Access to Quality Education, a Basic Right of Every Child

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

Policy Article

ABSTRACT

Quality education is a matter of great concern and what quality means in education is a subject of intense debate. UNESCO conceptualized quality education as, learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be. Making quality school education accessible to every child in India is a big challenge as the school system faces a huge shortage of trained teachers, a lack of basic infrastructure, school dropouts, and the socio-economic condition of the student's parents. Such is the reason for the undesirable literacy level. The non-availability of quality Early Childhood Care and Education is a matter of great concern in the country as it has a long-term impact on children. Teachers and headteachers are the most important pillar of the school and need to be strengthened through quality capacity-building training. National Education Policy 2020, emphasis on quality education. Hence making quality education accessible to every child will depend on how the policy [1] is implemented in reality. This article is based on a secondary source and tries to analyze the issues and challenges of providing quality education to every child in India.

Keywords: Quality education; school; children; human rights; teacher.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The proposition that education is a fundamental right for everyone date back to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 [2]. It is to recognize that education is the fundamental requirement for a human to understand their rights and empowered themselves to overcome poverty. This declaration is followed by many more assertion on access to education as a human right.

"Over the decades, there has been significant improvement in school education, especially in enrolment and infrastructure. Nevertheless, access to quality education remains a challenge. What does quality mean in the context of school education? There is a number of definitions of quality education all center around a child's ability. The term efficiency, effectiveness, equity, and quality have often been used synonymously [3] to define quality". "In all aspects of the school and its surrounding education community, the right of the whole child, and all children, to survival, protection, development, and participation are at the centre. This means that the focus is on learning which strengthens the capacities of children to act progressively on their own behalf through the acquisition of relevant knowledge, useful skills, and appropriate attitudes; and which creates for children, and helps them create for themselves and other, places of safety, security and healthy interaction" [4].

What constitutes a "quality education' has been subject to intense debate. The concept has been beset by rigorous debates on the scope of the definition of quality as well as very real difficulties in agreeing on indicators and obtained data. The first influential explanations of quality education are reflected in *Learning: The Treasure within* defined the ultimate aims of education as four pillars: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be. "The UNESCO conceptualization of quality is based on the above-mentioned four pillars; (a) learning to know acknowledges that learners build their own knowledge daily by combing indigenous and 'external' elements, (b) Learning to do focuses on the practical application of what is learned, (c) Learning to live together addresses the critical skills for a life free from discrimination, where all have equal opportunity to develop themselves, their families and their communities, (d) learning to be emphasizes the skills needed for individuals to develop their full potential" [5] & [6].

Going by the data available on access to education around the world projects the non-fulfillment of basic human rights. According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics and UNICEF (2015), around 63 million adolescent between the age of 12 and 15 years are denied their right to education. According to UNESCO for Sustainable Development Goals, about 260 million children were still out of school in 2018 – nearly one-fifth of the global population in that age group. And more than half of all children and adolescents worldwide are not meeting minimum proficiency standards in reading and mathematics. Therefore, the question arises as to why despite many efforts given by the Government and Non- Governmental Organizations, literacy level remains undesirable and millions of children out of school. According to Field, S., M. Kuczera & B. Pont [7], "from a systemic perspective, school failure occurs when an education system fails to provide fair and inclusive education services that lead to enriching student learning. At the school level, school failure can be defined as the incapacity of a school to provide fair and inclusive education and an adequate learning environment for students to achieve the outcomes worthy of their effort and ability. From an individual perspective, school failure can be defined as the failure of a student to obtain a minimum level of knowledge and skills, which can at the extreme lead to dropping out of school". "Students experience quality of education differently due to the differences in their backgrounds and characteristics, such as their individual ability, socio-economic status, relative level of poverty, ethnicity, and language, geographic location, and sex" [5]. "Trained teachers and head teachers are equally important and responsible for imparting quality education. School leadership is the starting point for the transformation of low-performing disadvantaged schools but often, school leaders are not well selected, prepared, or supported to exercise their roles in these schools. To strengthen their capacity, school leadership preparation programmes should provide both general expertise and specialized knowledge to handle the challenges of these schools" [8].

"The United Nations has for the first time included 'quality education' in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). Providing quality education to every child is a core part of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) adopted by all the United Nations member states in 2015. While India has done well in ensuring access and

universalization of pre-primary, primary, and secondary education, it is lagging behind in many parameters, such as quality of teaching-learning outcomes, enrolments in higher education, and the quality of teaching–learning outcomes, enrolments in higher education and the quality of skills imparted to this youth" [9].

India since its independence has given top priority to education [10-12]. The constitution of India enshrined several Articles and Clauses that reflect education. Article 45 Right of free and compulsory education, Article 21A Right to education, Article 15(1) (3) Education for women, Article 46 Promotion of education and economic interests of SC, ST, and other weaker sections, Article 25,28(1)(2)(3) Religious education, Article 29 Education of minorities, protection of interests of minorities, Article 30 Right of minorities to establish and administer educational institutions, Article 350-A Instruction in mother tongue at the primary stage, Article 239 Education in Union territories, Article 51(A) Fundamental duty to provide the opportunity for education, etc. Apart from the constitutional provision, numerous visionary schemes and programs for school education were implemented to encourage quality school education and universal enrolment in the country. The schemes and programs such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Mid-Day Meal, Mahila Samakhya, Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan, Girls Hostels scheme, National Scheme of Incentives to girls for secondary education, inclusive education for disabled at secondary stage, nation merit-cum-means scholarship scheme, scholarship schemes for minority students, National scholarship, etc [13-15]. For the past decade, India has witnessed tremendous improvement in the school education system. However, the question remains whether quality school education is imparted along with the improvement in the system.

2. AIMS OF SCHOOLING

School is where the formal education for a child begins. It is a place where children joyfully learn the concepts. It is a miniature society where children from different socio-cultural backgrounds interact with each other. School is where children's potential is identified and the foundation for their future is built. Imparting education is to equip children with knowledge, skills, ethics, and values. Schools can offer learning experiences that a child may not obtain at home, particularly if he or she is living in a disadvantaged environment [16].

3. QUALITY SCHOOL EDUCATION: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

- Access to Quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)
- Shortage of trained teachers
- School dropout
- Infrastructure

4. DISCUSSION

'Quality of education is the core challenge of the next decade when it comes to improving overall educational standards, retention, transition and equity in academic achievement' (UNESCO).

Early childhood (the period from birth to eight years old) is the most crucial period for child development. In National Education Policy 2020, this period falls under the 'Foundational' stage which is a time for remarkable growth with brain development at its peak. In this period a child is highly influenced by the socio-culture environment. "Therefore, Early Childhood Care and Education are more than preparation for primary school it aims at the holistic development of a child's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and well-being (UNESCO). Investing during the early years allows students to acquire skills and knowledge that shape their development and that are very difficult to acquire later on" [16]. "These include cognitive, non-cognitive, and socio-emotional skills, which facilitate the acquisition of skills and knowledge in the subsequent years of education" [8].

In India, quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is not available to millions of young children, particularly children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds [17,18]. In Census 2011, India has 158.7 million children in the age group of 0-6, and if the age group between 6 to 8 years is added the figure may go up making the task more challenging. Making quality ECCE accessible to this age group is a paramount task for the future of the country. Non-availability of quality early Childhood Education hinders children's cognitive, motor, and socio-emotional development. National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 projected to strengthen Anganwadi centers with high-quality infrastructure, play equipment, and well-trained Anganwadi workers/teachers. It envisioned preparing an initial cadre of high-quality ECCE teachers in Anganwadis, current

Anganwadi workers will be trained through systematic efforts by the curricular/pedagogical framework developed by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) [19].

Proficiency in reading, writing, and performing basic operations with numbers by a child reflects the quality of schooling. Learning to read, write and do basic numerical problems is a basic skill mostly developed in school. Much research conducted by government institutions and non-governmental organizations indicates the poor performance of children. According to the NITI Aayog report (2020-21) [20], 71.9% of class 8 students achieved minimum proficiency in language and mathematics. NEP 2020 highlights that there is a large proportion of students currently in elementary schools- estimated to be over 5 crores in number have not attained foundational literacy and numeracy, i.e., the ability to read, comprehend basic text, and the ability to carry out basic addition and subtraction with Indian numerals. NEP 2020 has set a target to achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy in primary school by 2025.

Indian school education system with nearly 97 lakh teachers is one of the largest school systems in the world. The system has 15 lakh schools (private and Govt) and 26.5 crores students (UDISE+ 2019-20) [21]. On average every school in India has 6.4 teachers and students – teacher ratio is 27:1. Many studies suggested that the shortage of trained school teachers in India is a matter of serious concern. According to UNESCO '2021 State of the Education Report for India'. No Teachers, No Class', around 1.1 lakh schools in India are single-teacher entities. 8.9 percent of these single-teacher schools are in rural areas. Many schools are been managed by guest teachers and teachers appointed under government flagship programs.

"Student dropout does not happen overnight. In fact, dropping out is usually the result of a long process of student disengagement" [22]. School dropout is a major challenge in the school education system in India. Despite different interventions to address school dropout, the issue continues. UDISE (2020-21) shows a 14.6 percent dropout rate at the secondary level and 0.8 percent at the primary level. Although it shows a 16.1 percent improvement from 2019-2020, still it accounts for lakhs of dropouts. National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21)

revealed that the "net attendance ratio falls from 82 percent in primary school to 71 percent in the middle, secondary, and higher secondary school. The main reason for not attending school was a child's lack of interest in studies. Poor-quality education cannot attract and keep students in school or help them to achieve meaningful learning outcomes [5].

As per the UDISE+ report, the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) at the elementary level is 97.78 % which declines to 77.97% at the secondary level indicating some serious issues in retaining children in the schooling system. The report shows a sharp decline in enrollment from primary (63251749 Boys and 58434954 girls) to upper primary (6-8) (33427571 boys and 31445816 girls). The enrolment declines in the secondary level (20072356 boys and 18392077 girls) to the Higher Secondary level (13330949 boys and 12616211 girls). A huge proportion of dropout and children out of school comes from the rural area and marginalized group of people. Parents generally struggle to provide quality schooling to their children as their priority is a daily livelihood. Financial constraints, engagement in domestic work, taking care of their siblings, etc. are some reasons why children developed disinterest in schooling life. Unfortunately, depriving early quality childhood education and schooling has a long-term effect on a child's life. It will be a top priority to bring these children back into the educational fold as early as possible and to prevent further students from dropping out, to achieve a 100% Gross Enrolment Ratio in preschool to secondary level by 2030 [1].

State of Art infrastructure motivates and enhances the teaching-learning process. Such infrastructure will promote quality education. Smart classroom enhances the interest of learners and teachers, it promotes joyful learning by integrating images, animations, video, audio, etc in teaching-learning. According to UDSE+, 82.9 percent of the school have an electricity connection, 41.3 percent of schools have computers, and 24.5 percent of schools have an internet connection. Infrastructure such as proper toilets for both girls and boys, inclusive friendly toilets, drinking water facilities, playground, etc. will ensure students' interest and quality learning.

Parents play an important role in a child's education. It is often said that 'Home is the first school and parents are the first teachers.' children learned basic values and ethics from their parents. Parents involved in their child's

education motivate and develop a positive attitude, improve kids' behavior, develop kids' interest in studies, etc. To achieve quality education accessible to every child, parents' responsibility is equally important.

Teacher training is fundamental for the transformation of the school system. "Teachers truly shape the future of our children and therefore, the future of the Nation" [1]. The policy recommends every teacher and head teacher participate in at least 50 hours of Continuous Professional Development (CDP) every year for their own professional development. To strengthen school teachers, Headteachers/Principals, and other stakeholders in Educational Management and Administration, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) under the Ministry of Education, Department of School Education and Literacy, Govt. of India has initiated the NISHTHA (National Initiative for School Heads and Teachers' Holistic Advancement) for different stages of school education.

5. CONCLUSION

The objectives of providing quality school education to every child are to develop the skills, values, knowledge, attitudes, and creativity that is fundamental to solving problems/ conflicts at local and global as well as the ability to contribute sustainably and democratically in a society. School should be a place where a child's potential is nurtured and developed and not where a syllabus is taught and tested. The reason why students drop out of school is multiple. It may be school failure, socio-economic factors, lack of interest from students, or lack of motivation/ encouragement from parents and teachers. One of the biggest challenges school education faces is the shortage of trained quality teachers.

The assertion to provide quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) brings hope to millions of children in the country. The ambitious policy needs a backup with quality trained teachers. What teachers know and practice is widely recognized as central to quality education, and ensuring that they are well-trained, resourced, and supported is the single- most important requirement for raising learning achievements [4]. Teachers training and follow-up research on how trained teachers are performing in the schools will strengthen training strategies in the future. The ability to

comprehend and be proficient in reading, writing, and doing basic mathematics by millions of children will lessen once the school has enough trained teachers and the required infrastructure.

Teachers are at the center of fundamental reforms in the school education system. The transaction and outcome of quality education envisioned in National Education Policy 2020 will depend on teachers. To fulfill the policy, quality teacher education, recruitment, deployment, service condition, and empowerment of teachers need to be enhanced.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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