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QUALITY PRIMARY EDUCATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Primary education is the first stage of formal education. The main objective of quality primary education is to inculcate basic knowledge about reading, writing and arithmetic among the children. It is expected that after the successful completion of the primary level of education, a pupil should be able to read, write, and solve simple arithmetic problem.

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INTRODUCTION

The quality of education is determined by a variety of factors within and outside the education system, but, teacher and teaching-learning process in classroom plays a crucial role. Indian Government has pursued a fivefold strategy in 1990s to improve the quality of education in general and of basic education in particular. These include- improvement in the provision of infrastructure and human resources for primary education; provision of improved curriculum and teaching learning material; improvement in the quality of teaching learning process through the introduction of child centred pedagogy; attention to teacher capacity building; and increased focus on specification and measurement of learners' achievement levels. Teachers and the quality of their teaching has been given high priority and importance in this context. There is no universally accepted definition for 'quality of education'. In education, perception of quality is around students (Mukhopadhyay, 2001). The performance of the students like examination results, learning achievements, ability to apply learned knowledge in practical life-- exhibit the quality of an education.

For some, "Quality of education" means value addition in education (Feigenbaum 1951); excellence in education (Peters and Waterman 1982); for others, fitness of education outcomes and experience for use (Juran and Gryna 1988). For a society, "excellence" and "value" are most appropriate indicators for quality education. A generally accepted definition of quality education does not exist and different end users adopt different criteria for determining the quality of education. In this study we measure the quality of primary education on the basis of student learning achievement (i.e., ability of read, write and do mathematics). Vygotsky's (1978,1987) socio-cultural theory of learning entails, that, learning occurs through social interactions as learners engage in culturally meaningful, productive activity with the responsive assistance of a more competent other. There is ample research evidence to indicate that teachers and students who share a common primary language, cultural understanding and experiences may be better able to develop inter subjectivity necessary for effective meditation. It is also empirically established that teacher's lack of knowledge of students' languages, cultures and communities result in deficiency perspective and inhibits in development of close relationship with students. The relationship between minority children and teachers have often been reported strained (Heath, 1983; Phillips, 1983; Valenzuela, 1999; Mc Quillan (1981).

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Valenzuela (1999) found that majority of the Mexican and Chicano students in her study believed, that, their teachers did not care about them because they failed to address the students' broader needs and social concerns. The underlying philosophy behind the appointment of para teachers in various countries and the para teacher scheme in India has been that a local person appointed as teacher is better able to establish good rapport with the local community. Monzo and Rueda (2001) working on Latino para educators found, that, sharing the culture, language, and experiences of their students helped them to relate with student in meaningful ways. These para educators are generally members of the same or similar community in which they teach, and therefore, share many of the experiences and cultural practices of their students, including their primary languages and cultural practices etc. In India, the state of Rajasthan has successfully been able to overcome the problem of teacher shortage and teacher absenteeism through these para professionals under the 'Shiksha Karmi Project' which is also the origin of para teacher scheme in the country.

"The Committee is concerned over the quality of education imparted under the Abhiyan. The Committee is little apprehensive about the feasibility of appointing education volunteer/para teachers for imparting quality education to the children. The Committee strongly feels, that, a child needs to be tended under well-trained hands to initiate him into the art of learning. The Committee is aware of the fact that there was problem in getting regular teachers in remote and inaccessible habitations. It, however, emphasizes the importance of trained teachers for child education. The Committee is happy to know that the Department had made a provision of pre-service induction/training as well as in service training of Education Volunteers even at block/cluster levels. But the Committee finds that due to shortage of teachers, not to speak of trained teachers/qualified resource persons at block and cluster levels, aims of the programme are not being achieved."

Primary Education: Universality Vs Quality

The universal declaration of human rights (1948) considered primary education as the basic human right of all people. Accordingly, all nations prioritized universal access to education. The developed and developing countries have attained universal or near universal access to primary education. Now the focus is on the quality of student learning. The quality concern is not uniform across the nations. The developing and poor nations are still striving for expansion of educational access. It has been established that access to education and its quality are not sequential elements. At the sub-regional meeting of South Asian Ministers in Katmandu in April 2001, quality education was unanimously identified as a priority area. All participants were in agreement that there was an urgency to develop the quality of education to meet the intermediate target and education for all by 2015. Because how well pupil are taught and how much they learn can have a crucial impact on how long they stay in school and how regularly they attend. Further whether parents send their children to school at all is likely to depend on the judgment they make about the quality of teaching and learning. Based on this perception parents decide whether attending school is worth the time and cost for their children and for themselves.

The World Bank (1997) suggested that 'the best way to improve access is to improve quality which would make coming to school or staying in school a more attractive option from the perspective of parents as well as children. Moreover, efforts to improve quality will tend to increase the efficiency of the public expenditure and will encourage parents to contribute children education'. In the year 1950, when the Constitution of India was adopted, education was recognized as a basic individual right. Directive Principles of State Policy, Article 45, states that "the state shall endeavour to provide within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years" (The Constitution of India). In line with the commitment of the country to provide elementary education to all children, educational facilities have got tremendously expanded during the post independence period, especially in primary stage. Primary education is the first stage of formal education. The main objective of quality primary education is to inculcate basic knowledge about reading, writing and arithmetic among the children. It is expected that after the successful completion of the primary level of education, a pupil should be able to read, write, and solve simple arithmetic problem. This study found that in India after completion of primary level education, 11 per cent student were not able to recognize anything, 14.1 per cent can recognize only letters, 14.9 per cent can read a word, 17 per cent can read a paragraph of a story and only 42.8 per cent can read the complete story (Table 1).

Table 1. School Children who can read-standard-wise (IV) (in per cent)

State	Nothing	Letters	Word	One-Para of the story	Complete story
Andhra Pradesh	8.8	10.5	15.6	17.7	47.35
Karnataka	5.4	12.1	17.7	19.0	45.9
Kerala	3.2	3.7	10.7	11.3	71.1
Madhya Pradesh	15.7	15.3	15.5	17.1	36.5
Tamil Nadu	10.3	11.4	17.5	17.3	43.6
All India	11.0	14.1	14.9	17.0	42.8

Source: India Labour Report 2007

What can be done to improve basic reading in primary school?

% Children at different reading levels All children: All India (rural)

Grade	Beginner	Letter	Word	Para Std I level	Story Std II level	Total%
Std III	14.9	25.0	20.0	16.6	23.6	100
Std	8.4	17.5	17.9	18.9	37.4	100
Std V	5.7	12.8	14.3	19.1	48.1	100

Source: ASER 2014

Look at reading numbers for Std V: (Similar patterns in other grades too) Two main points: ♣ % Children who can read at Std II level (or higher) is about 48% ♣ The rest of the children are at different levels: ♣ Close to 20% children can only read letters or not even that ♣ 14% can read words but not sentences. ♣ 19% can read sentences but no longer text. ♣ Each of these groups need special and specific attention. The condition of students learning achievement (quality) is

extremely poor in mathematics compare to language. This study found that after the successful completion of the primary level education, 18.6 per cent children could not recognize the numbers, 26.7 per cent children can recognize the numbers but not able to do addition or subtraction, 23.9 per cent children only can do subtraction, and only 30.7 per cent children can do addition, subtraction as well as division.

This is the scenario of primary education in India where students are not in a position to read, write and do a simple arithmetic problem even after completing the primary level education. The learning achievement of the student is very poor in all Indian states whether it is educationally backward or forward.

The low learning achievement problem in India mostly due to the combination of following factors:

- Most of the primary schools are shelter less.
- The schools with buildings have insufficient accommodation.
- Students mostly sit on mats/tats.
- High pupil-teacher ratio.
- Textbooks for teachers, which contain the methods for teaching for every unit of the curriculum, are not provided in time.
- Teaching aids are very old. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is still not used for teaching in primary education which is recognized as very effective for learning.
- The teachers of public schools often participate in political activity or other profitable activity rather than concentrating in teaching the pupils.
- Most of rural areas of India have their own local dialect. In many states the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction is not followed strictly. This is particularly so in case of the students belonging to linguistic minorities. The students belonging to the linguistic minorities have to study in the language of the linguistic majority of the state.
- Political nature of appointment of the primary teachers is largely responsible for poor quality of teaching.
- Resource materials are never provided in adequate quantity.
- Community support is at the very low.
- A high absentee rate of the students in primary school particularly in rural areas.
- Co-curricular activities have not been given due importance as the teachers of the primary schools particularly of public schools and rural areas consider them as wastage of valuable time. As a result, making learning a fun for the students is not done.
- Inspection system for primary education has become only a ritual.
- Curriculum of primary education is hardly matches the surroundings of the students in which they live. As a result, students often suffer from fish-out-of-water syndrome leading to a high drop-out rate.

For quality improvement, we have to re-think about the idea, structure and system of primary education which have very

crucial motivating effects on the students. The teaching-learning environment and quality of education are so unsatisfactory particularly in government controlled primary schools that teachers of those schools themselves prefer to arrange education for their children in a better run school in private sector. The elite and rich groups of the society or village enroll their children in private schools where quality is presumed to be far better than the government schools. So the clients of these public schools are the poorest of the poor, economically and socially downtrodden people. Due to the economic factor they have to enroll their children in government run primary schools where quality is very poor. So the children belonging to marginal groups are deprived from good quality education and as a result they can hardly climb ladder of development. To overcome this problem, government should implement the voucher system, especially in case of primary education.

The National Knowledge Commission (2007) has been emphasizing on 'quality primary education' for making India as a knowledge society in the world. The quality of education mainly depends upon physical infrastructure, qualified and competent teachers, curriculum and instructional materials, support materials and equipments, teaching learning strategies, comprehensive and continuous evaluation and effective management. Unfortunately in our country, where 90 per cent of our primary schools are run by government, most of them are situated in rural areas, lack the average criteria for quality education.

WHITHER QUALITY EDUCATION AT GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS?

Primary education in public schools has always been substandard

The first ten years of schooling typically build the foundations for a bright professional career of an individual. High quality education up to secondary level therefore merits the attention, investment and high priority of the government. However, in our education system, primary education imparted at the majority of government and public schools has always been substandard. Whatever may be the reasons but the poor standards of school education have compelled parents to work get their children educated in private schools. Consequently the market for schools where the Cambridge system of education is in place has been thriving while parents are not even afraid to work overtime to meet the financial requirements of an expensive education. Yet only a segment of society, most likely those with financially sound backgrounds, are able to avail this facility. Moreover, this dual standard of secondary and intermediate education is also creating a class difference where the rich can get quality education both locally and abroad but the poor can't even get good education locally. In fact, the ever increasing inflation coupled with high tuition fees of private schools has compelled people to undergo a great deal of hardship to bear the education expenses of their children. The poor standards of our education system are exposed when students are required to take international exams like IELTS, TOEFL, GRE, GMAT etc. While those educated through local examination boards struggle to even pass these exams, students of Cambridge System and top

private schools do exceptionally well in these exams. Be it English, Math or any other subject, school education plays a vital role in the career development of individuals and thus is of key importance.

Under the given conditions, the SMB Fatima Jinnah Government Girls Secondary School, Nishtar Road, Garden is a ray of hope for every child who wants to get quality education for free. One and a half years ago, the school was a typical government school where stray dogs wandered in class rooms and posed a threat to students. There was no discipline or sense of education, while mismanagement was at its peak. Visitors used to describe the apathetic learning environment and infrastructure, while even teachers would not admit their children in the same school because of pitiable standards. Luckily, Zindagi Trust in Collaboration with Book Group adopted the school and converted it into a model school that could be compared with the best private schools of the city. Some 1500 girls, mainly from poor families, are now enrolled at the SMB School.

Primary education in India: Progress and challenges

Primary school enrollment in India has been a success story, largely due to various programs and drives to increase enrolment even in remote areas. With enrollment reaching at least 96 percent since 2009, and girls making up 56 percent of new students between 2007 and 2013, it is clear that many problems of access to schooling have been addressed. Improvements to infrastructure have been a priority to achieve this and India now has 1.4 million schools and 7.7 million teachers so that 98 percent of habitations have a primary school (class I-V) within one kilometer and 92 percent have an upper primary school (class VI-VIII) within a three-kilometer walking distance. Despite these improvements, keeping children in school through graduation is still an issue and dropout rates continue to be high. Nationally 29 percent of children drop out before completing five years of primary school, and 43 percent before finishing upper primary school. High school completion is only 42 percent. This lands India among the top five nations for out-of-school children of primary school age, with 1.4 million 6 to 11 year olds not attending school. In many ways schools are not equipped to handle the full population – there is a teacher shortage of 689,000 teachers in primary schools, only 53 percent of schools have functional girls' toilets and 74 percent have access to drinking water. Additionally, the quality of learning is a major issue and reports show that children are not achieving class-appropriate learning levels. According to Pratham's Annual Status of Education 2013 report, close to 78 percent of children in Standard III and about 50 percent of children in Standard V cannot yet read Standard II texts. Arithmetic is also a cause for concern as only 26 percent students in Standard V can do a division problem. Without immediate and urgent help, these children cannot effectively progress in the education system, and so improving the quality of learning in schools is the next big challenge for both the state and central governments. Improving learning will require attention to many things, including increasing teacher accountability.

According to school visits teacher attendance is just 85 percent in primary and middle schools and raising the amount of time teachers spend on-task and increasing their responsibility for student learning also needs improvement. Part of this process requires better assessments at each grade level and more efficient monitoring and support systems. Overall, the public school system also needs a better general management system.

Conclusion

It appears from the empirical study that quality of primary education has been compromised for its universality in India. Operation Black Board, District Primary Education Project, National Literacy Programme, Sarvha Shiksha Abhiyan—all aim at universalizing. It is time that the nation pays heed to the quality dimension. As it has already been pointed out, quality indirectly helps in making the quantity. As a result, quality improvement programmes need to be devised for all levels—national, state and district. There is always talk of not enough good quality teachers in the system and I think that has partly to do with the fact that for most teachers, teaching is not out of choice or a passion. The minority few that have chosen teaching as profession when they could have been in other careers have usually earned name and fame. Passion in teaching is so important because in today's information age, as a teacher you need to be a student simultaneously and keep learning to ahead of the curve to deliver the best to your students. One of the reasons for not being able to attract quality teachers to this profession was the lack of good pay packages, but this is slowly changing now and pay scales have significantly improved over the last 5 years. But, then it takes time to develop good teachers and hopefully if this trend continues, we may see some of the best brains in area become teachers.

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