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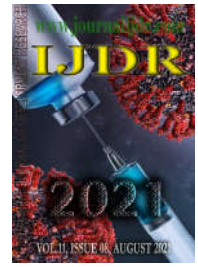
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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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REVIEW OF THE STATE OF EDUCATION QUALITY IN INDIA: ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

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ABSTRACT

Importance of education is the key to development of a nation. Despite the fact that education has been made free and compulsory in India as per Article 21-A of the Constitution, only in the last few decades, more efforts have been made for its expansion at public as well as private levels. However, private establishments are visualized more in primary and professional areas. Here, it is a question of debate as to whether the current state of expansion is adequate enough or not. Again, adequate expansion, if at all achieved, would eventually necessitate sustainable quality of infrastructure. But, both research and experience indicate several bottlenecks in the path for enhancing education quality. Therefore, one of the challenges of the next decade will be in identifying constructive and cost-effective ways by which the improvement in teaching and learning could be made possible in India. This paper focuses on this aspect of education.

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INTRODUCTION

Although education has been made free and compulsory in India up to elementary level as per Article 21-A of the Constitution, only in the last few decades, there has been significant spread of education at primary, secondary as well as higher levels. But, the efforts in this direction have been made at both public and private levels with private concerns seen comparatively more in case of primary and professional areas. However, it is a question of debate as to whether the current state of expansion is adequate enough or not. Nevertheless, considering this growth in quantity, timely and effective control on the quality is needed before the situation goes out of hand. But, as of now, quantitative progress is yet to be followed by the expected quality. There is, therefore, a need to make it more relevant and effective for achieving the national goals (Government of India, 2020). In this phase of transition when the quantity has already been achieved to a major extent, serious efforts are needed for consolidation and stabilization of the quality of the provision (Agarwal and Harding, 1997). Again, the public-private partnership is possibly to take the centre-stage for maintenance of the quality of education. The conditions need to be created that would be conducive for strictly managing the guidelines of evaluation (Bray, 2000).

Further, strict adherence of the principle of merit is to be the established practice in all areas, whether recruitment, regularization or promotion of the manpower in education (OECD, 1994). The quality of the provision of education depends on the quality of the various facilities created for the purpose. One of the important facilities is of course teaching, which is determined by good learning on the part of the teacher, his experience of good work and after all his specialization in the core area. The assurance of all these can be made possible by suitable evaluation during the initial recruitment of the teacher as well as during her/his regularization and promotion. Also, periodic assessment of the interest of the teacher in learning and teaching according to the developments in the subject or in her/his area of specialization needs to be made. Besides, syllabus updating according to the developments in the subject has to be undertaken at regular intervals (World Bank, 1997). Similarly, facilities of laboratory, study materials, extra-curricular supplements of various types such as field practical for improvement of the students' outlook require to be developed in accordance with the need of the time (Shukla, Garg, Rajput, Jain and Arora, 1994). The present paper attempts to analyse these issues involved in the enhancement and sustenance of the quality of education in India with specific reference to Odisha. Thus, its wider discussion may possibly contribute to better understanding of the emerging challenges of education development in the region during this phase of globalisation.

What is Education Quality?: The precise meaning of education quality and the path to its improvement are often not clear and so possibly left unexplained. When contextually examined, education quality apparently may refer to the inputs (numbers of teachers, amount of teacher training, number of textbooks, etc.), processes (amount of direct instructional time, extent of active learning, etc.), outputs (test scores and graduation rates), and outcomes (success/performance in subsequent employment). And, in addition, quality education may indicate simply the attaining of specific targets and objectives (Adams, 1998). Other and more detailed views are also available, and interpretation of quality may be based on an institution's or programme's reputation, the extent to which schooling has influenced change in student knowledge, attitudes, values and behaviour, or a complete theory or ideology of acquisition and application of learning (Chapman, 2002). As education systems grow and the numbers of stakeholders and clients involved in education decisions change, the potential for misunderstanding, disagreement and conflict regarding the meaning of quality increases. Agreement among parents, teachers, administrators and students as to the ingredients of quality, how to measure it, and how to initiate and sustain improvement is unlikely (Tatto, 1997). Nevertheless, as this paper discusses, many dimensions can be identified and addressed in the future.

The Challenge of Education: The reforms in the education sector are of vital importance insofar as they enable the economy to sustain liberalization and globalization. Although reforms have been initiated in different countries in response to economic crisis or to improve the existing economic situations, the programme may have both economic and social implications (Morley, 1997; Lewin, 1996). Social impacts of adjustment may be the fallout of the criteria of efficiency and accountability, which are inherent in conditions of liberalization and privatisation. While accountability necessitates adherence to strict fiscal discipline, efficiency lays increased emphasis on optimum utilization of the available resources. This could result in further reduction in the capabilities of the vulnerable sections to compete for survival in the open economy with no protection from the government (Lee, 1997). To compensate them for the economic losses, which they might have incurred initially because of the reforms, and to sustain them through such possible upheavals in the long run, there was to be more investment on their education, health and social security. But contrary to this, in many countries, the stabilization measures led to a cut in the social sector expenditure. This brought in the controversy, giving rise to an intensive debate on the SSAP regarding the programme's role in the social sector (Kemmerer, 1990). In view of the fact that the sector has a tremendous impact on the quality of living of the vulnerable population, a critical assessment of the social sector policy and the changes therein was made. Such an assessment provided a fillip to the process of the sector's own development and its contribution to growth, considering the size of India's population below the poverty line, their absolute dependence on the government's social sector spending and the already vulnerable character of the sector's policy since Independence.

As a result, virtually every country has identified improving education quality as one of its highest national priorities. In spite of progress in responding to the demand for increased school access, developing more effective national planning and policy mechanisms, and implementing massive training programmes for teachers and administrators, dissatisfaction persists with the capability of education systems to support national economic and social aspirations. To some extent, plans and policies calling for higher-quality schooling now supplement or even replace earlier attention to such priorities as education expansion and school access (Heyneman and Loxley, 1983). It would seem, a consensus is forming that immediate attention of policy-makers and involved international agencies should be focused on designing and implementing policies, programmes and actions to improve education quality. Translating the growing consensus into viable policies is a major challenge (Heneveld, 1994; Hanushek, 1994). Given the stated national priorities to improve education quality and the massive programmes for upgrading

curriculum and teacher quality, *why does quality not improve?* Rather, there are persisting obstacles to improving education quality (Cummings, 1997; Farrell and Oliviera, 1993). However, there is evidence that the quality of education has been improving, but unevenly across and within regions in India, especially Odisha. Indeed, many of the education challenges of the next decade have been created by the remarkable successes in India during the last two decades. During this period, in only primary education, gross enrolment rates grew to over 90 per cent, and by the 1990s several regions had primary education and net enrolment rates above 90 per cent. Education expansion and an extended period of economic growth (and recent economic decline), and evolving patterns of education decentralization have thus brought issues of education quality and relevance to the forefront and complicated the search for solutions (Chapman, 2002). The problem of low quality education in some regions was not created suddenly nor will it be resolved quickly (ADB, 2003). Five challenges lie ahead:

Education decentralization has been shifting increased responsibility for quality improvement to educators and communities. Hence, new demands emerge for leadership at each level of government. Improving education quality while maintaining the integrity of the national system of education and attaining equity goals creates a challenge much greater than administering expansion of enrolments (Chapman, 2002). Two key questions of the next decade will be: (a) "How can central government influence instructional and learning activities at the school and classroom level?"; and (b) "How will local community and school officials learn about and respond to the range of options available to them for raising school quality?"

In the competition for funds, quality may have to compete with access. Though both have political appeal, expanding access is more politically viable than raising quality (Irvine, 1997). Increasing access conveys an egalitarian value, while raising quality may appear to be exclusionary. Consequently, maintaining the commitment to quality improvement may be difficult, particularly during times of economic hardships and uncertainty. The challenge is how to keep education quality high on policy agenda and as a public concern. The role of policy-makers can be highly significant in encouraging attention to education quality through dissemination of information on its priorities and dialogue for assisting development of more effective national policy environments.

The information explosion of the last 10 years is putting new pressure on schools to keep up. The widespread availability of computers and various communication technologies raises anew the issue of how governments can utilize low-cost and higher-cost technologies to improve the quality of instruction. One fear is that the differential availability of technology across regions will perhaps lead to even greater differences in the quality of instruction.

Within countries, does the call for higher education quality include equitable distribution of school quality across geographic areas and sub-populations? Low quality is often due to the convergence of disadvantage. Raising school quality in those circumstances can be expensive and complicated, because it requires attention to an interwoven web of problems, often for groups that have relatively little political influence (Irvine, 1997). Regional cooperation in raising education quality makes great education and economic sense but often is constrained by political sensitivities and mired in minor differences between national systems (Capper, 1994). Countries' sensitivities about their own curricula sometimes preclude effective cooperation. One of the challenges of the next decade is identifying constructive and cost-effective ways in which countries can work together to improve teaching and learning. For instance, India should urgently expand its translation and interpretation efforts in order to make high quality learning materials in both written and spoken forms available to the public in various Indian as well as foreign languages (Govt. of India, 2020).

The Way Forward: As research and experience indicate, much remains to be learned about factors contributing to the several

meanings of education quality and about the processes of improving the same. Although a large body of research knowledge exists on learning, teaching, and organizational change, extant knowledge, even ignoring the normative and political nature of education decisions, is incomplete and insufficient to address the complex and messy problems of education (Capper, 1994). At the same time, our insights are well ahead of common practice. These concurrent conditions suggest that policy-makers and practitioners should envisage a two-pronged approach to strategies for improving education quality. The first assumes moderate risk and suggests that more resources and energies, which should be devoted to implement those education changes implied by both research and experience through a measure of credible evidence, are frequently successful in contributing to improving quality. The second recognizes that many education problems cannot be treated as technical problems and are not readily amenable to technical solutions. The question, "what works?" has little meaning unless it is followed by "when?", "where?", and "for whom?" There are rarely single answers to the causes of education problems as confronted by policy-makers. Sustaining a process of improving education quality may require the substitution of dialogue and continued inquiry for the comfort of certainty.

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