Quality Education: An Imperative Need for a Brighter Future

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the issue of falling quality of education. The issue of quality in education is complex and multi-faceted. Quality of education can be looked at from the input, process, output and outcome perspectives. This paper focuses on quality of education from outcome level. We examine quality in terms of learning outcomes among children. Information for the paper is mainly obtained through State Report Card, designed and developed by National University of Educational Planning and Administration, New Delhi and the eleventh Annual Status of Education Report (ASER 2014) and ASER 2016.

INTRODUCTION

Education has become the top priority of every country today. Indeed it ought to be if a country wants to build a nation that is accommodating to all through maintaining progress, peace and goodwill. India, which is considered to be one of the fastest growing economies in the world in the last decade, needs to strengthen its education policy to withstand every challenge that stands in the path of enrolment, excellence and employability. Last year's annual budget, the finance minister announced an allocation of Rs 72,394 crore compared to Rs 68,963 for last year, which is 4.9 per cent increase in the education budget. But despite the massive and growing government expenditure on education, the result of the investment is not up to the mark.

Annual Status of Education Report (ASER-2017) report revealed the status of education in India. As per this report, enrolment in elementary education is almost 100 percentages. However, when it comes to education outcomes, abilities in reading, writing and other comprehensive skills have deteriorated among children between the ages of six and fourteen.

Low learning and falling quality of education imparted to kids in India has grave implications for the future of an economy. The country has not been able to improve the learning skills of majority of its primary school children; if anything it has fallen to alarming lows. Even with the increasing primary enrolment rates, India has the largest number of out-of-school children in the world which is more than the out of school children in whole of sub-Saharan Africa. There is a huge disparity between the urban and rural education; rich and poor children have radically different schooling experience.

As one delves deeper into the Indian education system, one realizes that the very basic foundation is corrupt and flawed. Biggest problem is the fact that a sector as crucial to nation building as education seems to be getting importance only on surface level and real problems are intentionally being ignored due to deep rooted corruption.

Policy Framework for Education Development

National Policy on Education 1986 (Revised in 1992): A key milestone in India's march towards Education for All was the adoption of the National Policy on Education 1986 (revised in 1992) which states "In our national perception, education is essentially for all". Some of the key thrust areas of the National Policy on Education 1986/92 include; (i) national system of education which implies that "up to a given level, all students, irrespective of caste, creed, location or sex, have access to education of a comparative quality"; (ii) early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) "both as a feeder and a strengthening factor for primary education and for human resource development in general";(iii) focus on universal access and enrolment, universal retention of children up to 14 years of age; and a substantial improvement in the quality of education to enable all children achieve essential levels of learning; (iv) emphasis "on the removal of disparities and to equalize educational opportunity by attending to the specific needs of those who have been denied equality"; (v) widening of access to secondary education with emphasis on enrolment of girls, Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), particularly in science, commerce and vocational streams; (vi) education for women's equality, with special emphasis on the removal of women's illiteracy and obstacles inhibiting their access to, and retention in, elementary education; (vii) the introduction of systematic, well-planned and rigorously implemented programmes of vocational education aimed at developing a healthy attitude amongst students towards work and life, enhancing individual employability, reducing the mismatch between the demand and supply of skilled manpower, and providing an alternative to those intending to pursue higher education without particular interest or purpose; (viii) making adult education programmes a mass movement involving literacy campaigns and comprehensive programmes of post literacy and continuing education for neo-literates and youth who have received primary education with a view to enabling them to retain and upgrade their literacy skills, and to harness it for the improvement of their living and working condition; (ix) overhauling of the system of teacher education with emphasis on continuing professional development of teachers, establishment of District Institutes of Education and Training (DIET) with the capability to organize pre-service and in-service training of elementary school teachers, and upgradation of selected secondary teacher training colleges.

National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Education (2013): A National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Education was adopted in September 2013. The Policy envisages promotion of inclusive, equitable and contextualized opportunities for promoting optimal development and active learning capacity of all children below six years of age. The policy lays down the way forward for a comprehensive approach towards ensuring a sound foundation for survival, growth and development with focus on *care and early learning* for every child. The key goals of the policy include: Universal access with equity and inclusion; Quality in ECCE; and Strengthening capacity, monitoring and supervision, advocacy, research and review.

Key Programmatic Interventions for Fostering Quality Education

Interventions supported under the SSA: The key interventions supported under the SSA for fostering quality elementary education include: Renewal of curriculum based on the national Curricular Framework, 2005; Provision of free textbooks for pupils in Classes I to VIII; Introduction of continuous and comprehensive evaluation; Increasing teacher availability; In service teacher training to upgrade pedagogical competence of teachers; orientation of head teachers to academic management, financial management and human resource management; creation of an academic support system to provide decentralised academic support, training and supervision to teachers through the establishment of Block Resource Centres (BRCs) and Cluster Resource Centres (CRCs); and learning enhancement programmes that are designed to improve the quality of teaching-learning process and learning outcomes.

Restructuring and Reorganization of Teacher Education: The Centrally-Sponsored Scheme (CSS) of Restructuring and Reorganization of Teacher Education was initiated in 1987 pursuant to the formulation of the National Policy on Education (NPE),1986. The programme emphasized the need for a decentralized system for the professional preparation of teachers, and envisaged the establishment of District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs), Colleges of Teacher Education (CTEs) and Institutes of Advanced Study in Education (IASEs). The scheme has been revised in order to meet the challenges facing the teacher education system arising from the massive spatial and numerical expansion of schooling facilities at the elementary and secondary levels, the corresponding increase in the demand for teachers and to fulfill the statutory obligations with regard to teacher preparation and continuing professional development of teachers under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE Act), 2009.

Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA): The centrally-sponsored scheme 'Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA)' was launched in March 2009 with the objective of making secondary education of good quality available, accessible and affordable to all young persons in the age group 14-15 years. The scheme envisages enhancing enrolment in Classes IX-X by providing a secondary school within a reasonable distance of every habitation to enable universal access to secondary education by 2017 and universal retention by 2020; improving the quality of education through making all schools conform to prescribed norms; and removing gender, socio-economic and disability barriers.

Declining Quality of Education: Increased Schooling & Little Learning.

On one hand when enrolment for the age group 6-14 has increased from 96.7% in 2014 to 96.9% in 2016 at primary level. Enrolment for the age group 15-16 has also improved for both boys and girls, rising from 83.4% in 2014 to 84.7% in 2016. At the same time the increase in drop-out rate has contributed to poor retention. The drop-out rate at primary level increased from 7.98 in 2014 to 9.01 in 2016 and rising from27.20 in 2014 to 28.26 in 2016 at secondary level.

If the current trend continues, and unless some urgent measures are taken by the government, India is unlikely to meet its educational goals. At primary school level, the nation faces crisis of both access to and quality of primary education, our achievements during the last decade are being eroded. The initial increase in enrolment was made possible by massive construction efforts, whereby new classrooms and in some cases new schools were

constructed. Government also recruited more teachers and ensured that schools were provided with adequate teaching and learning materials. For the most part improvement in school facilities was recorded from 2014-2016.

There are several reasons for the current situation. Although there are many factors that have led to the decline of education quality, given the scope of this paper, we will analyse few key factors that we believe have impacted education the most.

Why is Education not delivering?

The quality of education is directly related to the quality of teaching and learning. The role of teachers in improving the quality of education is crucial. Several studies have shown the link between teacher quality and quality of education. Studies (Coleman1966, Husen et al, 1987; Solomon 1987) clearly indicate that teacher quality does have a positive impact on the level of academic achievement of students attending schools in developing countries. Bacchus (1996) argues that the poorer the country, the greater the impact teacher quality is likely to have on students' achievement. Given a lack of teaching and learning materials in many developing countries, teacher quality assumes afar greater importance in improving the quality of education than would be the case otherwise. Given this importance, it is vital to improve the professional competences of teachers and to raise their morale by improving their living conditions, so that the quality of basic education does not decline. There are several problems facing the education sector in terms of teachers. The first one and the most pressing one is inadequate number of teachers.

Inadequate number of teachers:

According to ASER report the pupil teacher ratio declined from 30 to 28 both at primary and upper primary level from 2013 to 2014 respectively. There are many other factors too that determine the quality of teaching, including teacher qualifications and experiences, their level of motivation, and working conditions. There are several issues that need to be considered.

Weak Students make Poor Teachers:

Having adequate number of qualified teachers is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for quality education. Motivation, dedication, work ethics are perhaps more important to ensure that children receive quality education. In recent years students who have done well in their exit examination are reluctant to join the teaching profession. Several studies have shown that the majority who join the profession as a last option include those who have recorded poor performance in exit examinations. A study by Mkumbo (2012) stated that the most often stated reasons by teachers for joining the profession was the ease with which students could become a teacher. Student teachers were guaranteed a job on completion of their training unlike in other professions. Many teachers joining the teaching profession dream to leave it as soon as they find another job.. Several teachers in Mkumbo's study said that students can join the profession when their grades were so poor that they could not join other professions.

With such a "reputation" of the profession it is no wonder that only students with low grades join the teacher training colleges. Obviously, there were some teachers who stated that they became teachers because they preferred to become a teacher, they loved teaching, but such teachers were few and far between. A study done by Sumra (2005) found teachers giving

similar reasons for joining the profession. However, the number of teachers with positive attitudes towards teaching was low. Study done by Cooksey (1990) showed that the major reason given by teachers for joining the teaching profession was "to help build the nation". Surprisingly, in 1990, 76 per cent of the teachers saw teaching as a respected profession, and nine out of ten respondents said salary was not an important consideration. This situation seems to have changed drastically over the last two and a half decades. Low status, poor living and working conditions of teachers is deterring many students to despise the profession.

Working Conditions of Teachers:

It will be understatement of fact to say teachers are working in a difficult environment. Class sizes are large as a result of lack of classrooms, many children have to sit on the floor as there are not enough desks in schools; majority of primary and secondary schools have no electricity. All these factors affect the performance of teachers and these problems need to be addressed in order to improve the quality of education.

Weak Content Knowledge:

Knowledge of content is as important for teachers as the knowledge of ways of how to teach this content. This is a major problem in many developing countries. Teachers not only lack techniques of teaching but their content knowledge of the subjects that they teach is also not up to the mark.

Teacher Absenteeism:

Even when teachers are competent, which many are not, learning can only take place if teachers are in class and teaching. The World Bank study (2011) found that on any given day 23 percent of teachers, 20 percent in rural areas and 36 per cent in urban areas, were not in school p.16). Even when teachers were in school, 53 per cent of them were not in classrooms at any given time. Teacher's absenteeism was much higher in urban areas, where 68 percent of the teachers were not in class compared to 50 percent in rural areas. On average pupils were taught for only two hours and 04 minutes out of required five hours of teaching. In rural areas pupils were taught for two hours 11 minutes compared to one hour 24 minutes of teaching in urban areas.

Language of Instruction

There is overwhelming research evidence that children learn best when they are taught in their mother tongue (Bisong, 1995; Poth 1997; Ufomota, 1999). The issue of Language of Instruction (LOI) generated emotional and sometimes hot debate among academicians, politicians and the public in general. The issue seems to have slipped off the agenda in recent years. The debate on the LOI has primarily focused on the use of English at secondary level. Studies have shown that using English as *a language of instruction* in secondary education has a profound effect on the quality of education

Developing a Clear vision for education

Society expects that output of the school system should have attained a noticeable and measurable behavioural change. This change in behaviour need to be captured by evaluating life skills imparted. We all agree that education is important but are not very clear about what the purpose of education is. The vision for education, the role education has to play, was much clearer in the early days of independence. Education was used for unity, nation

building, manpower planning, creating a socialist person and so on. We all agree that education is expected to produce graduates who are able to thrive in a fast changing world, meet challenges and solve problems, be entrepreneurial and create jobs, be critical and active citizens. Yet targets rarely focus on these sorts of outcomes of education, and methods of measurement do not measure these sorts of skills and attributes. The main point here is that education systems ought to have a clear set of outcomes for its students, and design all the rest of the pieces around these outcomes. In focusing on outcomes, we posit that the most important aspect of education is the *capabilities* of its graduates; the most important question in education is *'what are students able to do?'* This is a big shift from what is currently happening in our schools. We are more concerned about what our students "know" than what our students can do. For example, are we concerned about our children's writing ability? If this is one of the competencies that we expect our schools need to develop, then we would plan that this is done in classrooms and assess this ability. There is a tension between quantity and quality in education – there are trade-offs – and rapid expansion of education inevitably affects quality. But it is mistaken to plan to take care of quantity and enrolments first and quality later.

What are these capabilities? These are things that will enable students – whether of primary, secondary or other levels of education – to thrive in the world and in the next stage of formal schooling where applicable. For example, it is not important for our students to "know" all the facts but it is important that they know how to find the needed information. This is important for two reasons, first people tend to forget facts over time and secondly, "facts" change overtime. We feel there are several capabilities that are crucial. An ability to read and write and do basic numeracy is crucial for anyone to survive in present day. Literacy and numeracy are also important because they are basis of further learning. Perhaps no skill is more important than the skill to learn. Schools should prepare our children so that they are able to go on acquiring skills and knowledge in a wide variety of life situations once formal education has come to an end. Effective learners know how to learn and have tools and strategies to serve that purpose. The rapidly expanding pool of new information and the rise of international cooperation have increased the importance of such skills while the unpredictability and rapidity of change requires a closer connection between school education and lifelong learning. These are necessary for success in the academic world, the world of work and the society of the future. As stated earlier, reading and numeracy skills play a central role in an individual's learning at school. The ability to read and understand instructions and text is a basic requirement of success in all school subjects. A solid grounding in mathematics is at the very core of the educational curriculum. Analytical skills, logic skills and reasoning are all well enhanced through the study of mathematics. Compulsory training of children in mathematics is therefore an important requirement for participation in society, ultimately making an indispensable contribution to national competitiveness and the knowledge society. Our children should develop these skills, reading and numeracy, in early years of schooling. Other capabilities that are important are ability to comprehend, analyse, ask questions and think critically; be creative, innovate and solve problems even when faced with new challenges. It also requires a set of aptitudes such as being reflective, balanced and considerate of others; self-confidence and desire to take initiative; think out of the box and laterally, be imaginative.

A full discussion of these outcomes is beyond the scope of this paper; the idea is simply to illustrate the sort of things that should be the prime focus of education policies. Once there is this clarity of vision about the purposes of education, it can guide the development of the entire education system. We recommend a revision of education vision that focuses on the capabilities of its learners, that focuses on the skills, abilities and aptitudes of its graduates, because this is what will enable its graduates to thrive in the world and more effectively contribute to national development. Once a consensus is reached on the broad capabilities that are needed from our school graduates then other pieces will fall in place.

Quality education is possible when all teachers are properly trained, supported and paid. Teacher accountability is an issue that needs to be addressed. For a teacher to pay attention to the class, a pupil in particular, will need to be morally as well as materially motivated. Teachers need better pay, timely paid and a decent working environment. For education that focuses on outcome, teacher accountability is important. The government can focus on all the things discussed above – teacher preparation, deployment, support and management – but in the end teachers have to deliver. Policies need to be in place to ensure that teachers deliver. In all the years I have been a student of education, I have never witnessed a case where a teacher has lost a job, or not received his/her salary, because of non-performance. There are primary and secondary schools which continue to function and teachers getting their salaries even when year after year all their pupils fail. I do not think there is any other sector where job security is as guaranteed as in education sector, even in case of non-performance.

Another issue, related with non-performance, is the issue of teacher attendance. Obviously, students will not learn unless teachers are in class and teaching. Absenteeism rate was higher in urban areas compared to rural areas. The causes for teachers' absenteeism are many, including spending sometime of private matters (even if they are within school premises), follow up of their delayed or irregularly paid salaries and other benefits. Yet, teachers' motivation to teach has been reported indirectly to be lower than expected.

Suggestions

Most of the steps needed to transform the quality of education in India do not require policy change or a new educational policy. Yet, these steps are not getting taken because there is no visible crisis pushing us to act. Only a few points in the list below – like the creation of a cadre of Indian education civil services, replacing the policy of schools within a kilo metre of every habitation with a free transport to the nearest school policy – are policy level issues.

Below are 10 initiatives that can transform Indian education, if undertaken in a concerted way and sustained over at least a five year period:

Make the problem visible

Regular assessments are needed to measure progress in learning and make the current levels visible in a way that can be understood widely. India should participate regularly in international assessments like Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study and Programme for International Student Assessment so as to set goals and benchmark its performance and progress. The quality of national assessments should be improved and third party assessors like Annual Status on Education Report and Educational Initiatives should be encouraged to provide periodic feedback. The District Information System for Education (DISE) system should be upgraded to a 'Student Progress Tracking System' which will track

learning levels of individual children and provide diagnostic data to serve as a basis for improvement to schools and teachers.

Build systemic and institutional capacity.

The biggest problem in the educational system today is a severe shortage of capacity. Consider two initiatives – the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) and the Teacher Eligibility Test (TET). Few people disagree that these initiatives are based on sound principles and good ideas. Yet, many – some may say most – well intentioned ideas do not achieve their goals due to people across the system not having the required skills. In the case of the TET test, pass percentages have been between 1% and about 15% and the initiative has not had the intended impact. It raises questions both on our teacher training capacity and also the capacity to understand and execute the assessments successfully. Strengthening research on learning is the first step and only long term solution to this crisis. I recommend establishing a 'science of learning' centre, either as a part of National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) or as a separate institute, with a mission of promoting research on how children learn. This institute can undertake research on reading, elementary mathematics, intelligent teaching systems and assessments. However, research needs an ecosystem and we now need to kick start such an ecosystem. We recommend the creation of a research fund (similar to the American National Science Foundation Fund), which will provide grant support for innovation to take root and grow in research institutions nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and private players based on their track record and quality of research, and direct research towards areas of national and state priorities.

Establish a reading mission.

If we can ensure that 80% of our children can read and write well in any one language by the time they are nine years old, we would have solved 80% of our educational problems. Reading has to become a focus area of both action and measurement and a movement which involves all. A national level centre for reading research is more important for India than any Indian Institute of Technology and is not so difficult to create. Specialised training programmes need to be created for teachers on reading skill development and measurement. Reading tests need to be made available on computers, tablets and mobile phones so that parents can determine the reading levels of their children.

Build teacher and head teacher capacity.

Starting with regular assessments of teacher needs which will determine individual gaps/needs in teachers, high quality training programmes need to be deployed for teacher training. Information and Communication Technology should be used as a tool to provide many of these courses on an on demand basis. The resources available in the National Repository of Open Education Resources (and other open education resources) should be moderated by experts to ensure that high quality resources – including videos, teaching material and assessment questions are available to every teacher. Rather than depending solely on government organisations like the NCERT to create all this material, this work should be carried out through 'request for proposals' that would allow talented individuals and organisations to participate and contribute.

Change the goal post by reforming board exams to test understanding, not recall.

Board Exams are a source of the learning crisis observed even in primary schools. The focus on students, parents and teachers is on maximising exam marks and not on learning, which needs to be corrected by having Board Exams that measure learning. This is not difficult to do because there are so many exams that can serve as a benchmark for this change.

Invest in technology.

There is a need to research and develop ways to use technology to drive the change we desire. The focus should not be on installing hardware but creating new, high quality content such as intelligent teaching systems and tools that will help students to hone basic skills like reading and mathematics, and developing content in multiple Indian languages. ICT based remediation programmes should be encouraged, in which the service provider is reimbursed based on the measured student improvement. ICT should also be used to track teacher attendance. Free high speed internet connections can be provided to all schools through a simple scheme by which the government reimburse internet service providers directly.

Introduce school based practices for learning improvement.

This includes initiatives like monthly tests in school with academic support from State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) or District Institute of Educational Research and Training (DIET) and quarterly parent teacher meeting days which encourage parents to visit schools and build a parent teacher connect focused on student learning.

Work on mindsets through public education campaigns.

Public education campaigns should be aimed at prospective teachers to attract talent to the sector; at parents to make them aware of what constitutes a good school, the value of education beyond marks etc.; and at existing teachers to make them understand that every child can learn well if supported etc.

Holistic development.

Efforts in areas such as sports, arts and culture should be initiated or expanded in order to enrich holistic development.

Implement legal and structural changes.

A separate Indian education services cadre at different levels, within the civil services, should be created. Parents should be bound to send students to school, and district education officials should be responsible for the quality of both private and government schools. Public Private Partnership (PPP) arrangements should be explored for areas like strengthening DIETs, providing teacher training both using traditional and distance/ICT methods, providing standardised assessments, running remedial centres etc. Today, the preschool, elementary and secondary structures are distinct with different bodies overseeing their curricula. They should be combined under a single authority, possibly the SCERT. Fragmentation of schools should be reduced by combining schools and providing free transport to children further away rather than building schools close to every habitat.

Conclusion

There should be no doubt that our education is in crisis and needs immediate solutions. In the final analysis it is the government who has to make decisions to ensure the quality of education improves and that our youths are able to compete on the East African, African and

the World labour market. The paper shows that the quality of education in the country has deteriorated in the last few years. The focus of the government has been on expansion, at the expense of quality to ensure that as many children as possible enter school. Great deal of effort and resources have gone on inputs, building classrooms, ensuring schools have textbooks, hiring more teachers, building toilet facilities etc. These are important for education, safe and adequate infrastructure is necessary, but more important is the learning that take place within the four walls of these shining classrooms, and that has not happened. We have also argued that education progress is worth its name if and where it enables students to develop capabilities, aptitudes and skills that will enable them to thrive in further education and in the world. This approach measures success in terms of outcomes rather than inputs, assessing both the quantity and quality of student graduates. It is focused on the central question: 'what are students able to do?' Our basic point is simple. The major education policy challenge is to have basic education goals focused on capabilities, and organize everything else (teacher education, curriculum, textbooks, libraries, examinations, inspection, use of mobile phones, internet and other technologies) around this. Teachers will need to be at the heart of this transformation, and therefore must be meaningfully involved from the beginning and throughout. This is the right time to do it. The question is whether the Government, its development partners, civil society, and all of us are up to the task.

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