

DEMYSTIFYING ASSESSMENTS TO ENSURE SCHOOL- READINESS IN CHILDREN

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Executive Summary

As children progress through grades, the learning crisis intensifies – eventually leading to about 52% of children at Grade 5 not being able to read Grade 2 text. While the gaps in learning outcomes become more visible as learners move upward in grades, the problem starts early on. Moreover, it is not only literacy and numeracy that are lacking. Other indicators of development from domains such as physical and socio-emotional development also suffer, affecting the overall learning trajectory.

Among several factors that can improve this situation, assessments; specifically, school-readiness assessments have the potential to identify this issue right in the beginning and provide scope for course corrections. Assessments play a critical role during the early years, especially when children are transitioning from preschool to primary school. They provide a sense of extent to which the child is developing holistically, presents an opportunity to rectify learning deficits if any, helps guide curriculum and enhance teacher capacity to suit the needs of the learners. Moreover, they promote parental involvement by informing parents about the child's performance overtime across various areas of development. Along with parents, assessments also help policy makers and education officials make long-term decisions about children in the foundational stage.

While the significance of school-readiness assessments is well-established, a number of factors act as barriers to administering these assessments at scale. These include the **ambiguity in the way the construct of 'school-readiness' is understood.** This results in a bias towards measuring more concrete aspects like literacy and numeracy, as opposed to other aspects such as socio-emotional learning. Another challenge in the tool construction phase is **designing instruments that are sensitive and account for children's cultural contexts** while capturing their performance. These problems are amplified in the intervention landscape where these tools have to cater to **multigrade and multi-level learners in a classroom.** Eventually, **poor funding for assessments** and the compromised capacities of personnel involved in assessment administration affect the rigour and credibility of the results. All these factors are further intensified when the stakeholders using these assessments do not buy into the importance of these tools.

This perspective highlights **key characteristics of effective school-readiness assessments, including comprehensiveness, longitudinal data capturing, multi-source data collection, integration with classroom processes, and evidence generation for immediate and long-term decisions.** Additionally, it also provides solution pathways that can lead to creation of effective tools. The first of these focuses on creating comprehensive but easy-to-administer tools, and includes the work of Azim Premji University and Key Education Foundation on creating toolkits and assessment books. The other category includes solutions that not only focus on tool creation, but also enable stakeholder buy-in. These include the work of organisations like Makkala Jagriti where they work with actors such as anganwadi teacher,

parents, school teachers and headmasters, supporting them in using assessments and activities for building school-readiness.

Strengthening such solutions need investment in **long-term research** that focuses on creating a uniform vocabulary for school-readiness, designing tools that can be used in classrooms with varied learners, and those that put spotlight on socio-emotional skills. Moreover, social capital is also needed in interventions that improve **buy-in among different stakeholders**.

In a Nutshell

Considering the critical role of assessments in ensuring learning, it is important to deconstruct the suitable nature of school readiness assessments which can be implemented at scale.

India has a vast network of educational institutes with

1.4 million
Anganwadis

1.5 million
schools

catering to almost
80 million children below the age of 6

Despite this, only **57%** of children are school-ready when they enter grade 1.

Assessments play a crucial role in early identification of what children can do, and where they are experiencing a deficit. However, the assessment landscape is marred by:



1
Lack of holistic tools that can provide data on multiple domains and over time



2
Lack of data from multiple points rather than single tools



3
Integration of evidence into action

Two kinds of solution pathways are crucial to expedite changes in the assessment landscape:



Solutions that help make assessment tools **robust, comprehensive and actionable**



Solutions that ensure create buy-in for **implementing** school-readiness assessments among several stakeholders and create mindset change

The Key Education Foundation's Assessment Book

offers comprehensive assessments for children aged 3-5, focusing on various developmental domains.

Azim Premji University's Early Learners Assessment Tool (ELA)

offers comprehensive assessments for children aged 3-5, focusing on various developmental domains.

Makkala Jagriti's

adoption of a multi-stakeholder approach in engaging children, anganwadi teachers, parents, and school authorities in readiness assessments.

Pratham Education Foundation's School-Readiness Melas

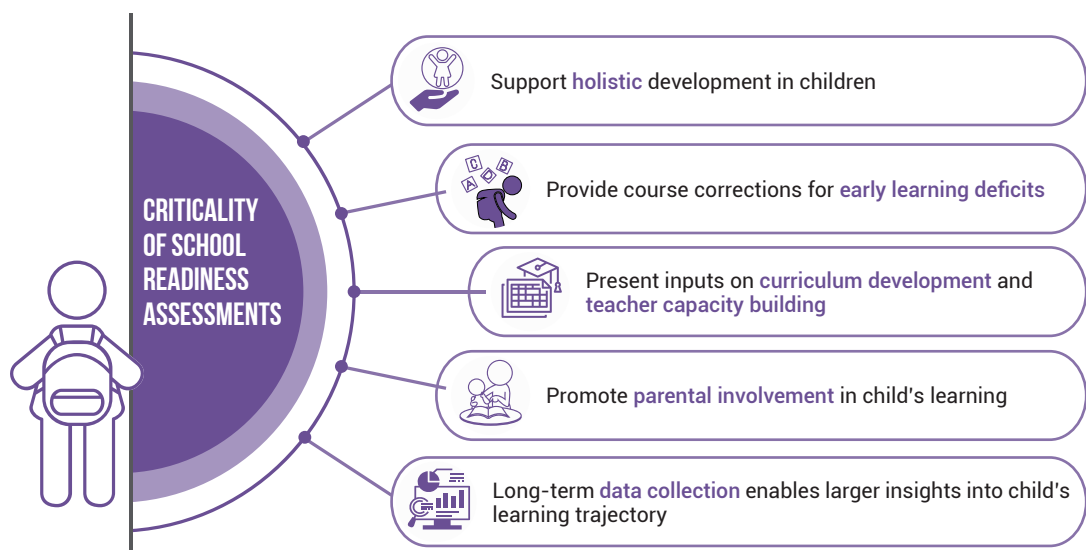
provide an engaging approach to evaluate children's preparedness for school most importantly by involving parents, communities, and volunteers in the assessment process.

Why are School-readiness Assessments Important?

According to ASER 2022 data, the percentage of children in Grade III who can read a Grade II-level text dropped from 27.3% in 2018 to a concerning 20.5%.¹ The Early Years ASER 2019 report also pointed out that only 57% of the children who enter Grade 1 are school-ready.² These figures indicate that children are entering their formal schooling years with a learning deficit. These gaps hinder the learning process for a child and hence, it is critical to address these early on.

India has an extensive network of educational institutions with 1.4 million Anganwadis and 1.5 million schools catering to over 80 million children below the age of six.³ Assessments in this demographic can play a crucial role in early identification of what children can do, and where they are experiencing a deficit. The following points highlight this pivotal role and underscore how assessments serve as essential tools not only for evaluating a child's readiness for formal education but also for shaping a more holistic, equitable, personalised, and effective learning experience.

Figure 1: Criticality of School Readiness Assessments



Source: SKI Research, 2023

By offering a snapshot of a child's cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and physical development, **school-readiness assessments help in improving all-rounded learning experiences.** These assessments go beyond measuring academic proficiency, as they encompass an evaluation of emotional and social wellbeing. This approach not only bolsters foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes but also fosters a sense of self-efficacy and confidence in young learners, establishing a strong foundation for lifelong learning.

ASSESSMENTS FOR SCHOOL READINESS

Assessments in the early years act as a proactive tool, pinpointing learning deficits and paving the way for **tailored intervention strategies that nurture each child's uniqueness and help ultimately curb educational disparities**. These assessments serve as a diagnostic lens through which educators can gain a detailed understanding of each student's strengths and areas for improvement. Each student's comprehensive view also provides data for tailoring teaching methods to cater to learning patterns in class, ensuring that each child receives the support they need to thrive.

Assessment data can help **guide ongoing curriculum planning at an annual level, inform focused capacity building of teachers and provide inputs on infrastructure development**. It highlights focus areas in the ecosystem that need strengthening, so that appropriate learning outcomes in children can be achieved. Be it the capacity building of the anganwadi workforce, primary school teachers or the specific changes in the stories and activities used at this stage, assessment data provides a reflection on the systemic changes needed to augment learning outcomes.

Assessments promote parental involvement by providing insight into a child's strengths and growth areas, empowering parents to actively engage in their child's educational journey. When parents are informed about their child's progress and areas where they may need extra support, they can offer targeted assistance at home and work collaboratively with educators to ensure their child's success. This partnership between parents and schools is a crucial element for the sustainability of the learning process.

Research and data collection through assessments offer valuable insights into **longitudinal developmental trends, allowing experts to stay informed and make informed decisions to support children's growth trajectory**. By aggregating assessment data, researchers and policymakers can identify broader trends in educational readiness and outcomes, and develop evidence-based policies and initiatives that benefit an entire region.

School-readiness assessments can, therefore, move beyond mere summative evaluation and serve as the means to design learning activities for harnessing the potential of millions of young minds. In a nation characterised by its vastness and diversity, these assessments become a vital mechanism for understanding children's educational needs and thus, guide policies and initiatives that ensure quality equitable learning.

India's policy landscape reiterates the relevance of school-readiness assessments.

The National Early Childhood Education and Care Policy 2013 highlights formative and summative assessments as a means to ensuring effective interventions, in its recommendations in Key Area 5.2, 'Ensuring Quality'. The National Education Policy 2020 emphasises the transformation of assessments at a foundational stage for optimising learning and development of students through regular, formative, competency-based assessments that test higher order skills (analysis, critical thinking, conceptual clarity, etc).⁴ To reinforce the same, the NIPUN Bharat directive states that assessments do not just convey 'what has been learned'

but also account for 'what has restricted the learning', while providing alternative strategies to bridge this learning deficit. It identifies three goals that assessments in the early years serve – maintaining good health and wellbeing of children, helping children become effective communicators, and supporting them in becoming involved learners in order to connect them with their immediate environment.⁵ In light of the roles that school-readiness assessments play, ensuring that their use is widespread and their implementation is scaled up is imperative. However, a number of challenges come in the way, which are detailed in the following section.

What are the Challenges Impeding Implementation of School-readiness Assessments?

Numerous challenges at the levels of assessment creation, implementation and interpretation of results come in the way of using school-readiness assessments at scale.

Figure 2: Challenges in implementing School Readiness Assessments.



Source: SKI Research, 2023

ASSESSMENTS FOR SCHOOL READINESS

There is a lack of consensus about the definition of school-readiness and its core components, which dilutes the focus school-readiness should get. For decades, various practitioners have been working on the components of early childhood education. However, there is an absence of a universally accepted definition and articulation of what really comprises school-readiness.

Due to the increased focus on holistic development across age groups by NEP 2020, there is agreement on the fact that school-readiness requires focus on all the domains of development, that is, physical development, cognitive development, language development, socio-emotional development and aesthetic development. Despite this, there is a difference in the way each of these constructs are defined operationally by practitioners in the field. In socio-emotional development for example, some practitioners like the Pratham Education Foundation focus on assessing a child on how they express and introduce themselves, whereas, Makkala Jagriti also considers the amount of time for which the child is able to sit in class and work with peers (Pages 20-26 would provide a detailed view on the tools).

The focus of some organisations on nuanced developmental milestones in language and maths, or even smaller habits that would help children to navigate tasks, also impedes uniformity. The following quote helps understand this.

One thing that we pay more attention to is pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills. At Pratham, we think the assessment of these skills is very important to strengthen the foundational learning of a child."

– Prachi Mittal, Pratham Education Foundation

Along with this, there is also a difference in whose readiness is being assessed. For example, while some organisations focus on capturing the readiness of children, the schools and the parents in accordance with NIPUN Bharat guidelines; others only focus on children.

Unless there is uniformity or some level of consensus about what encompasses school-readiness, assessments in this space would face the challenge of either being too comprehensive or too lean.

A predominant focus on academic readiness leaves crucial aspects like socio-emotional and physical skills underrepresented. Despite the recommendation of NEP 2020, NIPUN Bharat and NCF Foundational Stage 2022 on the importance of all domains of development, often, toolkit design does not grant equal importance to all aspects, or deprioritises them in the process of conducting assessments. While academic proficiency undoubtedly holds significance, it represents just one facet of a child's preparedness for school. Neglecting socio-emotional development – which includes skills like empathy, self-regulation, and interpersonal relationships – can hinder a child's ability to navigate social dynamics and work with peers and friends. Similarly, overlooking physical development – which involves gross and fine motor skills – can affect a child's readiness to engage in physical activities, and hinder fundamental coordination abilities.

To truly prepare children for life, school-readiness assessments need to be comprehensive while being simple.

“Social development is a key area that we miss out on in the system as a whole. For a child to feel comfortable in school, the first thing to ensure is that he/she is able to voice out its feelings. That is a skill that needs to be built in the Anganwadi to further hone it in the school. Things like toilet training, which are again crucial aspects of school-readiness, also get missed out. And toilet training is not just saying “I need to use the bathroom” but also what is the right way of washing your hands etc. These self skills that you build like packing your own bags are something that consciously need to be considered when we look at school-readiness.”

– Amrutha Murali, Makkala Jagriti

Even when socio-emotional skills are assessed, the way they are assessed or their implication on overall classroom processes is compromised. They merely remain a part of the assessment format and are filled just for the sake of completion, and not for actually inculcating these skills among students.

The complexity of the intervention landscape poses a challenge to designing school-readiness assessments. Learners entering Grade 1 are aged between 4-7 years, and go to different kinds of preschools. Accommodating this diversity in assessment creation and implementation is difficult.

“Children enter Grade 1 at different points and this makes the intervention scenario more complex than we think. Assessments, as well as the subsequent curriculum design needs to respond to this. If we don’t, then the unique needs of learners would not be addressed.”

– Prachi Mittal, Pratham Education Foundation

While RTE 2009 and NEP 2020 clearly mandate that learners who have completed age 6 are to enter Grade 1,⁶ ASER data indicates that children entering Grade 1 belong to various ages.

Table 1: Age-wise distribution of children entering Grade 1 (ASER 2022)

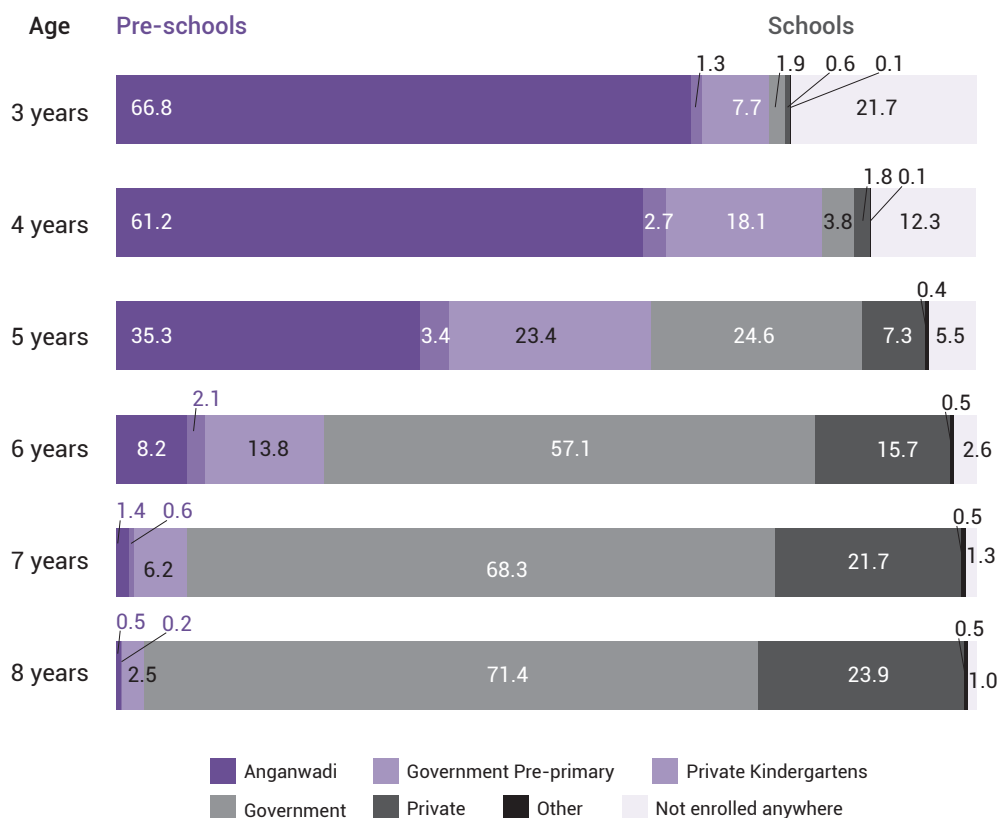
Age (years)	<=5	6	7	8	9	>=10
Percentage of children entering Grade 1	23.0	41.7	23.1	7.3	2.2	2.7

These children are at varied learning levels, and have diverse capacities owing to their respective developmental stages. Hence, school-readiness assessments cannot be administered solely on standard norms. Assessment design should cater to the needs of the learners, and enable interventions accordingly.

ASSESSMENTS FOR SCHOOL READINESS

This complexity is further compounded by the fact that these children go to different kinds of institutions, such as anganwadis, government pre-primary schools, private kindergartens, and government or private primary schools. A considerable proportion of children do not attend any preschool. Thus, the intersection of age and the nature of schooling is a crucial consideration while designing assessments. The following table provides evidence for this complication⁷:

Figure 3: Percentage of children in different preschools and schools (by age) (ASER 2022)



Along with catering to age- and institution-based diversity, school-readiness assessments also need to be sensitive to India's cultural variations. Regional differences and variations in parents' backgrounds have an impact on children's knowledge and exposure. The region where the child is brought up, parents' education levels, exposure to learning at home, or even the language spoken at home versus that spoken in the educational institution plays a significant role in preparing the child for entering primary school. Tools need to be sensitive to these nuances, so that an accurate estimation of a child's abilities is captured. Creating tools that are culturally sensitive, and those that also help parents gauge the child's learning at home through the material they have are of utmost need for India to scale these assessments.

In order to improve the quality of assessment implementation, having trained and sensitised personnel is extremely necessary. They also need to be convinced about the importance of these assessments for planning their classroom processes more effectively. Owing to the

range of responsibilities an anganwadi worker or a primary school teacher has to complete, assessments get deprioritised. It is often seen as an additional task and hence, not administered in a way that it is amalgamated with the classroom activities. There is a need for closer work with the cadre administering these assessments, so that their concerns are understood and they can be oriented about various simple tools like checklists, regular tests and observations to capture student development.

However, the capacity of teachers to make observations is another barrier that hinders the effective use of these tools.

“We often see that regular interactions are needed with anganwadi workers/teachers to help them capture their observations about children. Writing observations, marking changes on rubrics are higher level skills and they need hand-holding. Investing in these areas is a critical factor to ensuring these assessments are used well.”

– Amrutha Murali, Makkala Jagriti

Funding gaps are a major hurdle to the improvement of the quality of assessments and the creation of reliable, valid, standardised tools. With only 0.3% of the education budget being allocated to ECE, the funding for assessments (0.2% of the overall education budget allocated to assessments across primary and secondary grades), is dismal. Higher budget allocations are needed for developing appropriate tools, building the capacity of assessors and ensuring that results are used for classroom planning.

The most daunting of all challenges is to create tools that can create buy-in for focussing on school-readiness. A major reason for this lack is that most prevalent tools do not help all stakeholders understand what is actually happening. Parents, for example, may not be able to comprehend the complex tool results due to lack of education or exposure.

“We need the community to also enable the ECE process but parents are not able to support if they are not clear on what they can do to build strong foundations for their children. For instance, if the assessment tool is complex, they won't be able to understand it. There is a need for pictorial representations in tools or creation of simple tools that help parents understand, track and support the progress of their children.”

– Samyukta Subramanian, Pratham Education Foundation

Engaging government officials who have a strong say in planning and decision making is equally important. In order to make long-term decisions, the tools have to possess certain aggregate analysis mechanisms which can help in making major programmatic decisions. Additionally, bringing some mandates for ensuring implementation of these assessments and providing the required support would enable higher buy-in at various levels of the official cadre at the district and state levels.

What is the Solution Landscape for School-readiness Assessments?

This section maps insights from eight expert designers and practitioners whose work in the area of school-readiness assessments has stood the test of scale and diversity. Each of these solutions aims to further the penetration of assessments in such a way that they are comprehensive yet simple and lead to actionable recommendations. The section is divided into two halves where the first part focuses on opening out 'what do effective school-readiness assessments entail' and the second part focuses on the solution pathways to achieve these characteristics.

Section A: What do effective school-readiness assessments entail

An analysis of these interventions indicates that effective school-readiness assessments solutions consist of the following characteristics:

Figure 4: Characteristics of Effective School Readiness Assessments



Source: SKI Research, 2023

“One of the fundamental things that I think should be there in assessments is that they must be constructive, development and student-oriented. At heart of every assessment, it should tell you something about the child that you did not know. I think when you talk about demystifying assessment; it is about what the child is able to do right now. Being able to identify, recognise, acknowledge, and appreciate what the child knows should be at the heart of the approach to assessments.”

– Aanchal Chomal, Azim Premji University

Effective school-readiness assessments are comprehensive and provide a measure of various domains of development - physical, cognitive, language, social, emotional, and aesthetic equally. Additionally, they focus on capturing simple habits and behaviours that enable emergent learning

in children. This holistic approach recognises that a child's development is multifaceted and extends beyond academic knowledge. By assessing these diverse domains, educators and parents gain a well-rounded perspective of a child's capabilities and areas of growth.⁸

Along with various domains of development, it is also critical to have skills for navigating activities in this age group. The achievement of these skill sets is necessary to make learning more sustainable.

“In this age-group, parents think that their child should write, but this actually starts with the child just holding the pencil. In a similar manner, they want the child to read, but does the child know how to read a book? One would begin with building an understanding around which is the front of the book and where is the back etc. Many of the skills that are learnt at this age are the foundation of all that the child is going to learn later.”

– Samyukta Subramanian, Pratham Education Foundation

In order to be impactful, school-readiness assessments should be a continuous journey, not a one-time event, to capture the evolving capabilities and learning trajectory of young minds. Since learning is an ongoing process, a single assessment can only provide a picture of the student's abilities at a specific moment. Continuous assessments offer a complete view by helping the educators track students' progress over time. This is especially crucial where there is diversity in the age at which children enter Grade 1, demanding the framing of school-readiness as a continuum for 2-4 years, from preschool to Grade 1.

“Each educator looks at school-readiness assessments differently, but we need to understand that school-readiness cannot be achieved at a particular time. Everything that a child goes through between the age of 3-6 years is part of the school-readiness aspect. Hence, even the assessments need to capture that.”

– Amrutha Murali, Makkala Jagriti

“At Pratham, we have always started with what we need to do, rather than what we need to assess. In the same context, we believe that school-readiness is actually a continuum from preschool to grade 2. And so, children may not know everything right now, but there is no hurry because there are 4 years to work on it and assess. The continuum is not only for assessments, it is also for the materials used in class, activities in class and the curriculum.”

– Samyukta Subramanian, Pratham Education Foundation

Continuous assessments prove to be valuable even for parents. Parents are more closely involved in their educational journey when they receive a consistent stream of information about the child's development. They become active partners, as regular assessments

facilitate ongoing communication with teachers. This partnership improves parents' buy-in and enhances the child's learning experience at home. It transforms education into a shared responsibility, where parents, teachers, and students work together to attain learning goals.

Assessments are effective when they incorporate various tools and data points, avoiding reliance on a single test to assess school-readiness. Young children's development encompasses a wide range of skills and abilities and often, a single test may not capture the full spectrum of their readiness for formal education. Utilising a diverse array of assessment tools, including observations, teacher assessments, portfolio reviews, play-based assessments, parent feedback, and informal assessments integrated into daily activities, can yield a more holistic perspective. This multifaceted approach ensures that no aspect of a child's development is overlooked, fostering a more accurate understanding of their qualities and potential.

"We believe that school-readiness of a child cannot be reflected by a single assessment at the beginning and end of the year. We must emphasise that indicators of school-readiness must be a reflection of classroom observations and ongoing formative assessments. Therefore a combination of tools and methods that help build the profile of a child as honestly as possible is the need of the hour."

– Swetha Guhan, Key Education Foundation

School-readiness assessments should be seamlessly embedded within classroom practices and activities, becoming an integral part of the learning process itself. It is essential for assessments to transform from being isolated events to an ongoing, organic aspect of education. When assessments are interwoven with daily classroom activities, students experience a more natural and less stressful way of demonstrating their progress and understanding. It also allows educators to gather authentic, real-time data about students' learning, leading to customisation of the classroom activities.

"We don't see assessments separately, we see it as integrated into all of the activities. Even the way we assess, it is a part of the games in class. We have tried this in our direct programmes where children are wearing name cards. They are engaged in games and activities. The observer selects any five children, observes those children in groups and even interacts with those five children one-on-one. Hence, children do not feel that anything different is happening with them. Moreover, all of this is enabling which means it should help everyone to move forward with the results. That is our philosophy."

– Samyukta Subramanian, Pratham Education Foundation

Effective assessments measure what the child 'can do' at a particular developmental stage, and provide actionable inputs on enhancing a child's growth trajectory, as opposed to just recognising gaps. Rather than only highlighting the deficits, the analysis of assessments

needs to indicate the attributes that a child has attained. This enables the educator to build on the strengths and achievements of children and promote their confidence, motivation and continuous drive to learn. This approach also minimises the pressure on children to conform to predefined standards, allowing them to learn at their own pace in their unique way.

“When it comes to young children and the entire duration of early years, it is critical to note that we need to look at what the ‘children are able to do’, and not ‘what they should be doing’. Each individual child is different, and has a unique developmental pathway. A range of development is occurring at a rapid pace during this period. Assessments should capture what the child is able to do in a nuanced manner. Capturing what the child is able to do helps support their learning and development.”

– Kinnari Pandya, Azim Premji University

In the educational landscape, effective school-readiness assessments should play the dual role of serving as a compass that guides immediate actions, as well as long-term investments in education. Assessments that have high utility not only provide recommendations for course correction, but also furnish data for more futuristic decisions for the early childhood education landscape. Overall, this information guides decisions on curriculum development, resource allocation, and policy formulation, facilitating systemic improvements that benefit not only individual students but also the education system as a whole.

These characteristics help identify the essentials of ideal assessments and hence, indicate the kind of efforts needed to create robust tools. The next section opens out pathways to achieve the same.

Solution Pathways to design and implement effective school-readiness assessments at scale

Through an analysis of the existing solutions in the ecosystem, two categories of solution pathways have been identified. These pathways help overcome the design- and implementation-related challenges of school-readiness assessments.

Category 1: Solutions focusing on continuous research on the construct of ‘school-readiness’, making assessment tools that are comprehensive, yet convenient to administer.

The ambiguity resulting from the absence of a universally accepted definition of school-readiness leads to over-emphasis on specific components such as literacy and numeracy. This comes at the expense of reducing the comprehensive nature of assessment tools.

Recognising the imperative to evaluate a child’s overall preparedness for education, Azim Premji University invested in a seven-year long process of creating and iterating the Early Learners Assessment Tool (ELA). ELA aligns seamlessly with the principles articulated in the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundation Stage 2022, that underscore the necessity of assessments to offer teachers a holistic and in-depth understanding of a child’s learning process.⁹

<p>The solution and its impact</p>	<p>ELA is a performance-based toolkit developed during the period 2014-18 for children in the age group 3-5, which leverages the knowledge of field practitioners. As an evidence-based, culturally sensitive tool, it goes beyond just measuring FLN skills in young learners, and incorporates other domains such as socio-emotional, physical motor skills, creative and aesthetic appreciation. The tool was launched in April 2023, with further pilots for ensuring standardisation.</p>
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Early Learner Assessment (ELA)

What is unique about ELA?

The ELA tool is an evidence-based, comprehensive and culturally sensitive tool that has been developed specifically for tracking the developmental progress of *anganwadi* children in India. It is comprehensive because it encompasses all the major domains of development – physical, cognitive, language, social, emotional, and creative and aesthetic expression. It is culturally appropriate because it is based on the standards of development generated specifically for Indian children. Also, the items, language, materials, pictures, and examples used are contextualised for the *anganwadi* setting. This tool can be used to collect both cross-sectional and longitudinal data as it captures the current level of development of the children and can also track their progression to higher levels of development over a period of time, within the pre-school period of 3 to 5 years. It is a performance-based tool. Children attempt the assigned tasks presented by the assessor by engaging with the assessor and/or the materials. The tool has been extensively field tested and a rigorous iterative process for refining the tool was implemented by a team of academic and field experts, right from conceptualisation to its large-scale administration. The following section describes this process in detail.

<p>The solution and its impact</p>	<p><i>“A critical gap we saw on the ground for assessment for young children was that either there were developmental checklists available in the public domain or there were specific school-readiness instruments assessing literacy and numeracy abilities that were being used for research purposes. We did not find a comprehensive assessment</i></p>
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The solution and its impact

tool that addressed holistic development of children between 3 and 5 years. ELA's aim is to build a discourse on holistic and performance-based assessment for children, with a tool that is valid and reliable in the Indian context."

– Kinnari Pandya, Azim Premji University

A pivotal element of this tool lies in its individualised observation-based assessment approach, where educators play an active role in documenting the child's development. Recognizing the individuality and varying abilities of each child, ELA recommends assessors to engage with children, providing appropriate support to facilitate their active participation in activities that align with their capabilities. This approach not only assesses the child's skills but also fosters a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

Icon description

Activity by Assessor	Icon Representation	Icon Description
Non-Scoring Activity		This represents an example activity or practice activity. This activity should not be scored
Group Activity		This represents a group activity task. Individual child should be observed while he/she is engaging in a group activity. The child should be scored individually
Individual Activity		This represents a task to be individually assigned to the child
Verbal Prompt		This represents the Assessor should give a verbal prompt to encourage the child as per the instruction
Physical Prompt		This represents the Assessor should help the child by holding his/her hand or giving physical support while doing the task as per instructions
Demonstration		This represents the Assessor could demonstrate the activity as per instructions provided for a specific item

"One aspect that ELA highlights is that children need help while performing different tasks. This does not mean that they can't do the task. It's just that they may be at a level before the level of being able to perform independently. There is a scaffold needed for the child to be able to perform that task. Engaging with the child is critical for them to be able to do a task. ELA provides for this support and recognizes it in the developmental progression of children through its detailed rubric."

– Kinnari Pandya, Azim Premji University

The tool provides a view on the interconnectivity of different domains and the levels of competencies in each domain. For example, a child's competency in numbers is not devoid of their abilities and understanding of aesthetics or patterns that one sees in numbers and the tool highlights that.

Challenges experienced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While standardising the assessment tool, determining the extent of contextualisation of standardised items is difficult given the range of variation that may exist in geography and overall preschool experience of different children from different contexts. • The tool demands greater training support for the personnel administering the tool for it to be administered at scale.
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The Key Education Foundation is another organisation that has worked on holistic assessments in a child-centric, easy to administer manner and which helps the assessor to keep the record at one place with the support of their assessment book.

Description of the solution and its impact	<p>The Assessment book is an observation-based tool which is filled out by the teacher. The tool aims to assess all domains of development during the preschool years. Moreover, the compact nature and spacing of assessment points helps its administration at different stages or checkpoints in a child's preschool years. There are two kinds of assessments to be conducted.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smaller assessments, which are conducted after the curriculum completion. These are administered on 16th, 32nd, 68th, and 84th day, which are checkpoints in a child's early years of development during an academic year (formative assessments). • The other long form assessments are conducted twice – Mid-year and End-of-year – to assess the scale of the progress after the curriculum completion (summative assessments). <p>Mid-year assessments are conducted after completion of 52 days of curriculum, and End-of-year assessments after completion of 104 days of curriculum.</p> <p><i>“We don't keep all the testing till the end of the year as we aim to track the child's development during the year and see how the child is progressing.”</i></p> <p>– Anjali Govindankutty, Key Education Foundation</p> <p>By adopting more than one technique to assess the child's development and their progress in the mid-year and end-of-year assessments, the assessment book evaluates students under three categories – Oral Assessment, Observation Assessment and Written Assessment.</p> <p>The periodic nature of the assessment offers assessors the necessary support. The Assessment book has an elaborate description of how the assessor should evaluate learners using the three-level scheme – Learning, Progressing, and Achieved – to track the child's progress every year.</p>
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CHECKPOINT I

Sl. No.	Learning Objective	Assessment Type	😊	😊	😄
1	Child is able to talk about themselves, their name, gender, likes, and dislikes	Oral			
2	Child is able to name people in their family and describe their relationship with them	Oral			
3	Child is able to identify and name the body parts <i>Refer Page no 3 for the image</i>	Oral			
4	Child is able to name different rooms and talk about their function <i>Refer Page no 4 for the image</i>	Oral			
5	Child is able to listen and speak about a topic	Observation			
6	Child is able to understand the meaning of new words and use it in appropriate contexts.	Observation			
7	Child is able to write their name and identify their gender	Written			
8	Child is able to identify sense organs	Written			
9	Child is able to identify parts of the body	Written			
10	Child is able to identify family members	Written			
11	Child is able to identify objects in their house	Written			
12	Child is able to identify the words of different rooms in a house	Written			
13	Child is able to identify bad habits	Written			
14	Child is able to identify the activities done in different rooms of a house	Written			
Average Outcome					

Challenges experienced

Demands for written assessments by stakeholders come in the way of utilisation of the tool.

"The assessment book has three methods of assessment - observations, orals and written. While observations and orals are really powerful, the school and parents demand written assessments and rely only on that. With continuous dialogue, we are trying to navigate this challenge."

– Sneha Suresh, Key Education Foundation

ASSESSMENTS FOR SCHOOL READINESS

















Apart from these, the Pratham Education Foundation's Continuum Tool for Early Years Assessment also fits this category of solutions. The tool is detailed and is used over four years – two years of preschool, and one year each in Grade 1 and Grade 2. While it suits in this category, Pratham's solution is of much more significance for the second category of solutions mentioned below.

Category 2: Solutions for improving buy-in for school-readiness assessments by working with various stakeholders.

This category aims to enhance the engagement and commitment of various stakeholders within the educational ecosystem towards school-readiness assessments. These solutions do this by actively involving them in decision-making, planning, and implementation of the assessments. This inclusive approach helps in leveraging the collective wisdom of teachers, parents, administrators, policymakers, and the community to enhance the overall quality of education in early years by fostering a sense of ownership and valuing their contributions.

In this context, the interventions by Pratham Education Foundation and Makkala Jagriti indicate a strength of operating at scale with an ease of implementation.

Description of the solution and its impact	<p>Pratham Education Foundation's work is unique and addresses the challenge of increasing buy-in of various stakeholders by doing two things:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Designing a simple, easy-to-comprehend tool for school-readiness assessment.<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. It is heavily integrated with the classroom practices, such that assessment and intervention are seamless. This helps the teacher make course corrections and ensure children's high participation in class.b. It needs to be simple enough so that all stakeholders, especially parents can understand what is happening and hence, become active agents of change. To actualise this, the tool has a combination of verbal descriptions and pictures which supports parents to easily understand and react.c. The tool presents an opportunity for users to use it over a period of time, and hence consider the various testing milestones in a stage-based manner rather than grade-based. This allows the teacher to work on areas of improvement for children. <p>Considering these characteristics, the tool is not only helping implementation in the anganwadi ecosystem, but also in the primary schooling space in Grades 1 and 2. Moreover, it is now a part of the system in states like Himachal Pradesh, Haryana and Maharashtra, owing to government partnerships.</p>
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Skills	Beginner	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Jumping		At one place 	From one place to another 	On one leg (Hopscotch) 	With a skipping rope 
	1 2	1 2	1 2	1 2	1 2
Colouring		Scribbles 	Tries to fill colour inside the picture 	Inside the picture 	Neatly 
	1 2	1 2	1 2	1 2	1 2
Drawing and Writing - Expression		Scribbles 	Draws and writes letters 	Draws and writes words 	Draws and writes sentences 
	1 2	1 2	1 2	1 2	1 2
Sequential Thinking		Related to simple things 	Related to day-to-day life 	Related to surrounding 	Arranges unknown sequence and recites a story 
	1 2	1 2	1 2	1 2	1 2
Listening Comprehension		<p>A baby elephant was walking in the jungle. It felt thirsty while walking. It reached a river alone. After reaching there, it thought, how can I drink the water? First, it dipped its ears in the river water. But it could not drink water. Then, it dipped its mouth in the water. Even then it could not drink water. Suddenly, it dipped its trunk in the water and started to drink water.</p>			
	1 2	Answers in one or two words	Answers direct fact retrieval questions	Answers indirect fact retrieval questions	Answers inference questions
	1 2	1 2	1 2	1 2	1 2

Disclaimer: This report card is used to convey a child's learning levels to their caregivers and teachers. Over the last year and a half, Pratham has been working towards evolving this report card based on multiple pilots and interactions in the community. Some versions of this report card are already used in Pratham across India depending on the requirements of the programme.

<p>Description of the solution and its impact</p>	<p>2. Organising school-readiness melas for encouraging community and parent involvement.</p> <p>Across their interventions in Early Years, Pratham organises fairs called School-readiness Melas. These melas are attended by parents of children who have completed anganwadi and are entering school. With the support of young volunteers, typically adolescents and youth from the village, these readiness fairs set up stalls where parents can get their children tested. The assessment is focused on all the five domains of development i.e. physical, cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional.</p> <p>While these fairs are for assessing children, a spirit of celebration is created in the village where every household ensures that their neighbours are participating. The process of going through various counters and seeing their child perform tasks, helps parents understand the criticality of interventions. Towards the end, a child report card is handed over to the parents along with a bunch of simple activities that the parents can support.</p> <p>This process helps engage parents as a critical stakeholder for preparing their child for school. The experience across locations indicates that while these assessments help understand what the children can do, they also help build agency in parents to ask questions, share observations and eventually help the children in at-home activities based on the areas highlighted in the assessment results.</p> <p><i>“In one of our melas, a mother returned to the assessment location. Her daughter had gone to the mela with a guardian and had already been assessed and given the report card. So basically, the mother came back and said, ‘you have marked her saying she cannot skip, but she can. She does it at home’. Saying this the mother took out a skipping rope for her daughter and said, “show them” and the daughter skipped.”</i></p> <p>– Samyukta Subramanian, Pratham Education Foundation</p> <p>Currently school-readiness melas are happening across 15 states in India which include Delhi, Maharashtra, Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana. In some states such as Maharashtra, these are done in partnership with the government and have become a sustainable part of the system. Additionally, they have also been adopted in the NIPUN Bharat directives and are termed as ‘NIPUN melas’.</p>
<p>Challenges experienced</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The system demands these assessments to be very traditional. Hence, tool creation and implementation is expected to fit into the format of a particular number of formative and summative assessments to be conducted in a year. It does not provide the atmosphere to look at assessments as a means for informing immediate actions and long-term solutions.

Challenges experienced	<p><i>“The assessment book has three methods of assessment - observations, orals and written. While observations and orals are really powerful, the school and parents demand written assessments and rely only on that. With continuous dialogue, we are trying to navigate this challenge.”</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">– Sneha Suresh, Key Education Foundation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multigrade and Multi-age learners coming to these classrooms is a challenge that makes the assessment process lengthy. Moreover, the paucity of teachers as well as the mindset of teachers to have grade-level tools is another difficulty that complicates the problem. While the tool is able to withstand these challenges, the readiness of the teachers to use these is an aspect that needs focus.
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Makkala Jagriti has taken a systematic, multi-level approach to work in the early childhood education landscape – such as curriculum building, capacity building, and assessments – with a variety of stakeholders, like children, anganwadi teachers, parents, primary school teachers and community at large.


“There are 3 aspects to school-readiness. One is to assess if the child is ready to go to school. Second, to see if the parent is ready to send the child to school. And third, is the school ready to accept the child? Hence, we have assessments and interventions that work on all three aspects.”

– Amrutha Murali, Makkala Jagriti

In order to work on all these aspects and ensure stakeholder buy-in, Makkala Jagriti has the following strategies in place:

Description of the intervention and its impact	<p>Makkala Jagriti works with students, anganwadi teachers, parents/ community and the school where the child would enter. While doing so, they use a number of assessment tools – both quantitative and qualitative, formative and summative – and accordingly make course corrections based on the results.</p> <p>Anganwadi teachers: Makkala Jagriti works with anganwadi teachers by training and supporting them to use the ICDS tool which measures and helps make observations across all the five domains of development in children. Pre-literacy and numeracy are also essential aspects in these observations. The progress report, as well as the training helps teachers to look at the overall development of the child during ages 3-6 and helps them understand and conduct assessments holistically.</p>
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ASSESSMENTS FOR SCHOOL READINESS



AGE GROUP: 3-4 YEARS

Domains of Development		1st Assessment		2nd Assessment		3rd Assessment		4th Assessment	
		Needs Help	Performs well	Needs Help	Performs well	Needs Help	Performs well	Needs Help	Performs well
Domains of Development	Assessment month								
	Height (cm)								
	Weight (kg)								
	Developmental Indicators	Needs Help	Performs well	Needs Help	Performs well	Needs Help	Performs well	Needs Help	Performs well
Physical and Motor Development	Participate actively during playtime (indoor/outdoor)								
	Can throw a big ball with both hands								
	Can jump at one place								
	Can thread beads								
	Can colour within a large space with crayon								
Sensory, Perceptual and Cognitive Development	Can identify different odours, tastes, sounds and textures, etc.								
	Can identify colours (yellow, red, blue)								
	Can classify objects on basis of any one concept, e.g. all circles or all red objects, etc.								
	Can solve a simple maze or puzzle of three pieces								
Language, Literacy and Communication	Can repeat a given pattern of different shapes								
	Can follow simple instructions								
	Can express feelings and ideas in gestures, words, phrases or simple sentences								
	Enjoys exploring story books and doing picture reading								
	Can describe a picture in a complete sentence								
Personal – Social and Emotional Development	Can recognise own (written) name								
	Enjoys playing in group of children								
	Interacts comfortably with familiar individuals								
	Shares with friends/peers								
Creativity	Waits for turn while playing								
	Can recognize and express simple emotions such as joy, sadness and anger								
	Shows curiosity and interest in learning new things								
	Enjoys engaging in pretend play								
	Shows creativity in daily activities (e.g. experiments with objects or words in new and different ways)								
Overall Opinion	Participates in dance, drama and music activities								
	Uses imagination in drawing, artwork and problem solving								
Overall Opinion									

Designed by : UNICEF India and CECED, Ambedker University Delhi

<p>Description of the intervention and its impact</p>	<p>Parents and Community: Makkala Jagriti works closely with parents of children between ages 3-6 helping them understand various aspects of development; starting from brain development, to importance of play or reading in this age-group. For parents of children between the ages five and six, the organisation uses focus group discussions to understand their narrative about the child's well-being and assess how parents are supporting the child to be school-ready.</p> <p>The process of data collection through FGDs also provides the team an opportunity to work with the parents on practices that would help them support the child positively. For example, Makkala Jagriti advises against the use of any form of small or big fear tactics, such as telling children that if they cry, they would be sent to school. This approach helps parents enable children to build positive and safe associations with the school and eventually, be comfortable in the space.</p> <p>School, Headmaster and Teachers: At the school level, the interventions aim to create a seamless transition for children from early childhood to formal education.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It conducts workshops that familiarise children with the formal school setting and help them understand how it works. In order to do so, classes in the last 2-3 months of the child's time during the preschool years are conducted in the adjacent/closest primary school. This helps children to adapt to the school routine, get to know the teacher, and feel safe in school. 2. Furthermore, the organisation's approach also involves headmasters to the process so that there is a strong buy-in from the leadership in the school. 3. It also conducts workshops with Grade 1 teachers who would be supporting the children once they enter the primary school. The focus of this training is on literacy, numeracy, sound recognition, and letter recognition – all conducted in the Kannada language. This training equips teachers with the tools to bridge knowledge gaps and foster the cognitive development of young learners effectively. These trainings are conducted in the presence of the anganwadi teachers. <p>Such interventions of including stakeholders from children's ecosystems have also helped build a strong rapport between the anganwadi and the school eventually, supporting the child's transition.</p> <p><i>"We were conducting an FGD recently with some of our anganwadi teachers. An interesting point that came out was how anganwadi teachers felt more respected in the schools rather than before. Initially, there was always a sort of blame game when it comes to this. Now this anganwadi teacher says how her standing in that space has increased because the school teachers are seeing that change in the children and are able to attribute it back to the anganwadi teacher."</i></p> <p>– Amrutha Murali, Makkala Jagriti</p>
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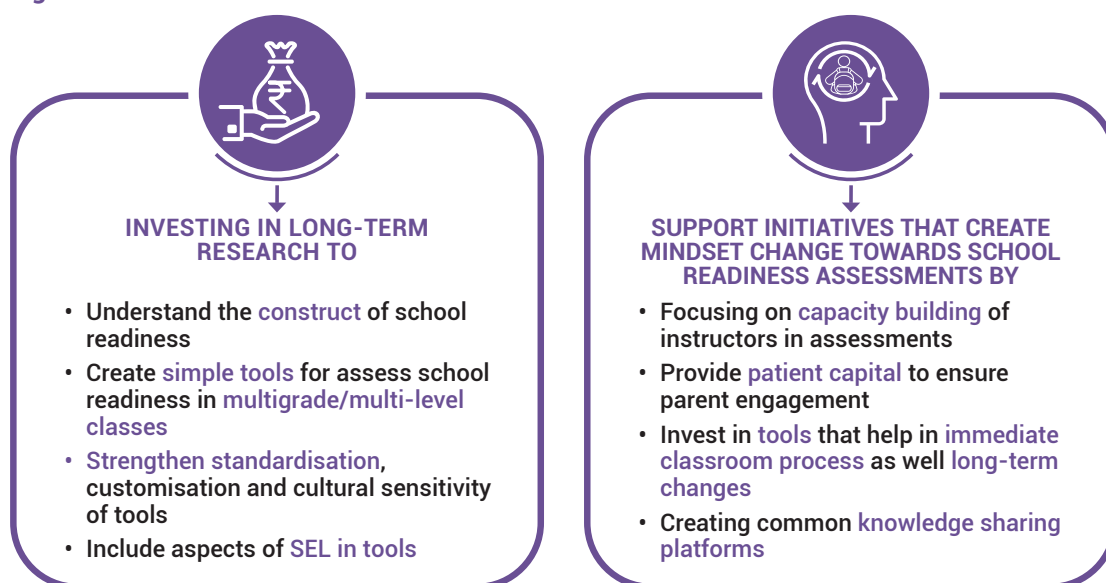
Description of the intervention and its impact	By working with various actors, Makkala Jagriti is impacting not only the holistic development of the child but also preparing a comprehensive ecosystem buy-in for facilitating the child's school-readiness. In this process, it is important to highlight that quantitative tools like the ICDS tool or checklists, and qualitative methods such as workshops and focus group discussions become crucial levers of assessment.
Challenges experienced	Nuanced and sustained efforts are required to run a multi-stakeholder intervention and constantly adapt to the needs of the various people involved. This requires patient capital, which is currently not available for assessment related investments.

The solution pathways mentioned above have the potential to be scaled up while maintaining the much-needed deep approach to work on school-readiness assessments. However, they face certain barriers; some of which these organisations have been able to overcome. For others however, there is a need for further attention through efforts and investments. The following section highlights these areas and provides a way forward for smooth implementation and utilisation of school-readiness assessments.

Potential Areas for Funders to Invest in Scaling up School-readiness Assessments?

Funders can enable school-readiness assessments by investing in the following gaps across two areas:

Figure 5: Potential Areas of Investment



Source: SKI Research, 2023

Funding entities can focus on the following action points for each area of investment:

1. Investing in long-term research related to various aspects of school-readiness assessments

- a. Fund initiatives that focus on uncovering the construct of 'school-readiness' and enabling the creation of a common vocabulary.
- b. Support studies for generating evidence related to creating easy-to-administer school-readiness tools that can help in multigrade and multi-level classrooms.
- c. Invest in studies that work on ensuring smoother standardisation, customisation and increasing cultural sensitivity of existing tools, so that they can be used at scale.
- d. Support research related to assessment creation for components such as socio-emotional learning, aesthetics and also ways of translating the results into classrooms.

2. Support initiatives focusing on creating buy-in and ensuring mindset change towards school-readiness assessments among various stakeholders:

- a. Invest in capacity building of instructors administering assessments with children from the point of view of readiness to conducting assessments and using those results in class.
- b. Provide patient capital to initiatives working in the communities to engage parents in the process of assessment and implementation of school-readiness activities at home.
- c. Support creation of assessments that not only help with fixing the current gaps in classroom processes but also present evidence for making larger systemic decisions.
- d. Create common knowledge sharing platforms – for example: 'Bachpan Manao, Badhte Jao' by the EkStep Foundation – that enable transfer of information about best practices, and highlight various forms of assessments.

Investments in the above areas would act as strategic levers that can significantly enhance school-readiness in children and lead to a steeper learning curve. These efforts can improve the quality of assessments, help make assessments become more agile and easy to administer, and eventually make the processes more equitable. As a result, assessments could serve as a catalyst for children's preparedness for school and set them on a trajectory of accelerated learning, equipping them with the vital skills and knowledge necessary for academic success and lifelong growth.

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