

Learning Without Teaching

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THERE IS more to primary education than the acquisition of functional literacy and numeracy skills. But even these skills are not acquired by the vast majority of Indian children who complete four or five years of primary education in our Government schools. Millions of them do not even master the skills expected by the end of Std. II. Many are worse off, unable to read or write at all.

Merely marginally improving the abysmal standards of learning in our Government primary schools, where the overwhelming majority of our rural and urban children study, will not be enough. By 2010, we need to ensure that at least half our children in these schools complete the primary stage mastering the expected basic skills. This almost utopian goal can only be accomplished if three issues are seriously addressed during this decade.

First, all rural and urban Government primary schools should be provided with basic facilities and teaching / learning equipment. Second, we need to guarantee that all teachers in these schools should have at least mastered the literacy, numeracy and other skills and knowledge expected of their students completing five years of primary school, and know how to impart them. Finally, and the most difficult task of all, is to ensure that all Government primary school teachers teach according "to rule" - be present in school and provide instruction during the prescribed hours and days of the school calendar.

Teachers and children need to be provided with school environments conducive to teaching and learning. Most Government primary schools are in bad shape lacking one or more of the following basic facilities: adequate classrooms, blackboards, cupboards, libraries, toilets etc.. Despite our cities and many villages having electricity, television and computers cannot be used in their Government schools because the vast majority of classrooms do not have electrical outlets. State Governments need first to enunciate, and provide to the public, a list of basic facilities that all their primary schools should have, and put in place and finance a management system that will provide them to the schools.

Though most Government primary teachers have studied beyond high school and possess professional teaching qualifications, the vast majority do not know how to teach young children effectively. What is not generally known is that various studies have indicated that quite a few teachers have themselves not mastered even the literacy and numeracy skills expected of primary school children. Potential primary school teachers are not likely to be better off if the following study in Gujarat, reported by Eklavya in Ahmedabad, is any indication. Of a group of 184 students trained as primary school teachers, not even 30 could solve the sum 35×3 correctly.

The most significant factor affecting children's learning is the number of hours of instruction, and the quality of teaching, that they are exposed to. While the exact figures vary from State to State, Government primary schools are meant to function for around 200 days for 5-6 hours a day. The dismal reality is that the vast majority of students are exposed to far fewer days and hours of instruction. In addition to the 150-odd official holidays, individual schools or groups of schools close, often unofficially, for local celebrations, to prepare for national day observances, visits by dignitaries, and other sundry reasons. Many schools, especially in rural areas, routinely start late and end early. While this can significantly reduce the time devoted to instruction, the more serious problems is that children attend schools, where teachers are absent, and sit in classrooms where teachers seldom teach systematically.

The plague of endemic teacher absenteeism in tribal India, as well as in remote villages, has now spread to most Government urban and rural schools. In addition to the occasional demands made by the Government on their services for various bureaucratic tasks during the school year, teachers take all the leave that they are entitled to. And many take much more unofficial leave based on understandings reached by them with their colleagues, and sometimes with the education inspectorate. Go to any urban or rural Government primary school unannounced, and you will find one or more teachers absent.

Children's learning is most acutely dislocated by teacher absenteeism in single-teacher schools, which remain closed until teachers return. But even in average rural and urban schools, teacher absenteeism affects children's learning as they are compelled to sit in unsupervised classrooms or verandahs, or herded with children in other classrooms. Discipline is often maintained with the use of the stick. And this can go on for days and weeks, as there is no system of providing substitutes for periodically absent teachers. Even when teachers are present, how many teach systematically? The PROBE survey indicated that in about half the primary schools visited in five North Indian States, there was no teaching activity at all. In this deteriorating teaching environment, there is little support for caring and devoted teachers - a species rapidly diminishing - who are increasingly finding it difficult to do their duty.

No innovation can succeed at present in markedly improving children's learning in most Government schools. For example, we can at best expect marginal improvements from the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), which continues to pump in crores of rupees in many districts all over the country to improve primary education. No significant improvements in children's learning can be expected of such reforms, unless the education system in general and teachers in particular are held accountable for actual performance. The operating word is 'actual' because the three main quantitative indicators of performance - enrolment, attendance and the learning achievement of children - are routinely fabricated by teachers and educational authorities to create an illusion of change. Most of the actors in this charade - politicians, educational administrators and teachers - are unwilling or unable to make significant improvements. Many are more concerned with far more attractive matters such as the money to be made out of tuition and side businesses, teacher selections and transfers, and the procurement and disbursement of school supplies. Only citizen initiatives linked with reform-minded teachers, bureaucrats and politicians can catalyse the necessary changes.

A critical priority in the nation's educational agenda should be to ensure, within the next decade, that at least half the children completing primary education in our Government schools should have mastered the expected skills. Without this radical improvement in learning, the recent target set by the Centre to provide eight years of elementary education to all children by 2010 - a task which was expected by our Constitution framers to have been completed by 1960, and expected to have then been completed on various dates before 2000 by successive Governments - will be yet another Sisyphean goal.

Improved primary education foundations will also raise the terribly low standards of secondary and university education. In a study of primary school teachers in Tamil Nadu, over half of them could solve only three of the five simple problems based on the primary mathematics curriculum. Underachieving teachers included those with graduate and post-graduate qualifications. More than something is rotten in the state of Indian education.

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