

Quality education at elementary level: A quest

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Abstract

Education is a critical input in human resource development and is essential for the Country's economic growth. The goals of universal literacy and enrolment are laudable in themselves; the achievements in these areas would remain hollow without ensuring quality education. This paper includes causes of quality crises and provides a way to qualitative improvement in the content and processes of basic education, in order to make them more responsive to the learning needs of individuals and the development needs of different socioeconomic sectors. The challenge for providing quality education at the elementary level involves improvements in the preparation, motivation and deployment of teachers, the quality of textbooks and of infrastructural facilities. It also involves making education relevant to society's needs and strengthening the management and institutional capacity of educational institutions especially at the state, district and local levels.

Keywords: qualitative improvement, quality education, education, elementary school students

Introduction

The role of education in facilitating social and economic progress is well recognized. Improvements in the functional and analytical ability of children and youth through education Open up opportunities leading to both individual and group entitlements. Education in its broadest sense of development is the most crucial input for empowering people with skills and knowledge and giving them access to productive and gainful employment in future. Improvements in education do not merely enhance efficiency but also augment democratic participation, upgrade health and the overall quality of individual and societal life. Every youngster is entitled to a quality education in a safe and secure school. A quality education provides the foundational skills that student need to become productive citizens capable of civic engagement and sustaining competitive employment.

Millennium Development Goals

- Achieve Universal Primary Education - to ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling by 2015.
- Promote gender equality and empower women - eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015

Indicator of Quality

The main indicator of the quality of elementary education can be visualized in terms of its product – the learners' achievement both in scholastic and co-scholastic areas i.e. the performance in various subjects of study and habits, attitudes, values and life skills necessary for becoming a good citizen. The factors associated with success in these areas, which relate to conditions of learning and learning environment, are also sometimes considered as indicators of quality of elementary education. Thus ensuring quality in the inputs and processes becomes necessary if quality achievement is the aim.

The National Policy on Education, as revised in 1992, had emphasized the need for a substantial improvement in quality of education to achieve essential levels of learning. The

Programme of Action, 1992, stressed the need to lay down Minimum Levels of Learning at Primary and Upper Primary stage. This need emerged from the basic concern that irrespective of caste, creed, location or sex, all children must be given access to education of comparable standards. The MLL strategy for improving the quality of elementary education was seen as an attempt to combine quality with equity.

Quality issues in elementary education will therefore, revolve around the quality of infrastructure and support services, opportunity time, teacher characteristics and teacher motivation, pre-service and in-service education of teachers, curriculum and teaching-learning materials, classroom processes, pupil evaluation, monitoring and supervision etc. Some issues are mentioned below:

- a. Providing for reasonably good school building and equipment to all schools;
- b. Providing quality ECCE to all children until 6 years of age;
- c. Ensuring a minimum of 4 to 5 hours per day of meaningful stay of each child in school.
- d. Providing trained and committed teachers in all schools and really interested and
- e. Oriented instructor for all EGS/AIE centres.
- f. Improving the quality of existing pre-service teacher education;
- g. Organizing quality in-service teacher education to all teachers on a periodical basis and with a
- h. Follow up mechanism.
- i. Creating and sustaining teacher motivation;
- j. Revitalizing supervision system for quality elementary education;
- k. Re-organization of curriculum to imbibe local needs and in-corporating the concerns of the
- l. National Curriculum Framework 2005;
- m. Development of competency based and contextual teaching-learning material;
- n. Improving teaching-learning processes to make them child centered, activity based, mastery
- o. learning oriented;

- p. Providing for remedial teaching and enrichment programmes at due occasions in all classrooms;
- q. Introduction of formative evaluation and grading system to make it stress free for children;
- r. Reduction of curriculum load; and
- s. Introducing participatory management of elementary education with community support.

The Crisis

The learning levels of children in government schools (both primary and upper primary) are very poor. While a large number of primary school students are not able to read and write properly, the students at elementary level have abysmally low understanding of mathematics, science, social sciences and languages. The elementary education is in deep crisis and there is a need to take immediate remedial measures. The situation calls for putting in place immediate, short-term and long-term strategies so that the gains in elementary education in last five decades which have resulted in universal access, universal retention, gender parity and high transition rate from primary to upper primary and higher classes are not lost. The conclusion that elementary education (and as a result higher education) in a state of emergency is not anecdotal, but based on several studies and reports.

Dimensions of the Crisis

The learning levels of the children establish beyond doubt that the quality of classroom transaction is very poor. A sincere dialogue with the teachers throws up several reasons but nothing can justify poor performance in our schools. The teachers admit that at primary level the focus is no longer 3Rs and at elementary level the subject based teaching has taken back seat. Their reasons are: multi-grade situation (not having one teacher for each class), frequent transfers, non-rational deployment, load of non-teaching activities, paper work generated by SSA and RMSA, migration of students from better off sections of society to private schools, non-cooperative community. Each of the reasons listed has some merit to it and need not be ignored. However the outcome is clear: students are not leaning in schools as per the expectations.

The key points are:

1. Teachers are not teaching

Teacher has perhaps stopped owning the school where he/she is posted. The intrinsic motivators like success of students is the best reward for the teacher, seem to have lost their appeal. The teacher who used to take pride in his profession and called it the most noble of all is disappearing, even though the salary and perks of teachers today are the best.

2. There is decline in the enrollment in the government schools and most of the private schools that are

Mushrooming in rural are not better than the government schools in terms of quality and training of teachers, infrastructure and on parameter of per child spending. Government

School teachers do not educate their children in government schools.

3. There is no accountability. The age old wisdom expressed by clichéd phrases such as what gets measured gets done and we must keep the score has been abandoned by the education

department. The formal supervisory structure of Head Teacher, Centre Head Teacher, Headmaster/Principal and Deputy Director/Director is no longer going their duty as far as quality is concerned. There are no formal or informal inspections. The so called euphemistic supportive supervision has not taken root and there is near absent assessment and analysis of the learning levels of the children at supervisory levels.

4. Decline in Enrollment in Schools has some peculiar features:

Though there is overall decline in School enrolment in the state due to overall decline in population, yet there is a clear trend to establish migration of students away from the government schools. Private schools are opening in rural areas and the parents perceive that these are better than government schools because they teach English, dress is smarter, there is one teacher to a class and the “teaching” is better. These reasons are not just anecdotal but are those that have come up as a result of several interactions with parents, teachers and field visits. It is worthwhile to look at the trends in enrollment.

Way Forward

Quality is never an accident and the goal of quality cannot be realised through short cut methods. There is a need for a long term plan with clear measurable goals and timelines.

Some of the major components of quality aspects of elementary education are as follows:

1. Learning Environment and Support Services

As the learning environment of a school affects the quality of learning it is necessary to collect information on availability of pre-schooling facilities, community participation, socio-economic background of the students, early childhood care facilities, current status of the schools in the district, teachers’ position, financial and other incentives, facilities available to the teaching staff from different levels of the education department.

2. Teachers’ Competency

The teachers’ competency has a positive effect on improvement of quality of education. This is

Measured by the knowledge and skill of teachers in the subjects. Besides their level of motivation, interest and commitment and ability to interact with parents and community members also contributes to and influences the quality of teaching-learning process. As the assessment of teacher’s competency is a sensitive issue and sometimes open assessment may be counterproductive, the information on educational qualifications, years of experience, area of specialisation, pre-service and in-service training etc. may help in assessing the level of competency.

3. Opportunity

Opportunity time refers to the extent of time given by the children that is actually used by the teacher in teaching-learning activities. In order to calculate the opportunity time, information is needed on number of days the school is functioning in a year, number of classes handled by each teacher, attendance of teachers in a year etc. As availability and effective utilisation of time is a basic input in children’s learning, information on this aspect will facilitate better

planning for teachers for proper allocation and effective utilisation of time by teachers.

4. Curriculum

Development of curriculum is a continuous process to suit the emerging learning needs of the Children within the broad framework of National Policy on Education. NCERT had developed a “National Curriculum for Elementary and Secondary Education: A Framework” which is followed in original form in some states or in modified form in other states to respond to state and local specific contexts and needs. Under SSA, the focus is on making the curriculum for elementary education more and more contextual, adopting a holistic approach to educational development by incorporating knowledge, skills, values etc. relevant to the child’s life situation. Although it has been perceived that educational planning and management may be decentralized upto the district level but there are some problems in this regard. The NCF 2005, developed by NCERT after extensive consultations, endeavors to reduce the Curriculum load and make learning more enjoyable for children.

5. Teaching-Learning Material

The use of teaching-learning material play a crucial role in actual curriculum transaction both at the Primary and upper primary stage, and consequently on the quality of education. Hence it is essential to assess the type, availability, suitability and usability of various teaching-learning material. Information on availability of teaching-learning material like blackboard, textbooks, workbooks, teaching-learning aids, teachers’ guides may be collected at the school level to facilitate the planning at the district level for

- (i) Developing need-based teaching-learning material;
- (ii) Opening scope for using local-specific material
- (iii) Involving teachers in developing the material and
- (iv) Providing scope for capacity building of teachers.

6. Classroom Processes

Since the classroom provides the setting for all teaching-learning and an opportunity to the child for exploration, experimentation and communication, the more effective the classroom process better is the learning outcomes. Hence it is necessary to know how the classroom transactions are conducted and managed, status of classroom environment, various teaching-learning strategies used by teachers. The information on all these can be collected from classroom observations, interviews with teachers, students and headmasters etc. which will help in

- (i) Improving interventions for all aspects of classroom processes,
- (ii) Identifying training requirements for teachers/head teachers, and
- (iii) Identifying areas for capacity building of supervisors.

7. Evaluation-Learning Achievement

To ensure meaningful learning both the outcome and the process of evaluation/assessment are important and essential. So it is necessary to measure the learner achievement from time to time in both cognitive and non-cognitive areas. The information on the indicators of achievement can be collected from school records, teachers’ interviews, pupil’s assessment and evaluation records which would help in

- a) identifying the gaps in the evaluation strategies to develop new and improved strategies for enhancing learners’ achievement, and
- b) Adopting and improving upon existing assessment and evaluation tools. While planning for quality related interventions needed, phasing of activities should be clearly assessed, visualised and incorporated, and may finally be shared will all concerned to make it more realistic, contextual and implementable.

8. Rational Deployment: Though there is some shortage of teachers in the state, yet it is possible to Take care of the problem of single teacher schools by rational deployment of teachers. Due to mismatch between the requirement at the school level and staff strength, quality of reading and writing suffers.

9. Transfer Policy: The State Government has already constituted a committee to formulate a transfer Policy and the Hon’ble High Court has also issued certain directions in this regard. Once this policy is in place the problem of gaps in teacher deployment will be addressed.

10. Rationalization of Schools: The cohort of students who come to schools is declining as the overall Population in is showing a declining trend. Besides the State has noticed growth of private schools in last decade. While this trend is a welcome trend (and the state need to take note of this too under SSA/RMSA- the point is discussed below), yet there is a need for the education department in the state to introspect the reasons and to take corrective measures. Though the average PTR (Pupil Teacher Ratio) in the state is very good: for Primary and for Upper Primary level, yet there is variation from district to district and within district also.

11. Involvement of Private Schools: The Right to Education Act mandates that the state engages more with the private schools as the concept of neighbourhood school and 25% enrollment for weaker sections is to be implemented. In addition, the private schools (especially those located in the rural areas) may be asked (optional offer, on payment basis- which may be nominal in case of rural schools) to train their teachers through the training programmes of SSA/RMSA.

12. Library Movement: The will launch massive movement to ensure that school libraries are used. Each school has library books, the problem is these are not used. Already the State Office SSA/RMSA has issued enabling instructions to make libraries vibrant. The SPO will come out with standards and benchmark of library use and then undertake an assessment to award best libraries, best teachers (in terms of library books), and best schools based on self-disclosure and application based system.

13. Selection and Transfer procedure for the BRC and Coordinators at State and District Level

At present there are no guidelines/policy to select the BRCs/ Lecturers for DIETS/ SCERT/Coordinators for SSA/RMSA offices. The Court has also opined that these coordinators should be changed only if they fail to meet the requirements and perform below the expectation compared to a notified and defined policy. However in the absence of a policy detailing

14. Performance Based Financing of Schools

At present all the schools get same amount of grant this will be changed from 2013-14 and the schools will be released grant on the basis of performance which will, in turn, will be based on objective criteria. A separate proposal will be part of the Annual Plan for the year 2013-14 in this regard.

15. Supplementary Material

One immediate need is to print and circulate a Glossary of Important Terms, Definitions and Formulae with explanatory notes for students. The students who study Science and Mathematics in Hindi Medium find it very difficult to relate to English terms in higher classes. While the overall, comprehensive textbook renewal will take care of the problem in a holistic manner (part of the short term plan), there is an immediate need to get this booklet printed and given to each student so that this confusion is avoided.

16. Seminars (both at state and district level), Discussions (again at different levels)

Science Fairs and Language Fairs, Quizzes, Competitions for teachers. The papers presented by teachers in Seminars and deliberations of discussion can be later published by the SSA/RMSA. The teachers need to be made part of the **Quality Initiative**, as a participant and learner in order to make them realize their potential. Teachers must shed their pessimism and the approach to treat them just as passive receivers in a lecture based training system must be done away with.

17. Professional Development of Teachers

Ensuring pre-service training to all elementary school teachers so that all untrained teachers can be Trained within a period of three years, including through the distance learning mode. Enhancing pre-service training facilities in selected districts where the present capacity is not adequate and extending the provision of pre-primary teacher training by strengthening existing institutions that provide, or are willing to provide, pre-service education for the preprimary stage.

18. Strategy for Drop-outs

Where the children are dropping out because of the need to work, the emphasis would be on involving the community in motivating the parents to bring their children back to school so That they are in a position to complete eight years of elementary education. For those children who have already dropped out, suitable alternative education systems such as bridge courses, Remedial teaching, back to school camps, etc., would be provided so that they can be mainstreamed into the formal system.

19. Systematic learner evaluation

A mechanism for regular learner assessment will be designed and put in place to evaluate the impact And efficacy of measures taken for improvement in school quality.

20. Professional development of practitioners, i.e. teacher educators, managers and others

New courses for teacher educators and curriculum developers would be developed and tried out on a pilot basis. Innovations and pilot projects in pre-service and in-service teacher

education will be supported. Another major focus area would be networking of teacher education institutions and Strengthening of teacher education by expanding access to digital resources.

21. Development and strengthening of teacher education institutes

The focus of teacher education would be on the development of the following institutions:

District Institute of Education and Training (DIETs):

Each state would be encouraged to rethink the structure of its DIETs as per needs of the district and Effectiveness of the institution. Each DIET would be encouraged to draw up a development Plan for itself, defining its role and setting goals for itself. Special attention will be paid to the development of libraries in DIETs, as well as providing computer facilities (including computer literacy Training), exposure visits, networking and sharing among DIETs and other academic institutions on Professional issues and the establishment of district resource groups.

College of Teacher Education (CTEs) and Institutes of Advanced Studies in Education (IASEs)

The need for CTEs and IASEs in each state would be ascertained in terms of the needs for secondary teacher education and identified institutions would be strengthened. The identified CTEs/ IASEs would need to prepare their individual plan of development, mentioning the areas in which they need to be strengthened and make a need assessment survey in the areas of their jurisdiction. They must also Develop schedules and materials of in service teacher training to cover secondary teachers and Implement the National Council of Teacher Education (NCTE) project on imparting information technology (IT) literacy to the teachers. IASEs would be encouraged to play a greater role in elementary education and education of teacher educators.

22. Strengthening of State Councils for Educational Research and Training (SCERTs)

The SCERT is identified as a key area for teacher education in the Tenth Plan. The state governments need to fulfill some essential conditions for being eligible for funds for strengthening of SCERTs, such as recruitment of appropriate faculty, linkage to DIETs, resource centres and schools, autonomy of SCERTs and proper maintenance of buildings etc. Only then would the central government fund capacity building and training of SCERT faculty, development of infrastructure, computers and IT literacy programmes and hostels for residential training programmes, etc.

23. Remedial Education - Very often children admitted to formal schools after undergoing a bridging

Programme face problems of adjustment to the formal environment. These children need to be helped for some time through community-based volunteers. The scheme would support activities like home visits, weekly meetings with parents and children, remedial teaching of such children for a period of upto 4 months after their admission into formal schools.

Approach under SSA for Quality Enhancement

A strong focus on quality issues in elementary education underpins all efforts under SSA, which will increasingly become centre stage, as the programme advances. There is a clear outcome orientation within the programme, reflecting an understanding that inputs of different kinds, whether in the form of additional teachers, training programmes, textbooks etc. must translate into tangible outcomes that reflect improvement in the quality of classroom transactions, pedagogic practices and learning outcomes of children. SSA includes several features that seek to improve the quality of elementary education,

- a) ensuring basic provisioning to enable improvement in the quality of classroom transactions;
- b) large scale capacity building of States, for undertaking interventions for quality enhancement; and
- c) Evaluation of quality related processes and assessment of learning outcomes. Real education has to draw out the best from the boys and girls to be educated. This can never be done by packing ill-assorted and unwanted information into the heads of the students. Mahatma Gandhi (Harijan 1 December, 1933)

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