's English reading ability level* would most probably be higher if *the mother's educational status* was higher.

However, for the *Educational Status of Father*, the 2-tailed p-value was 0.215. This value was higher than 0.05, which was the threshold level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis that ‘the distribution of *English Reading Ability* is same across categories of *Educational Status of Father*’ was retained. In other words, any indication of the influence of fathers' educational status on English reading ability was not found.

For Private Tuition, the 2-tailed p-value (0.010) was less than the threshold significance level (.05). Hence the null hypothesis that ‘the distribution of English Reading Ability is same across categories of Students Taking Private Tuition’ was rejected. As the 1-tailed p-value (.004) was less than the threshold value (.05), it was concluded that the children's English reading ability would probably be higher if they took private tuition. Therefore, it was deduced that private tuition improved the English reading abilities of the children.

IV. DISCUSSION

In the previous section, the relations of six (6) independent variables with English reading ability of the children living in interior rural areas were presented. Statistical analyses brought out some interesting observations as well as contradictions. These are discussed below:

- a) Out of the three (3) inside-school variables, SCR and PTR were found to have non-significant statistical influence over English reading ability, even though the schools' SCR and PTR varied a lot. The reason behind not finding any significant relation could be traced back to the teachers' various practical challenges. During fieldwork, we found that grouping of classes was common in the schools in the study area, even though PTR and SCR were not extreme in most of the schools. In seven (7) out of (8) schools (i.e., 87.5 per cent), the grouping of students of different standards was done to manage the paucity of either classrooms or teachers. Out of 29 teachers who taught in the school, 20 teachers (i.e., 68.9 per cent)

had to manage the grouped classroom at least once a day. All of the 20 teachers recognized that they faced difficulty in managing grouped students in one classroom.

- b) Language posed as a barrier for teachers as well as children in the study area. The root of the difficulty was found in the geographical-cultural context of the study areas. In Uttar Dinajpur district, the villages of Goalpokhar-I block were situated along the border of Kisanganj district of the state of Bihar. These villages were once part of Bihar. These villages were made part of West Bengal in 1956, following the recommendation of the States Reorganization Commission to restore the territorial links between the northern and southern parts of West Bengal. It was found that Surjapuri was the spoken language in many families residing in the villages of Goalpokhar-I block. Surjapuri-speaking children faced difficulty in interacting with teachers in the school.
- c) The problem of children in Kaliaganj block was altogether different. Kaliaganj was close to Bangladesh border. In one of the villages, many families spoke a local dialect of Bengali, which teachers did not understand even though they lived in the same district. (In fact, the researcher had to take the help of a young girl studying in Standard VIII to communicate with some of the respondents).
- d) In such challenging situations, only the commitment and accountability of the teachers could make some difference. Unfortunately, some of the teachers did not feel accountable to the students and guardians. Hence they neglected their duties. There was a school in Uttar Dinajpur, where irregular classes, reaching late, and departing early were routine for some teachers. “Bela 12 tar age ar Midday meal er pore kono class hoe na” (“No class before 12, no class after Mid-day meal”)- one of the parents made a synopsis of the routine of that school.
- e) On the other hand, we could also find examples of remarkable commitment among teachers. In Hugli district, interaction with a teacher revealed that he had to ride a bicycle, catch a train, then a bus, and finally walk to reach the school. He needed to journey for more than 5 hours every day. Yet, the parents reported, he rarely left the school early.
- f) Accountability of a teacher inside the classroom is challenging to measure. Nevertheless, it seemed that the actual hours devoted to instruction which can be calculated with parents' inputs, can be treated as a proxy measure of the teachers' accountability (or lack of accountability).
- g) The 'mother's educational status' was found to be influencing the learning level of the students, but the 'educational status of father' was not. One plausible explanation for this apparent contradiction is related to the migration of fathers. It was found that in 28.4 per cent of households, the father migrated to other states for employment purposes. Hence, they were not in a position to guide their children. Naturally, statistical tests were unable to detect the difference made by the father's guidance.
- h) During fieldwork, mothers of four (4) Muslim children admitted that they felt it embarrassing to acknowledge that their husbands were less educated than them. They indicated that their husband(s) could not continue their schooling due to financial compulsion. They had to leave school and had to start work at a significantly younger age. However, their economic condition improved later. So, the guardians of the female respondents did not mind selecting him (the husband) as the bridegroom. Hence, the children were more likely to get guidance regarding English reading from their mothers and not from their fathers. This is another factor that may have caused the test results which indicated that the mother's educational status was influencing the learning level of the students, but the educational status of father was not.
- i) The result of statistical tests indicated that private tuition improved English reading abilities of the children. However, this result does not mean that private tutors gave any additional input or taught anything new to the children. The parents reported in the study area that their children needed to be kept 'under pressure' and 'regular practice'. Otherwise, the children would not remember whatever they learn in school. Private tutors kept the students under pressure to memorize the letters, words, and texts by repeated practice. This type of strategy was fruitful in recognising letters and words, which were indicators of language reading ability in the test we used. Hence, an association between private tuition and English reading ability was found.

V. CONCLUSION

Recognizing the significance of quality education, the new National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 of India has accepted the ground reality that significant learning gaps exist among Indian school students. This paper has highlighted some of the factors which deserve attention for ensuring the quality of learning.

The findings imply that ensuring physical infrastructure and human resources (teachers) in the schools is not enough to ensure the quality of learning. Late arrival and the early departure of the school teachers in some of the schools in the study area reduce the overall time for teaching-learning. Sensing the ineffectiveness of the schools, parents often resort to the assistance of private tutors. Government should take steps to increase teachers' accountability and improve the quality of learning of the students. The NEP 2020 aims to have an education system by 2040 that is second to no other country. Achieving such a goal would require understanding the reasons for the learning gap among students and taking steps to address those gaps properly.

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