

Virtual assessments for students with disabilities: A case study from India

Radhika Misquitta¹

¹The Gateway School of Mumbai, India

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CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Radhika Misquitta;
rmisquitta@gatewayschoolmumbai.org

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ABSTRACT:

The pandemic in India impacted over 247 million learners (UNICEF, 2021). Children with disabilities were at a significant disadvantage, losing access to rehabilitation, medical and remedial services (Verneker et al., 2020). This article presents a guide to assessing students virtually. It explores one teacher's attempts to navigate learning to read remotely using a digital curriculum-based measurement tool, Fluency Assessment for Benchmarking in Literacy education (FABLE). It discusses the processes she employed to set goals, monitor progress, and structure virtual assessments over the course of an academic year to build reading fluency. Overall, virtual assessments were easy to conduct. Teachers require two devices when conducting FABLE virtually, one to share the reading passage, and one to mark progress. FABLE provides end-of-year benchmark goals that can be used as individual target goals for students. More research is needed to develop benchmarks specific to the Indian context. FABLE data were most useful when communicating progress with parents and informing instructional practices. Many processes used to implement FABLE virtually can be applied to face-to-face settings, such as goal setting and progress monitoring schedules. Learning was impacted for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who struggled with access to the internet and support in the home settings.

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INTRODUCTION

Students in India are struggling to meet foundational literacy standards. National achievement tests paint a bleak picture. According to the latest National Achievement Survey of 2017 (National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2019), 50% of students in the third grade were not proficient with basic literacy skills. Another national survey of students in rural India, the Annual Survey of Educational Reports (ASER Centre, 2018), concluded that less than half of students in the fifth grade were able to read second-grade passages. Recognizing this as a concern, the recent National Education Policy (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020) has placed foundational literacy at the forefront of its agenda.

The pandemic has created a deeper learning crisis. India's closure of 1.5 million schools during the Covid-19 pandemic impacted millions of children (UNICEF, 2021). Many schools, such as those in urban Mumbai, remained closed for face-to-face education for the entire academic year in 2020 and continued to engage in remote learning for 2021. Data is emerging about how much learning has been lost, with one report indicating that 92% of students in primary grades performed more poorly on language assessments in 2021 as compared to their performance the previous year (Azim Premji Foundation, 2021).

Although the pandemic impacted all children, students with disabilities were more negatively affected. Students with disabilities were a marginalized group even before the pandemic with 27% of students never having attended school, either inclusive or special school, as compared to a 17% average in the general population (Census, 2011). The recent Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2020) indicated that students with disabilities in developing economies were 19% less likely to achieve minimum proficiency levels in reading as compared to their peers. The closure of schools has further exacerbated the problem. Students with disabilities lost access to essential rehabilitation, therapy, medical, and remedial resources (Vernekar et al., 2020). Those from a lower SES and in remote areas were at an added disadvantage as they had limited access to e-learning devices and infrastructure suitable for learning (Narvekar, 2020). With India experiencing one of the longest school closures in the world (Press Trust of India, 2022), it is important to understand what remote learning looks like for students with disabilities and how effective it is. Remote

learning has also forced teachers to innovate and find new ways to address the learning needs of students. This paper explores what strategies introduced during remote learning are applicable in face-to-face classes as well.

Curriculum-based measurement in India

Curriculum-based measurement has long been employed to assess and monitor the progress of students with difficulties (Deno, 1985; Wayman et al., 2007; Tindal, 2013). CBMs are brief assessments, typically one to three-minute used to measure foundational skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. Unlike curriculum-based assessments, CBMs have robust reliability and validity data and are designed for repeated measurement. The most researched CBM in reading is oral reading fluency (ORF) as a general outcome measure for progress in reading. ORF assessments typically consist of one to three reading passages that students read for one minute each. Progress is measured as words read correctly per minute (WCPM).

Fluency Assessment for Benchmarking in Literacy education (FABLE) is the first digital CBM measure being developed for the Indian context (Misquitta & Ghosh, 2021). ORF assessments in FABLE are currently available for Grades 2, 3, and 4 in English, with plans to expand to other grades and Indian languages (Misquitta & Ghosh, 2019). The FABLE app allows for both benchmarking and progress monitoring assessment. The application groups students into intervention groups based on the benchmarking scores. Teachers can view progress for the group or the individual student on the app. In the absence of Indian reading benchmarks, FABLE has employed international benchmarks at present to guide instruction (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2017). Research is underway to develop Indian-specific benchmarks (Ghosh et al., 2022).

Rationale and Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to examine how a teacher used data from FABLE to monitor student progress and inform teaching practices in a virtual setting. This study presents data from three students and their teacher. Specifically, this paper seeks to answer four research questions:

1. How did the teacher use FABLE to set goals?
2. How often did the teacher monitor student progress?
3. How did the teacher use data from FABLE?
4. What were the challenges of conducting FABLE in an online format?

RESEARCH METHODS

Participants and Setting

Three students and their teacher in a private school for students with special needs in Mumbai, India participated in this study. See Table 1 for a description of participant demographics. The names used in this paper are pseudonyms. All three students participating in this study had been attending the school for at least two years. The home language for Abhay was English, for Adat was Marathi, and for Elton, both Hindi and English. The families of Abhay and Elton had indicated they preferred oral and written communication in English, while Adat's family preferred Hindi or Marathi. Before joining the school, all participants had been at other English medium schools in Mumbai. Instruction in classes was primarily in English, although the teacher would explain concepts in Marathi or Hindi if needed, and encouraged students to respond in the language they were most comfortable in. Two of the students, Abhay and Elton, were fluent in English and communicated primarily in English. Adat was an English Language Learner (ELL). He had been schooling in English since the primary grades and was able to follow most instructions in English. Adat tended to respond in English for most classes but would switch to Marathi for certain vocabulary words, especially in content area classes. /Table 1/.

The teacher, Gayatri, had been the language teacher for the students for two years. Gayatri had over 15 years of experience in both general and special education settings. She had a Master's in Counselling Psychology and a Bachelor's in Special Education. During the time of this study, schooling was being conducted virtually over the video conferencing platform, Zoom. Gayatri had been assessing students using CBM tools such as DIBELS (Good et al., 2011) in face-to-face settings and was familiar with the processes involved. She had assessed students with FABLE in the previous academic year in face-to-face settings and played a key role in developing protocols for implementing FABLE in the online mode.

Tools

The primary source of data in this study was students' scores on the FABLE app. FABLE assessments reported the total words read, the number of words read correctly per minute, the number of errors made, and the accuracy percent. FABLE reports also included a list of error words and data about the types of errors students made, whether primarily phonics, sight words, or morphological errors. See Figure 1 for a description of FABLE reports. Students were assessed at Grade 2 or Grade 3. The end-of-year goal specified by FABLE was 72 WCPM for Grade 2 and 91 WCPM for Grade 3. /Figure 1/.

The second source of data was interviews with the teacher. Given that this study was conducted during the pandemic, no face-to-face interaction was possible. The author interviewed the teacher over a video conferencing software, Google Meet, using an open-ended interview format. The author conducted two interviews in total. Each interview was recorded and automatically transcribed using closed captioning software.

Procedures

Students were assessed individually. The teacher moved the student to a breakout room on Zoom to conduct the assessment. Each assessment took between five to seven minutes. Children attended the session on their laptops. The teacher used two devices to conduct the assessment, a PC and a phone. She first read out the instructions to the child. She then shared the reading passage on her PC screen and asked students to read it aloud. She marked errors on her phone. At the end of one minute, the teacher asked students to stop reading and stopped sharing her screen.

RESULTS

How did the teacher use FABLE to set goals?

Goals for the students were set at 91 WCPM for Elton, and 72 WCPM for Abhay and Adat. See Table 2 for student-specific goals. On discussing how the teacher ar-

Table 1. Student demographics.

Student	Age	Grade	Home language/s	English Language Learner	Disability	Low SES
Abhay	12 years, 5 months	5	English	No	Global developmental delays	No
Adat	12 years	5	Marathi	Yes	Learning disabilities	Yes
Elton	12 years	5	Hindi and English	Yes	Global developmental delays and ADHD	No

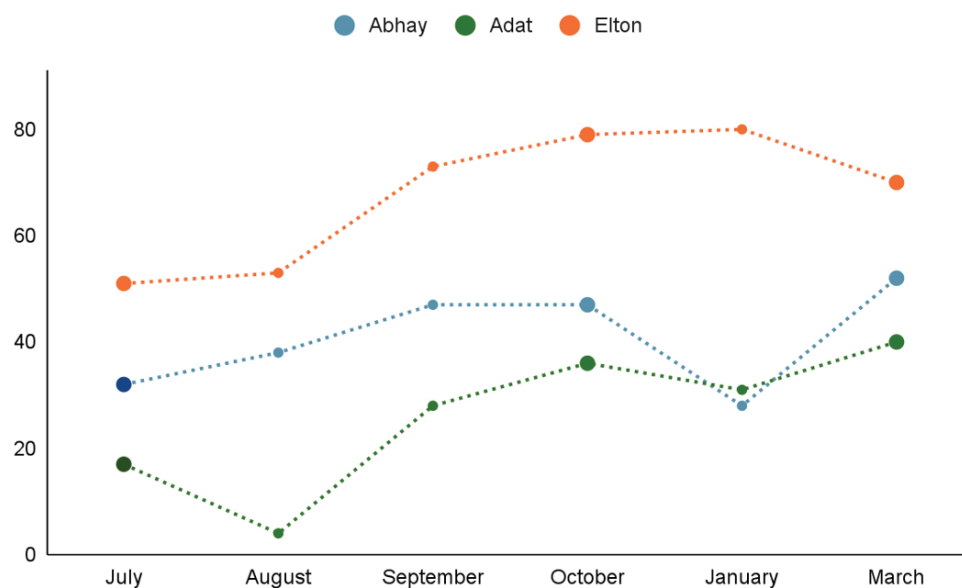


Fig. 1. Students' benchmark and progress monitoring scores on FABLE.

rived at these goals, the teacher indicated she had selected them based on recommendations by FABLE.

So Fable already gives you the target for the end of the year for each grade level. So that was helpful... FABLE already has that benchmark for you. [Table 2].

When asked why she selected the same end-of-year goal for both Abhay and Adat although their baseline scores were different, the teacher indicated that considered other factors when determining if a goal was realistic, such as her knowledge of students' learning pace, and the support they had received in the summer holidays.

We know he (Adat) does not have access to as many resources as the other students. So we knew that probably at the beginning of the year, he probably has done no reading over the summer as opposed to some other kids who probably had adults in their lives who probably were following up... So we knew that that beginning of the year school could be a summer slide that we can address during our remedial sessions ... (We had) experience of working with (him) in terms of his skill level from last year. So we kind of had an inkling that if we kind of worked more intensely

with him, he probably will pick up and has a probability of reaching his... end-of-year goal.

How often did the teacher monitor student progress?

Students were benchmarked three times in the academic year, in July, October, and March of the following year, and progress was monitored monthly. No progress monitoring data were collected in October, November, and February due to school holidays. In total, each student had six data points. See Figure 1 for students' progress monitoring graph.

The teacher indicated she attempted to monitor progress monthly as that was what the school deemed as most feasible.

We decided (to progress monitor) at least once a month. Ideally would have been once a week, but that was too much just logistically. It was really hard to do it every week, so we decided that okay, once a month, at least we know where we are getting because doing it less frequently than once a month would have been trickier because we wouldn't know where the kids are.

Table 2. Student baseline scores and end of year goals.

Student	Grade monitored at	Baseline score	Target goal
Abhay	2	32	72
Adat	2	17	72
Elton	3	51	91

How do teachers use data from FABLE?

The teacher indicated that FABLE data was most useful when communicating with parents.

This was also good data to show the parents because like (Elton's) parents were convinced that he was not progressing in reading... I had to show this data to say in fact, it's the other way around. Like, look at his (scores).... Because on the IEP, what they see is literally an A or a B and they see the same grade level. I said, but in the same grade level, look at the progress that he has made.

Finally, the teacher used the data to inform her teaching practices. The teacher had students engage in the repeated reading of texts at their progress monitoring grade level to build on their reading fluency. She also pulled data about specific error patterns seen on FABLE and had students practice reading word lists. For example, FABLE specifies what Fry word reading list each word may be a part of. Using this data, the teacher had students practice decoding words from that Fry list on a free software program, Studyladder.

FABLE also gives though the words which the student has misread... which informed our instruction for their grammar and phonics intervention. It also gives you the Fry list which they are working at so we kind of used that information also. So while this one student was reading with us, the rest of the students were working on (a) fry list on Study ladder.

What are the challenges in implementing FABLE online?

The teacher indicated FABLE was easy to implement virtually once she had familiarised herself with the procedures.

Fable was easy to administer. I think once we figured that, you know, you download the passage from here and put it on a desktop. It was really easy. So, in terms of teacher prep time, you take like five minutes to figure out which passage you want to use, and you email it to yourself, it was pretty easy.

When asked how long each assessment took, the teacher indicated that the time varied depending on the profile of the child. For example, one child was anxious, especially in testing situations, and the teachers first had to spend time building rapport and reassuring him.

It took that long because we knew kids like (Abhay) ... we know he's high on anxiety... we had to kind of prime him for it... So that took about two, three minutes of conversation and then another like two, three minutes of the testing. So, like I would say, ... maybe five to seven minutes.

In particular, the teacher struggled with Adat because of his home environment. The school had provided Adat with a laptop, but he had poor internet connectivity and did not have any adult supervision at home.

We struggled with him (Adat) in terms of getting him into classes... (He) kept having internet connectivity issues... We only had his audio, we did not have his video, and we have no clue what kind of circumstances that he worked in.

Although none of the students achieved their end-of-year goals, Adat's performance was the lowest. When asked about this the teacher felt that given what she had learned about Adat's home environment and learning circumstances, she would probably revise the goal lower for the coming year if school continued to be virtual.

So, I feel like had this been in a physical school, this was a sensible target to have. But given the challenges of virtual and given the fact that different students are of different kinds of socioeconomic statuses and challenges, this probably was not the most realistic target.

DISCUSSION:

A GUIDE TO ASSESSING VIRTUALLY

The purpose of this study was to examine how a teacher employed FABLE as a monitoring tool when working with students virtually. Data from three students and their teacher informed this study.

Setting up a Virtual Assessment using FABLE

The teacher was able to conduct virtual assessments using FABLE with minimal challenges. Teachers need two devices to conduct online assessments, one to share their screen, and the other to mark student progress. Students should access the content from a PC or large-screen tablet or iPad to ensure the text is large enough to be read easily (Bernard et al., 2002; Katzir et al., 2013). Testing takes about five to seven minutes including preparing students for the activity. A good internet connection with clear audio and video is important when conducting assessments virtually (Khan et al., 2021).

Setting Goals using FABLE

Teachers are making use of the suggested target goals in FABLE. When setting goals, it is best that teachers take into consideration a range of factors in addition to the baseline data. For example, although the two students' baseline data was different, the teacher in this study set the same goal for the student who performed lower as she felt that from prior experience, the student would be able to move up quickly with adequate support. It is important to note that the current target goals on FABLE are drawn from international benchmarks and have not been normed in the Indian population. Given that teachers are looking to FABLE to guide with goal setting, future

research must establish benchmarks specific to the Indian population. In addition, FABLE could also consider suggestions for how to set goals for students who may not be able to reach the end of year goal. For example, factoring in weekly progress rates of 1 or 1.5 words per week to calculate the end of year goal (Deno et al., 2001; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1993; Hosp & Hosp, 2003).

Monitoring Progress using FABLE

Most progress monitoring data is collected at least once a week (Mellard et al., 2009). However, this can get challenging in school settings (Gesel & Lemons, 2020; Jenkins et al., 2017), especially in a country like India where the student-teacher ratio is large and there is little additional support. In this study, the teacher decided to monitor students monthly. She was aware that more frequent assessments were preferable but did not feel this was feasible given the constraints she worked under. These data represent a real-world case of a progress monitoring schedule, but more research is needed to better understand the implications of different schedules of progress monitoring in resource-scarce countries, whether in virtual or face-to-face settings.

Applications for FABLE Data

FABLE data can be used for several purposes. To begin with, FABLE data can be used for reporting purposes, especially when communicating progress with parents (Lembke et al., 2010). The teacher in this study found the data most helpful to explain to parents how their child was progressing.

The teacher employed repeated reading as the primary strategy for intervention (Meyer & Felton, 1999). She selected texts according to the FABLE grade level she was monitoring students at. She also had students work on their decoding skills. FABLE reports indicate which words the student made errors on and the characteristics of those words such as the graphemes and morphemes in the word, or if the word belongs to the sight word list. The teacher in this study used error words to identify a larger list of words that students could work on. For example, FABLE specifies which Fry sight word list a word belongs to (Fry, 1980). Using this data, the teacher then had the child practice reading that word as well as other words from the same list. Sight word lists like Fry lists are freely available online and are a great resource for teachers, especially teachers from developing countries where resources are limited (Singal, 2019).

Considerations for Students from Lower SES

Although virtual assessment and intervention were possible for some children, it was challenging in the case of

Adat, a student from a lower SES. Adat had limited internet connectivity and was often not able to access class, or if in class, then he was not able to turn on his video. Further, Adat did not have access to a dedicated place to study or adults who could support him if he struggled. At the beginning of the year, the teacher indicated that they had set goals for Adat keeping his performance of the previous year in mind. However, considering the constraints he was working under, she felt that the goal she set may have been too ambitious.

Students from lower SES have been at a disadvantage during the pandemic as they had limited access to devices, internet services, and the home setting may not have been conducive to learning (Jena, 2020; Jordan et al., 2021). During the pandemic, families have been struggling to meet their basic needs (Gopalan & Misra, 2020; Mishra & Rampal, 2020), and learning may have taken a backseat. The pandemic, unfortunately, has widened the inequality gap between the rich and poor in India. Moving forward, teachers need to be cognizant of the learning loss that has occurred in the pandemic and take steps to build on foundational skills to ensure students are given equal opportunities to succeed.

Recommendations for virtual assessments

The following are some recommendations for conducting virtual assessments gleaned through the study:

- teachers need two devices and a good internet connection to conduct virtual assessments.
- monitor students as frequently as possible, at minimum once a month.
- goals for students can be set using the benchmark end of year target, or weekly progress rates of 1 to 1.5 words per week.
- data from assessments can be used to communicate with families, support instructional decisions, and monitor student progress over time.
- finally, virtual assessments and intervention may not be appropriate for all students, especially those from lower-income sections who may struggle with basic requirements such as internet connectivity, a dedicated space to study from home, and home support.

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