

Perpetuating Grossly Substandard Schooling Limitations To A Knowledge Society

*(Published in edited form in The Indian Express on September 30, 2006,
entitled "When the teacher does not know")*

John Kurrien

The vast majority of primary school-going age children in India attend government schools. We have become increasingly aware that large numbers of these students are unable to write their names, leave alone do simple addition and subtraction after 5 years of primary schooling. At the other end of the learning spectrum, a small proportion of government school students, taught by caring and competent teachers, acquire the requisite literacy, numeracy and cognitive skills at the end of the primary stage.

Most students in government primary schools fall between both ends of the spectrum, and are to varying degrees innumerate and illiterate. The limited evidence that there is indicates that the picture is not very different in many of the private teaching shops - often purportedly English medium schools - that have mushroomed in rural and urban India, catering mainly to the children of the poor and lower middle classes.

This pervasive and almost total lack of quality at the base of the Indian educational pyramid has had tragic consequences. An inability to understand and enjoy what is being taught accounts for large numbers of children dropping out before completing eight or even five years of schooling. Automatic promotion, lack of any serious attempt at remedying early basic deficiencies in literacy and numeracy skills, ensures that large numbers of students fail in Std. 10, thus limiting their opportunities for further education and employment.

Many things need to be done simultaneously to remedy the grave deficiencies of learning at the primary stage. A concerted effort has been made by the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan to improve the provision and quality of school facilities and teaching-learning materials. But learning levels will not significantly improve unless teachers themselves have mastered the skills that their students are expected to master by the end of five years of primary schooling.

Some years ago, a study of primary school teachers in Tamil Nadu, including graduates and post-graduates, indicated that over half of them could solve only 3 of 5 simple arithmetic problems based on the primary mathematics curriculum. Another study of teacher-trainees in Gujarat indicated that not even 30 of the batch of 184 potential primary school teachers could solve the sum 35×3 correctly.

More recent evidence from some states, as reported in the 2004 DPEP Joint Review Mission, has corroborated the understanding that primary school teachers themselves have not acquired the basic competencies that their students are expected to acquire. The current hiring, in large numbers, of para-teachers with less formal qualifications, can only add to the large numbers of incompetent adults recruited to teach in government schools and alternative educational centres.

The issue of teacher competency needs to be addressed at all levels of education including the university stage, as there is an acute shortage of knowledgeable teachers. For each level of education, we should be able to specify what types of knowledge and skills are required of teachers. An adaptation of the National Eligibility Test to ensure minimum standards for

entrants in the teaching profession in higher education could be considered. The demonstrated acquisition of this body of knowledge should be one of the essential requirements for recruiting new teachers, and for giving increments and promotions to the existing cadre of teachers.

At the elementary and secondary stages of education, every state will need to evaluate its teachers, take immediate remedial action and provide ongoing support. Special attention must be paid to 'difficult' subjects like mathematics, science, and language teaching - especially English - where the vast majority of English teachers are likely to fail in even the simplest of proficiency tests. Whereas the Knowledge Commission is already considering the issue of improving English instruction, other subjects also need to be considered.

It is important to focus on how these subjects can be taught interestingly and effectively to young children. Lack of teacher competence in both content and methods of teaching in these subjects has resulted in many students struggling in considerable fear and uncertainty to cope with classroom requirements. Many who survive and sit for the Std.10 examination tend to fail in these subjects.

Students from SC, ST, OBC and Muslim communities, in comparison to other groups, are more likely to fail in these 'difficult subjects' in the state-level or CBSE examinations. Failure of students from these disadvantaged groups has prompted discussions and proposals on making these subjects optional at the secondary stage to help more students pass. Making mathematics optional at the secondary stage was discussed recently by the Maharashtra Board of Secondary Education, while The National Commission For Minority Education has suggested making both mathematics and science optional in Std. 10.

Such well-intentioned proposals need to be firmly resisted. While there is a critical need to review what is taught and evaluated at the secondary stage, piecemeal measures to make subjects optional to help, for example, more Scheduled Caste students to pass are not the answer. We must be clear that if Scheduled Caste, Muslim and Scheduled Tribe students are provided with competent teachers and schools that function, they are as capable of excelling in these 'difficult' subjects as any other group of students.

Many of the critical challenges facing our country, and other nations, cannot be tackled without significant improvements in the quality of school education provided to socially and economically disadvantaged groups. The success of our reservation and affirmative policies in higher education and employment will depend largely on exponentially increasing the number of high achievers that enter the university system from these groups. Without this thrust of excellence at the foundations, we will not be able to tackle the huge problem that many industries are facing of being unable to find suitable candidates from the vast ocean of university degree and diploma holders.

The little we know of the competencies of college-educated primary school teachers may be an indicator that many college graduates are functioning with extremely substandard learning skills. A country that has constituted a Knowledge Commission, to enable it to be a leader in the creation, application and dissemination of knowledge, also needs to have a credible and independent institution to measure and track what our students and teachers in schools and colleges know, and do not know, in selected bodies of knowledge.

(The author is the Director of the Centre For Learning Resources, Pune, and can be contacted at clr@vsnl.com)