EDUCATION

Educational Transformation through Ennum Ezhuthum and Illam Thedi Kalvi in the Context of Contemporary Educational Issues

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Abstract

Persistent inequities in access, low foundational literacy and inadequate infrastructure continue to constrain education in India, particularly in rural areas, and the COVID-19 pandemic widened these gaps further. This paper analyses the contribution of two Tamil Nadu government initiatives, Ennum Ezhuthum and Illam Thedi Kalvi, to educational transformation in the state. Ennum Ezhuthum targets foundational literacy and numeracy among children in Classes 1 to 3, whereas Illam Thedi Kalvi brings community-supported, home-based learning to children in Classes 1 to 8. Drawing on government reports and published studies, the paper examines the design of both schemes, their reported effects on literacy, numeracy, dropout and teacher development, and the operational, socio-economic and evaluative challenges that constrain them. Comparisons with Read India, the Khanya Project and Learning for All are used to identify transferable lessons. The evidence suggests that both programmes have improved learning outcomes and community engagement, and recommendations are offered on resource allocation, data-driven monitoring, teacher development and scalability in relation to Sustainable Development Goal 4.

Keywords: Educational transformation; Ennum Ezhuthum; foundational literacy; Illam Thedi Kalvi; Tamil Nadu education policy

1 Introduction

Contemporary education systems worldwide face persistent challenges, including inequity in access, low literacy and inadequate infrastructure, while rapid technological change has intensified the need for inclusive reform (UNESCO, 2021). India confronts these problems on a considerable scale, particularly in rural areas where children encounter multiple barriers to learning. Although education remains a key determinant of economic development, disparities in access continue to undermine that potential (Chakrabarty, 2019), and the COVID-19 pandemic widened these inequalities further (Anderson & Strayer, 2022). Tamil Nadu has traditionally led educational innovation within India, yet disparities in literacy and access persist, especially in rural areas and among marginalised communities (Narayan & Mishra, 2020). Two state initiatives respond to these gaps. Ennum Ezhuthum, a scheme for foundational literacy and numeracy, targets children in government schools from Classes 1 to 3 (Tamil Nadu State Government Report, 2022). Illam Thedi Kalvi, introduced during the pandemic, seeks to bring learning to students' homes and to bridge the disruption caused by school closures (Rajan, 2022).

This paper analyses the contribution of these schemes to educational transformation in Tamil Nadu, considering how they address inadequate learning resources, teacher shortages and socio-economic

barriers. Whether such models might transfer to other Indian states and to countries facing comparable challenges is also examined (Mehta & Saravanan, 2023), together with their relation to Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all (UNESCO, 2017).

2 Understanding contemporary educational issues

2.1 Global educational challenges

Education systems across the world continue to grapple with problems that growing inequality frequently intensifies. UNESCO (2021) estimated that approximately 258 million children and young people were out of school in 2019, a situation the pandemic has since aggravated, and a substantial share of students do not reach basic reading proficiency by the age of ten (World Bank, 2019). Students from marginalised communities are disproportionately affected by weak infrastructure and shortages of qualified teachers (Saito & Cheng, 2022). Although the pandemic accelerated the digital transformation of education, it also widened the gap between students with and without access to digital tools, particularly in rural areas (Anderson & Zhao, 2020), a divide the OECD (2021) regards as a barrier to equitable access.

2.2 National educational concerns

India's educational system reflects both its diversity and its scale. Rural-urban disparities in resources, qualified teachers and school infrastructure are among the most pressing issues (Rangarajan & Desai, 2020), and they are compounded by poverty and caste discrimination, which further marginalise children in underserved communities (Majumdar & Basu, 2019). Low literacy also persists despite sustained government effort. The Annual Status of Education Report indicated that only 44% of rural Grade 5 children could read a Grade 2 level text in 2022 (Pratham, 2022), which points to a learning crisis that calls for intervention at the foundational stage. Teacher shortages produce larger classes and less individual attention (Subramanian, 2021), while limited training and professional development constrain educators' capacity to engage learners (Mishra & Pandey, 2020). A weakened relationship between teachers and students in rural government schools has been associated with high dropout rates and low achievement (ASER, 2022).

3 Historical development and policy objectives

Ennum Ezhuthum and Illam Thedi Kalvi were introduced by the Tamil Nadu government to address foundational learning gaps in the post-pandemic context. Ennum Ezhuthum was launched in 2022 for learners in Classes 1 to 3, responding to evidence that a significant proportion of children could not read or perform basic arithmetic at grade level (Tamil Nadu State Government Report, 2022). Its stated aim is that all children in these classes acquire foundational literacy and numeracy by 2025, with remedial support for those who struggle with basic concepts (Tamil Nadu Education Department, 2022). Illam Thedi Kalvi, launched in 2021, was designed as a home-based scheme to mitigate learning loss during prolonged school closures, reaching children in Classes 1 to 8 through local volunteers and parents, particularly in rural areas where digital access remains limited (Rajan, 2022). Whereas Ennum Ezhuthum concentrates on foundational literacy, Illam Thedi Kalvi combines academic recovery with community engagement that reintegrates children into the learning process (Krishnan & Mehta, 2023). Both correspond to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations,

2015) and to the National Education Policy 2020, which regards foundational literacy as the cornerstone of long-term educational success (Mehta & Saravanan, 2023).

4 Key features

The success of both programmes is commonly attributed to their pedagogy and their emphasis on community involvement. Ennum Ezhuthum adopts a child-centred approach built on play-based learning, storytelling and interactive methods (Krishnan, 2023), while regular assessment allows teachers to track progress and give timely support to children who fall behind (Tamil Nadu State Government Report, 2022). Its simplified learning materials break complex concepts into manageable units, making the fundamentals of literacy and numeracy easier to grasp (Mishra, 2022). Illam Thedi Kalvi, by contrast, relies on local volunteers and parents acting as para-educators, guided by learning kits and manuals, a form of support that is especially significant where schools are understaffed and digital tools are scarce (Ravikumar, 2021). Figure 1 summarises the principal characteristics of the two schemes.

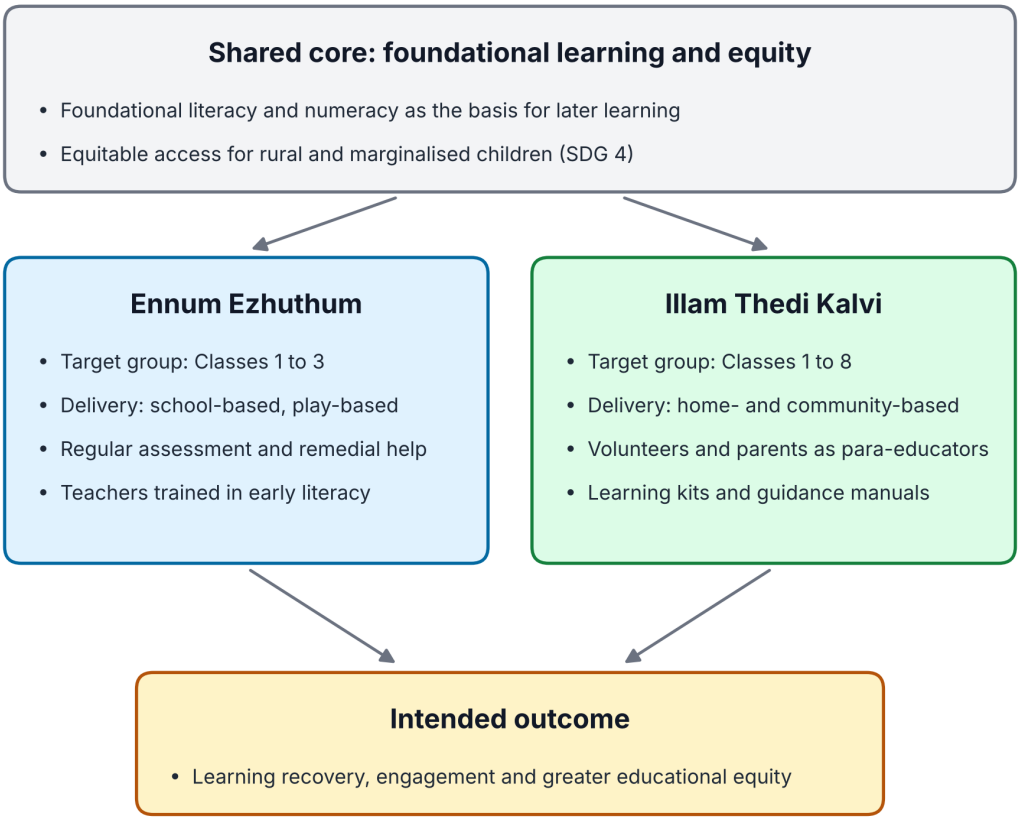


Figure 1. Principal characteristics of Ennum Ezhuthum and Illam Thedi Kalvi.

Note: Compiled by the authors from the descriptions of the two schemes presented in this paper.

Both initiatives seek to incorporate low-cost digital tools and mobile applications where feasible, although their primary focus remains on community involvement and personalised learning, so that education reaches every child regardless of socio-economic background (Krishnan & Mehta, 2023).

5 Impact on educational transformation

5.1 Quantitative and qualitative results

Both programmes have produced measurable effects. A 2023 report by the state School Education Department indicates that literacy among students in Classes 1 to 3 rose by nearly 15% within one academic year of the introduction of Ennum Ezhuthum, while numeracy improved by 12% (Tamil Nadu Education Impact Report, 2023). Rajan (2023) reports that dropout in several rural districts fell by 10 to 12%, a change attributed to community-based models that re-engaged children who had left schooling during the pandemic. Mehta and Saravanan (2022) observed greater classroom participation and curiosity among pupils, which they linked to interactive pedagogy and a sustained focus on foundational literacy.

5.2 Community and stakeholder engagement

Mobilising communities, parents and teachers has been central to both programmes. Ravikumar (2022) argues that Illam Thedi Kalvi has redefined how education can be conducted, and more than 200,000 volunteers have reportedly been mobilised as para-educators who support children at home (Tamil Nadu Education Department, 2023). Working alongside teachers, they give personalised attention to children who have fallen behind. Parental involvement has also shifted, with Mishra (2023) reporting that over 70% of parents felt more engaged with their children's learning after the programme's introduction, compared with 42% before.

5.3 Teacher training and development

Professional development has been equally important. Krishnan (2022) reports that more than 50,000 teachers received specialised Ennum Ezhuthum training in early literacy and numeracy, with emphasis on active learning, child-centred pedagogy and diagnostic assessment that identifies learning gaps early. Through its collaboration between teachers and community volunteers, Illam Thedi Kalvi gave teachers insight into how home-based learning could complement classroom instruction (Subramanian, 2023). Continuous support through peer learning groups and online modules sustained good practice, and the same author associates it with higher job satisfaction and reduced burnout.

6 Challenges in implementation

6.1 Operational and logistical issues

Several operational and logistical challenges have constrained the programmes. Subramanian (2023) observes that many rural schools lack basic amenities, including functional toilets, adequate classrooms and digital tools, which limits the interactive and community-based learning on which both schemes depend. The Tamil Nadu Education Department (2022) reports a deficit of 10 to 15% in trained teachers, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas, raising student-teacher ratios and eroding the personalised attention central to Ennum Ezhuthum. Economic disadvantage also leads some families to prioritise children's labour over schooling, and Ravindran (2022) contends that home-based learning struggles to sustain the interest of children who must contribute to household income.

6.2 Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation have proved difficult. Rajkumar (2023) notes that data collection is often inconsistent, particularly in remote areas where digital tools are scarce and manual recording is prone to error. Attendance rates and literacy scores offer a broad view of progress, but indicators of engagement, teacher effectiveness and conceptual understanding are frequently overlooked, and Singh (2022) identifies heavy reliance on short-term assessments as a major gap. Although regular evaluations have been introduced, policy adjustments remain slow, which delays corrective action (Venkatraman, 2023). Heavy administrative burdens on teachers may also reduce the consistency with which progress is recorded (Sharma, 2022).

7 Comparison with similar global initiatives

7.1 Case studies from other countries

Ennum Ezhuthum and Illam Thedi Kalvi share features with literacy reforms elsewhere. Pratham's Read India initiative, launched in 2007, addresses foundational gaps among rural children through community-driven models, and Banerji and Chavan (2019) attribute its success to local volunteers who reach underserved children, much as Illam Thedi Kalvi does. South Africa's Khanya Project, initiated in 2001, integrated technology into underperforming schools to improve literacy and numeracy, and Howie et al. (2021) report measurable improvements associated with its deployment. The UNICEF-supported Learning for All initiative in Nigeria, begun in 2012, addressed disparities through community engagement and home-based learning in remote areas. Musa and Olaniyi (2022) attribute its strength to strategies adapted to each region's cultural and socio-economic context, which parallels the regional sensitivity of Illam Thedi Kalvi.

7.2 Lessons learned

Several lessons follow from these comparisons. Early intervention prevents learning gaps from widening as children progress through school (Banerji & Chavan, 2019), a principle reflected in Ennum Ezhuthum's focus on Classes 1 to 3. The Khanya experience suggests that technology contributes to sustainable transformation only when accompanied by teacher training and infrastructure support (Howie et al., 2021), while Musa and Olaniyi (2022) argue that community participation strengthens sustainability and encourages local ownership, a theme central to Illam Thedi Kalvi.

8 Recommendations and future directions

8.1 Policy recommendations

Resource allocation should be reviewed to secure funding for infrastructure and teacher recruitment, especially in rural areas, since insufficient infrastructure and poorly trained teachers significantly hinder reform (Sridharan et al., 2022). Regular data collection and analysis would allow more targeted interventions and timelier policy responses (Gupta & Narayan, 2023). Curriculum reform should continue to favour contextualised learning, and Kumar and Singh (2020) suggest that integrating local languages and cultural practices can improve engagement and outcomes.

8.2 Future prospects

The future of both programmes may lie partly in adaptive learning systems that personalise instruction, which Tamil Nadu could pursue through partnerships with educational technology providers (Bansal & Krishnan, 2021). Such integration depends on continuous teacher development, which Singh and Mehta (2022) regard as vital for adopting new pedagogical strategies, and sustained upskilling in digital tools and blended learning is therefore recommended.

8.3 Scalability

Scaling both programmes would require adaptation to local contexts while maintaining core principles of accessibility and quality (Rao & Kumar, 2021). Their community-based and home-learning features could plausibly be transferred to regions with low literacy and infrastructure constraints, such as parts of northern India and sub-Saharan Africa, and partnerships with UNESCO and UNICEF may facilitate wider dissemination, as the Nigerian Learning for All experience indicates (Musa & Olaniyi, 2022). A modular approach that lets each region adapt curriculum and pedagogy to its own circumstances is likely to improve these prospects (Raj & Bose, 2020).

9 Conclusion

9.1 Summary of key findings

Through a combination of home-based learning and school-based intervention, Ennum Ezhuthum and Illam Thedi Kalvi have reached vulnerable populations, particularly in rural Tamil Nadu. The available evidence points to improvements in literacy, reductions in dropout and greater teacher-student engagement, which suggests that the initiatives are effective and potentially scalable when supported by targeted government policy (Rao & Iyer, 2021). Their professional development modules have also encouraged teachers to adopt student-centred pedagogies, and Srinivasan (2022) regards such development as crucial to translating pedagogical innovation into classroom success.

9.2 Impact on contemporary educational issues

In promoting equity and narrowing literacy gaps, the programmes address barriers faced by disadvantaged communities (Murthy, 2020) and align with Sustainable Development Goal 4. They also suggest that transformation need not depend solely on top-down policy and can be catalysed by empowering parents, local leaders and teachers, a view consistent with the argument of Sharma and Menon (2021) that sustainable reform must involve all stakeholders. Their experience is likely to inform policy in other states and countries facing comparable challenges.

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