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Equity and Quality are Two Sides of the Same Coin in India's School Education

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Equity and Quality are Two Sides of the Same Coin in India's School Education*

Vimala Ramachandran[1*]

Abstract

The struggle for equality in education, at all levels, is ultimately a struggle for quality. And who we are determines the quality of education we can access. Only few good schools, colleges and technical institutions cater to a very small fraction of students, leaving the majority to deal with relatively low grade / poor quality education. The author shows that higher number of people in poverty especially those from disadvantaged communities (SC, ST, new migrants, Muslim) end up attending schools that are more likely to have very poor facilities, indifferent teachers (in government schools), poorly qualified teachers (in low cost private schools) or are multi-grade schools with two or more classes sitting together with one teacher. Such schools are now referred to as high-poverty schools and exist in both the government sector as well as the private sector. Further, income inequality has led to an increasing spatial segregation of high-income families from middle income and low-income families with the poorest often relegated to the outskirts of cities or specific habitations in rural areas. Equally, more than 50% students enrolled in higher education go to poor quality institutions, what is called C or D grade institutions, and are studying subjects that do not help them gain

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employment or be self-employed. This spatial segregation of the rich from the middle class and from the very poor essentially implies that children are going to different kinds and differentially endowed schools.

The economic cake is expanding fast for some people in India. New opportunities are available to those who have been able to access quality education. There is a clamour for better schools, English education and new technologies. In a nutshell, quality is the new battleground.

Quality is the heart of the struggle for equality and justice. The unwillingness or inability to define what we really mean by quality and institutional mechanisms necessary to realise standards of quality is ultimately a political question. Unfortunately, communist parties, social democrats, the centrist liberals and the right-wing ideologues all are on the same side in the education quagmire, together contributing to the growing schism between the rhetoric and reality.

Introduction

Before I begin, I would like to share two insightful observations by people who have been deeply engaged with education in India for over 40 years. After going over this text Professor Govinda said,

> every teacher and every administrator knows that our schools do not function properly—whether it is the number of teaching days (often far less than the stipulated 200 days a year), or it is regular teaching and learning activities in the classroom. For over 10 years now surveys after surveys tell us the same thing—children are not learning. We have become numb and insensitive. The basic issue is that no one in the government, or in civil society or even in the education community is serious about doing something to change the scenario. We all conveniently blame the 'system' and carry on business as usual. There is no sense of urgency nor is there serious 'official' acknowledgement that <u>all is NOT well</u> with our schools. What is the use of testing children all the

time, we only add to their despair and their helplessness. Tell me if we genuinely teach, why will children not learn?"

During an interview on teacher status a headmaster and teacher educator in Rajasthan threw up his arms and said "those who bother about what is happening to our schools and our children do not matter and those who matter do not bother" (Field notes of Rajni Patni, 2013)

The two statements in fact summarise the anguish that is felt across the country today. It is not that we cannot do anything about fixing our schools. In recent years the experience of Poland and Finland[2] stand out. While Poland introduced far-reaching reforms in education and the message of the Polish Education Minister Miroslaw Handke was simple—do not think about the background of students, but work with each of them earnestly and rigorously, give each one additional academic support and encouragement (Amanda Ripley 2013). The schools have to work with each and every child and facilitate learning. Both these countries focus on what happens and does not happen inside the school. They are not obsessed with testing children and nor

[2] Finland has vastly improved in reading, math and science literacy over the past decade in large part because its teachers are trusted to do whatever it takes to turn young lives around… Nearly 30% of Finland's children receive some kind of special help during their first nine years of school… There are no mandated standardized tests in Finland, apart from one exam at the end of students' senior year in high school. There are no rankings, no comparisons or competition between students, schools or regions. Finland's schools are publicly funded. The people in the government agencies running them, from national officials to local authorities, are educators, not business people, military leaders or career politicians. Every school has the same national goals and draws from the same pool of university-trained educators. The result is that a Finnish child has a good shot at getting the same quality education no matter whether he or she lives in a rural village or a university town. The differences between weakest and strongest students are the smallest in the world, according to the most recent survey by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). "Equality is the most important word in Finnish education. All political parties on the right and left agree on this," Olli Luukkainen, president of Finland's powerful teachers union.

do they run after numbers and statistics. The message is simple: teach every child with love and care and children will learn.

The scenario in India

Enrolment in primary schools recorded impressive growth in the 1990s and 2000s. Government and non-government surveys confirm that close to 97% children between the age group of 6 to 11 years are enrolled in primary schools.[3] More girls are in school as are many more children from socially and economically deprived communities. A large number of teachers have also been appointed in the last five years. The Right to Education Act was notified in 2009. In fact, if we are to go by the numbers published by the government, there is much to be upbeat about the primary education scenario in India.

Yet, despite the impressive data generated every year there is a sense of disquiet when we talk of education. A few weeks back some of my colleagues were conducting focus group discussions with parents of children who had dropped out after class 8. In almost all the villages, parents said that their children had learnt little. For example, a student of class 8 of today cannot read what a child in class four could twenty-five years ago. Many of them enrol in secondary school but drop out soon because they are unable to cope. Parents also shared that children today can barely read and have rudimentary skills in mathematics and science. What is the use of such schooling, they asked.

Mere access to schooling, without commensurate focus on quality and learning outcomes is meaningless. For almost ten years now (since

[3] While acess to primary education has improved significantly in the last 10 years, the same cannot be said for upper primary and secondary education. For example, in 2010–2011, GER at primary level was 116 with little gender gap, but at the upper primary level, it drops to 85.5 (boys 87.7 and girls 83.1). It further drops to 65 (boys 69 and girls 60.8) in classes IX and X and to 39.3 (boys 42.2 and girls 36.1) in classes XI and XII. If fact, the situation in higher education remains quite worrisome with a GER of 16%, far below the global average of 27% (Twelfth Five Year Plan, Planning Commission, GOI, 2011).

2005) independent surveys and also government-sponsored surveys have called the bluff and declared loud and clear that all our children are not learning the way they should be. "In India, on a test of reading comprehension administered to Grade 5 students across the country, only 46% of students were correctly able to identify the cause of an event (NCERT, 2011). Only a third of students could compute the difference between two decimal numbers (NCERT, 2011). Another recent study found that about 43% of Grade 8 students could not solve a simple division problem. Even recognition of two-digit numbers, supposed to be taught in Grade 2, tends to be achieved only by Grade 4 or 5 (ASER, 2011)" (Dunder, Halil et al Forthcoming 2013). This is not all—careful scrutiny of the data reveals huge rural–urban, male–female, inter-state, and inter-community differences. We now know that one of the biggest markers is the kind of school a child attends—alongside poverty, social status and location that effectively determines the kind of school a child would attend.

For many decades now we have known that the social and economic status of a child's family is one of the strongest determinants of a child's educational attainment. Last 60 years of educational data as well as other socio-economic surveys (like NSS, NFHS) have demonstrated this link. In fact, this is valid not only for India but is a global phenomenon. There is considerable evidence to show that the educational mortality of different social classes is different and the cumulative burden of poor learning and exclusion becomes most visible in higher education (Satish Deshpande, 2013). Bourdieu and Passeron, in their seminal work, also point out that

> The combination of the educational chance of the different classes and the chances of subsequent success attached to the different sections and types of schools constitutes a mechanism of deferred selection which transmutes a social inequality into a specifically educational inequality, i.e., an inequality of 'level' or success, concealing and academically consecrating an inequality of changes of access to higher levels of education (Bourdieu and Passeron ,1977, p 158).

The gap in achievement levels continues to grow as the child moves from primary to high school and university, with the cumulative burden

of non-learning pushing children out at different stages.[4] Reardon has argued that, "The relationship between family socioeconomic characteristics and student achievement is one of the most robust patterns in educational scholarship, yet the causes and mechanisms of this relationship have been the subject of considerable disagreement and debate" (Sean F. Rearden, 2011). In India, the mix of family poverty, location (rural, tribal, urban slum etc.), caste / community identity, gender and parental occupation is known to be a significant predictor of education achievement among children (Ramachandran, Vimala, 2009[5]).

We all know that the fight for equity is ultimately a struggle for quality education. Equally, our socio-economic identity often determines the quality of education that is accessible to us.

Yet, why and how did equity and quality get disjointed?

It is commonly believed that parents, who are well off, invest more resources and devote a larger proportion of their financial and social resources on their children's cognitive development. It is also argued that the rich have greater access to educational resources. The question, which then arises, is whether differentiation in the kind of schools that

[4] A recent World Bank report (Dunder, Halil et al Forthcoming 2013) captures the situation succinctly: "Students from poor backgrounds have difficulty accessing education, and those who do enter tend to drop out early. More importantly, while gaps in enrolment between disadvantaged groups and the population averages have narrowed, historically disadvantaged and economically weaker children still have significantly lower learning outcomes… Large and growing learning gaps threaten the equity gains in enrolment because children who learn less are more likely to drop out. School-age children who miss out on educational opportunities rarely have many opportunities to remedy this later in life. Poor-quality primary education also hinders access to, and performance in, higher education. Thus, an early focus on learning outcomes and bridging gaps in learning levels are essential to meet the equity and efficiency goals of education policy in South Asia".

[5] Vimala Ramachandran. 2009. 'Towards gender equality in education: EFA Mid Decade Assessment'. NUEPA. New Delhi.

children attend, the quality of schooling and opportunities that are available reflects differences in income. Similarly, is it fair to assume that more educated parents (especially mothers) devoted more time and energy to the overall development of their children? (Sean F. Rearden, 2011.)

At another level, is there so much differentiation in the kind of schools children attend that it makes a significant difference to overall development and learning? Till 1970s, we had heard about and met professionally successful people who had studied in a modest rural school or an urban municipal school.[6] We also heard of numerous instances where a good school or a motivated teacher had been able to neutralise the odds that very poor children come with and enabled them to learn. Equally we have known of headmasters and teachers who made a big difference in the lives of very poor children, through encouragement and, most importantly, active academic support and guidance. Sadly, in the current scenario, such instances are becoming increasingly rare and in the last two to three decades, the difference in the ability of a child attending a rural primary school compared with children attending private school or a government school with a lot of resources is increasing.

[6] What happened through the 1970s to 1990s that our government school system lost focus on educating children and started chasing numbers? The 1960s were turbulent and our political system was adjusting to a unique Indian model of electoral politics. Teachers working in rural areas became assets to political parties. At the same time, as people's aspirations changed, more and more poor and marginalized communities started sending their children to school. When this happened, the middle-class and the rich started pulling their children out of government schools and sending them to private or private-aided schools. Gradually as the years rolled by, people whose voices count and those with political or administrative clout no longer cared about government schools—especially the "ordinary" ones in rural and urban areas. They had no "stake" left in government schools (except of course the special ones like Kendriya Vidyalaya or Navodaya Vidyalaya). At the same time, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, government started chasing numbers – enrolment rates. They believed that once all children are enrolled, they will then worry about quality. For a more detailed discussion see Ramachandran, Vimala. 2007.

The more worrying trend is that higher number of children who are poor and those from disadvantaged communities (SC, ST, new migrants, Muslim) end up attending schools that are more likely to have very poor facilities, indifferent teachers (in government schools), poorly qualified teachers (in low cost private schools) or are multi-grade schools with two or more classes sitting together with one teacher. Such schools are now referred to as high-poverty schools and exist in both the government sector as well as the private sector. Further, income inequality has led to an increasing spatial segregation of high-income families from middle income and low-income families with the poorest often relegated to the outskirts of cities, inner city slums or specific habitations in rural areas. This spatial segregation of the rich from the middle class and from the very poor essentially implies that children are going to different kinds and differentially endowed schools.

Government data also reveal another side of the picture. According to NSS 66th round data (2009–2010), a startling 14.25 million children in the age group of 6 to 14 years were estimated to be "not attending". According to DISE data, 135.2 million students are enrolled in primary schools (an increase of 10 million children between 2005–06 and 2010–11). While more and more children move from primary to upper-primary, only 57.8 million children were enrolled at upper primary level in 2009–10. Further, these numbers drop sharply in high school and secondary schools and age specific attendance ratio decreases sharply.[7]

[7] The ASAR is 88% (all) and 87% in Rural in age 6–10 to 86% and 85% in age 11–13, to 64% and 61% in 14 to 17 years and 18% and 15% in age 18–24. The NAR for classes 1 to 5 is 88% for all (87% rural, 91% urban); for classes 6 to 8 it comes down to 59% (57% rural and 65% urban), decreases sharply to 41% in classes 9 and 10 (38% rural and 51% urban) and to a low of 27% in classes 11 and 12 (23% rural and 40% urban). (Source: Report No. 532, NSSO, 64th Round, 2009).
Age Specific Attendance Ratio (ASAR): For each age group this measure gives an idea of proportion of persons of a particular age group currently attending educational institutions, irrespective of the level or class in which they are studying. For example, for age group 6–10, this attendance ratio is = Number of persons in age-group 6–10 currently attending educational institutions x (multiplied) 100 / (Divided by) Estimated population in the

The 64th round of the National Sample Survey Organisation also confirmed that close to 84 per cent children from the poorest economic quartile attend government and government-aided schools. As we go up the economic ladder the proportion of children attending government schools comes down and those attending private school goes up. If we look deeper, even among the poor who are able to attend private schools go to the 'low cost' private schools where the quality of instruction is, at best, marginally better than in government schools and infrastructure is far worse.

It is indeed noteworthy that more than 90% of rural as well as urban households reported having a school with primary classes within 1 km. But availability of schools with middle or secondary level classes differed considerably between rural and urban sectors. Only 61.6% of rural households, compared to 82.5% of urban households, had a middle school within one km. For secondary level classes, the proportion was 30.7% for rural as compared to 68.6% for urban households. Further, about 33% of rural households did not have any secondary school within a distance of 3 km (Report 532, NSSP 64th Round, 2009). Hence, it is fair to say that access is not equal and the ability of children to continue with their education is largely determined by location and availability of public transportation.

Crossing the secondary education barrier is a major hurdle before young people can hope to enrol in colleges and universities. Quality of secondary education exerts a huge influence on opportunities after school. Thomas Weisskopf points out that,

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age–group 6–10 years. (Report 532, NSSO, 64th Round).

Net attendance ratio: For each education class-group, this is the ratio of the number of persons in the official age-group attending a particular class-group to the total number persons in the age-group. For example, for Class group I–V the ratio (in %) is = Number of persons of age 6-10 years currently attending Classes I–V x100 / Estimated population in the age-group 6–10 years. Similarly it can be obtained for the remaining class-groups of school education, i.e. VI–VIII, IXX and XI–XII, with the corresponding official age-groups as 11–13, 14–15 and 16–17 respectively. (Report 532, NSSO, 64th Round).

> In India roughly 40% of higher education students are enrolled in relatively low prestige arts programmes / bachelors programmes. This percentage is 60 for SC and 75 for ST…The question is what kind of higher education do they have access to? (Their) academic performance and how many finish their degree in the stipulated time…(there are) varying estimates, but in professional courses the percentages are far lower than the general category. Why do SC / ST students fall behind in during the course?..."(Weisskopf, in Tilak, 2013).

In fact, this is not a new revelation. Way back in 1972 Suma Chitnis's work in Maharashtra revealed that overwhelming majority of SC students (in the sample she was tracking) were "studying in grade D colleges" and their performance in the course was poor and drop out rates were also high. She also found that a higher percentage of SC students were enrolled in non-professional courses and in non-science courses (Suma Chitnis, 1972). Reviewing the higher education terrain, Prof. Tilak (2013) feels that, "In India the emphasis is laid either on quantity or quality or equity, not on all three at the same time and we end up with a scalene, a triangle of three unequal sides".

Going forward, having overcome the first barrier of access to primary schooling, there is no guarantee that attending school can guarantee learning. As discussed above, ASER 2011[8] revealed that nationally only 48.2 % of class 5 children could read simple class 2 level texts and only 29% of class children could solve a two-digit subtraction problem. These findings reflect a mere tip of the iceberg and the reality on ground is quite sombre. While many more children may be enrolling in school, the big question before us is whether they

[8] **ASER:** The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) is a national survey that collects information regarding children's schooling status and basic reading and math abilities. Conducted every year since 2005, ASER is facilitated by Pratham and conducted by local institutions in every rural district of the country, reaching about 3 lakh households and 7 lakh children each year. ASER results show that at the national level, there has been no improvement in children's ability to read simple text and do basic arithmetic in the seven years for which data are available.

are learning, and to what extent, does the kind of school they attend influences this learning. The recent PISA test results (2011[9]) have also raised similar issues.

When most administrators, educationists (even those working in government institutions) and the larger education community agree that measuring inputs and enrolment is inadequate, the question that arises is why does government data focus so much on enrolment, retention, teacher appointments, teacher training, infrastructure and supplies and to a far lesser extent on learning? Why is it that we, as a nation, do not shrug at the thought that millions of our children attend school and emerge barely literate! What does it say about our education system? And how did we reach this situation?

Quality, the heart of equity[10]

India attained Independence in 1947. Mahatma Gandhi had dreamed about a school system that was rooted in the social and cultural context while at the same time ensuring good quality secular education that is accessible to all children in the country. But as the first government assumed office "education for all" was quickly forgotten. We plugged along with the colonial system, partly because there were more pressing economic and political issues to tackle. Gandhiji's plea for 'Nai Taleem' (a fresh approach) in education was lost in the din of building a command economy, which meant focusing on heavy/basic industries, institutions of higher technical education etc.

It is not that education was neglected. In addition to regular schools, the government did set up a chain of 'central schools' that were fairly well endowed and of good quality. But the real attention was reserved for higher education, as the ruling elite was committed to building quality

[9] PISA and recent findings.

[10] A longer version of this section appeared as a Vimala Ramachandran's chapter "Quality, the heart of equity", in Joel Cohen and Martin Malin (eds.) *International Perspectives on the Goals of Universal Basic Education*, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Routledge, New York, 2010. (pp. 104–112).

institutions for professional and technical education. National institutes of technology, science, medicine and management produced graduates, who compared with the best in the world. It is no surprise that India had managed to ride the current global information technology wave in the 1990s with confidence. In this rarefied world, excellence and quality are key words.

However, the euphoria of India being a knowledge driven economy was short lived. An independent non-governmental organization facilitated a nation-wide sample survey on learning outcomes of children in 2005. The results were shocking. Close to 35% of children in the 7–14 age group could not read a simple paragraph (grade 1 level) and almost 60% of children could not read a simple story (grade 2 level). 65.5% of children in the 7–14 age group could not tackle simple arithmetic problems and more worrying was the fact that 47% of children from 11 to 14 years could not solve grade 2 level arithmetic problems (ASER, 2005). That is not all. In the same year, the government admitted that out of all children who enter grade 1, 52.8% of children drop out before they reach grade 8 (SES, GOI, 2005). Among them, children coming from the most deprived communities and from rural and remote areas constitute an overwhelming majority of dropouts. Education meant little to these children since they acquire few skills and little confidence. For all the official claims, close to half of all children in the appropriate age group receive less than the constitutionally mandated eight years of schooling.

How can two entirely different systems coexist in the same space? Is this an area of concern for the government and the larger civil society?

In the early 1950s, education and quality were seen as coterminous, in part because education was a privilege of the few who could afford it. Most children, even from upper middle-class families, studied in government schools. With modernisation and escalated demand for education, pressure for rapid expansion in the public education system increased. By the mid-1960s, as increasing number of children started enrolling in school, the country also witnessed a gradual increase in the number of private aided and unaided schools. As the sixties rolled by, people with means moved out of public (government) schools and

a feeling developed that quality was, perhaps, better pursued in private schools. This was also the time when competitive language politics led to political decision to adopt vernacular medium and postpone or withdraw the teaching of English to high school. This further quickened the exit of the middle classes from government schools (except of course the special government schools like Kendriya Vidyalaya). This movement of the children from economically better off families moving from government schools to private schools has continued to gain momentum through subsequent decades.[11] The socially and politically significant minority, i.e., the middle classes and the rich, have more or less fully moved out of government schools. Interestingly, even those who remain in government schools go to better-endowed government schools.

Officially, in 2012, 54.8% of schools were run by the education department of the government, 29% run by local bodies (panchayat / municipality), 8.9% were private aided and 7.3% were private unaided. The distribution changes quite dramatically when we look at secondary and higher secondary schools: 31.3% by government, 8.5% by local bodies, 24% are private aided and 36.2% private unaided (School Education Statistics, GOI 2012). If we look at the above distribution of schools alongside drop out rates, it is noteworthy that 27% of children drop out by the end of class 5 (28.7 boys and 25.1 girls). Further 40.6% drop out by class 8 (40.3 boys, 41 girls). It is worrying that government data does not tell us who (meaning by location, income group, family education status, type of school they attend) drops out. Micro studies / field-based studies point to the very poor, among them socially disadvantaged groups like SC, ST and Muslim and within them first generation school goers are the ones who drop out.

In the 1990s, data on enrolment and retention took precedence over the painstaking process of monitoring the functioning of schools. The inspectorate system gave way to data-based monitoring. As a result, as long as the local education authorities could show high

[11] ASER reports show increasing trend in private school enrollment from 18.7% in 2006 to 25.6% in 2011.

enrolment rates, the work was seen as having been done. Even though the dropout rates were alarming, the ability of the system to retain children was not really seen as an important indicator of achievement till almost the middle of the last decade. It is no coincidence that a majority of children from the most deprived communities attend government schools and dropout rates calculated essentially pertain to government schools.

With growing pressure to meet globally accepted levels of school enrolment India joined the great numbers race. Issues of access and quality were analytically separated and the focus shifted to somehow getting children into schools with the belief that the government could worry about quality later. Statistics acquired an unprecedented status and we started searching for simple measures like enrolment, transition and completion rates to show progress, forgetting that highly complex webs of issues are responsible for poor quality of government schools.

First: The school system is not accountable to anyone. When the government is satisfied with monitoring numbers (number of students enrolled, teachers appointed, textbooks distributed, mid-day meals supplied, buildings constructed, toilets built, etc.), there is very little motivation to do or look for anything else. Till 2012 (this may be about to change), the academic support institutions at cluster and block levels were preoccupied with gathering data from schools. Old-time inspectors no longer monitor what happens inside the schools or, for that matter, what the children are learning. Therefore, according to the old maxim, "what is monitored is what gets done". Our school system has perfected the skill of enrolling children and showing them on the rolls.

Second: Given the no-detention policy (whereby children are not detained in class if they have not achieved the grade-specific competence), schools just promote children from one grade to the next without bothering to find out if they have indeed acquired the grade-specific knowledge and skills. As a result, we now have a situation where many children reach grade 5 without learning to read or write. There is another danger that looms large. The RTE Act has extended the no-detention policy right up to the eighth grade. This

essentially means that we may have children who have been in school for eight years but have not learnt language or mathematics or science.

Third: The numbers of days the schools actually work vary across the country**.** According to ASER survey (2011) student attendance has been falling. For example, average attendance of students in Bihar has declined from 59% in 2007 to 50% in 2011, whereas in Uttar Pradesh it fell from 67% to 57% in the same period. Several studies have also shown high teacher absence rates (Michael Kremer et al 2004; Muralidharan, 2013). In our own field studies, we found that teachers in rural schools keep an undated leave application ready and take turns to attend class. Therefore, if there are indeed five teachers appointed for a primary school, on any given day only two or maybe three are likely to be present (Ramachandran, 2004; Sharma and Ramachandran, 2009). They rotate their "French-leave" and as a result, one teacher ends up managing more than one class. Over the last ten years I have found that the actual time spent on teaching-learning in any one grade/class could be as little as 25 minutes a day. A recent study commissioned by the government's Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan also found that the actual teaching-learning time (time-on-task) was low and student attendance was also a matter of concern.[12] Why then are we surprised that our children do not learn?

Fourth: The RTE has stipulated norms for basic infrastructure and facilities, for teacher–pupil ratio, and other academic matters that determine quality. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan of today, the District Primary Education Programme of the 1990s, Operation Black Board of the 1980s and so on also developed elaborate guidelines and notified norms. The unfortunate reality is that many of these wonderful plans remain on paper. Often lofty intentions announced through policy are not followed up with concrete action. As a result, even after three decades of government-sponsored, central sector schemes for universal elementary education, a majority of our government schools

[12] TSG, Government of India, 2010. *Teachers and Students Time-on-Task in primary and upper primary schools—a synthesis report*. Research, Evaluation and Studies Unit, Ed CIL. New Delhi.

located in rural areas and also in urban areas (the abysmal state of MCD-run schools is a case in point) have crumbling infrastructure and poorly maintained facilities. If there are toilets, there is no water; if there are toilets and water facilities, cleanliness is an issue. Apart from problems of basic maintenance, quality of construction is also poor. As a result, our schools are neither attractive nor safe.

The situation is not very different at the secondary level. Government secondary schools in many educationally backward states have poor infrastructure, inadequate teachers in some subjects, extremely poor science labs, no library etc. This list is fairly long. In addition, in many schools in rural and remote areas, a large number of girls-only school do not offer science or commerce. Students are left with little option and end up doing language or arts. In a study that I did in 2008–09 in New Delhi, I found that girls' schools in some of the poorer areas did not offer science. When we asked the students of classes 9 and 10 what they would like to do, many of them wanted to enrol in ITIs or in nursing schools, but they were unable to do so as their school did not offer science.

The problem is not lack of financial resources or of lack of good policies or strategies. The basic issue is that no one really cares if government schools function or not. Our political leaders, administrators, media and the middle classes have all abandoned government schools for their own children. In a recent study, (Ramachandran, Bhattacharjea and Sheshagiri, 2009) we had an opportunity to interact with teachers across eight states of India. I was shocked to note that not one of them sent their children/grand-children to government schools. All of them said that they wanted their children to go to a functioning school that teaches English and "maintains discipline". They all wanted English medium for their own families even though they enforce vernacular medium in government schools. They want to see their own children go to schools that function, with proper classrooms and desks, with trained teachers, while at the same time they look the other way when government school children are cramped into small windowless spaces, are made to sit on the floor, have no lights or fans and, what is worse, are not sure if they will see the teacher every day.

This is a warped system! Official numbers tell us that all is well with our education while our eyes and ears tell a different story. India has created parallel structures of education governed by different norms and playing by different rules. In the process, the education system has got more differentiated, i.e., public, aided and private; formal and alternative; permanent, transitional, pedestrian coexisting with institutions of excellence. The poorer and the more disadvantaged are pushed into schools with poor facilities, teachers and overall learning environment. This has given rise to a new trend of 'hierarchies of access', whereby, paradoxically, the democratisation of access to schools is accompanied by a reaffirmation of a child's caste, community and gender in defining which school she or he attends[13] (Ramachandran, 2004). Having pushed the socially excluded into educational ghettos, the government wants to neutralize the inequalities of past centuries through affirmative action in the form of reservation of a certain percentage of admissions of specific social groups in higher and technical education institutions. It is cruel to offer reservations at higher levels while paying little attention to education quality and learning in school. Are we not perpetuating or even deepening inequalities by not giving our children equal opportunities in school?

The economic cake is expanding fast for some people in India. New opportunities are available to those who have been able to access quality education. There is a clamour for better schools, English education and new technologies. Quality is the new battleground.

Yet we are at a loss to define what we mean by "quality". At the heart of this concern are questions related to the goal of education. Is it to enhance the capabilities of people to negotiate an increasingly unequal, divisive and polarised world from a position of strength? Is it to enable people to reflect critically on their life situation and understand the world they live in to make informed choices? Good quality education, in essence, involves creating a system that enables children to learn to know, learn to do, learn to live with others and

[13] Vimala Ramachandran (ed). 2004. *Hierarchies of Access: Gender and Equity in Primary Education*. Sage Publications, New Delhi.

appreciate interdependence and diversity, and above all learn to "act with ever greater autonomy, judgment and personal responsibility"[14] (Jacques Delors et al, 1996).

The segregation in education with different social classes enjoying differential access to different kinds of schools cuts at the root and poses a real threat to democracy. As Joel E. Cohen points out,

> "little has been done to address questions about the universality of educational content, which varies across countries and regions. Universal could mean that all children get the same education. Or it could mean that all children get some education, but the content differs by place, type of school, or technology of instruction. Or it could mean that there are universal principles that apply everywhere but that the implementation and specification of these principles in practice depend on the local context. If content differs, there may be some or no common elements for all children. Or it could mean that education is the same for everybody except for those children who are disabled, remote, rural, minority, or otherwise handicapped" (Joel E. Cohen, 2010[15]).

An inability to address the fundamental goals of education does not augur well for democracy. In an increasingly polarised society, caste, religion and language identities are reinforced in politics and political parties mobilise along caste and community lines, pitting one group against the other to capture votes. Schools no longer provide a common shared space for children of different backgrounds and communities. Children today are growing up without getting an opportunity to mix with children from other social groups. While children from middle class and affluent families with greater access to the world media may potentially be exposed to different view points, majority of poor children not only attend school where they mix with their own kind but have little access to the media (print and visual). They are thus doubly disadvantaged, by poverty and by poor quality education.

[14] Delors, Jacques, and others, 1996, *Learning: The Treasure Within: Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century.* Paris: UNESCO Publishing.
[15] Cohen, Joel E. and Martin B. Malin, 2010.

Given the segregation and given that those who can access reasonable quality education opt for higher end careers, teaching as a career is increasingly becoming a last resort. The last three decades have witnessed a sharp decline in the quality of teachers. The further one moves away from the metropolis and well-endowed schools, the greater the decline in educational level, skills and confidence of teachers. With the base of the educational pyramid remaining poor and the inability of our system to attract competent teachers, we are only reinforcing the quality divide.

As we peel away the layers of the education system, more contradictions reveal themselves. Larger governance issues like corruption, rent seeking and patronage make an already difficult situation even more resistant to reform.[16] Even well- meaning reformers are at a loss about where to begin. Lofty goals are set every few years, new documents are released (the most recent being the nation-wide effort to draft a national curriculum framework[17]) and institutions are revamped to regulate quality (NCTE). Yet, institutions that are expected to set standards and provide academic leadership at different levels (national, state and district) have been reduced to petty fiefdoms that are least concerned about larger issues, such as the purpose of education. And unfortunately, the larger political debate on education continues to centre primarily on writing and re-writing history and

[16] "In a survey of 2,350 teachers in three large states in India—Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Karnataka—depending on the state, 12 to 25% of teachers reported often being harassed directly and indirectly by politicians for reasons unrelated to teaching (Béteille 2009). Harassment included threat of transfer to a remote area, demand for bribes to avoid transfer, and the expectation that school administrators would cooperate with local politicians in hiring contractors for school construction projects and issue no-objection certificates even if the construction was visibly substandard with only a fraction of the budget actually spent on it. Harassment did not end with politicians and their middlemen. It also included having to cultivate connections with government clerks in order to be reimbursed for claims owed to the teacher (Béteille 2009)"—quoted from Dunder, Halil et al Forthcoming 2013.

[17] NCERT, Government of India: National Curriculum Framework, New Delhi 2005.

peculiar manifestations of affirmative action that only reinforce social divisions and existing inequalities.

The crisis faced by Indian education reflects a global concern. Be it rioting youth of migrant communities in Europe, the exasperated students in South and Southeast Asia and the Middle East, or the palpable unrest in Americas and Africa, all these are telling something. An education system that emerged in the early industrial period is no longer able to meet the growing aspirations and needs of people across the world. The "best" are happy with the Ivy League, Oxbridge, Sorbonne, Indian Institutes of Technology and Indian Institutes of Management, their stepping-stone to money, fame and power. Simultaneously, the media has equalised aspirations and raised hope that education could indeed be the great equaliser. Yet, the education that poor receive adds little real value. The real world is harsh and those on the margins are being pushed further out into the wild.

At the heart of all this is the content of education:

- Who gets to learn what and how much?
- What confidence and capabilities does it endow?
- Who decides what is taught in school and later on in colleges?
- What accountability systems are in place to make sure that children who come to school are taught with love and care, in a non-discriminatory environment and in a manner that enables them to realise their potential?
- Who ensures that caste, gender, race and community prejudices are not reinforced in school and in colleges?
- Is anyone monitoring to see if a playing field is being created in schools and colleges?

All these questions are about quality, of learning, of environment, of relationships and of experience. Quality is the heart of the struggle

for equality and justice. The unwillingness or inability to define what we really mean by quality and institutional mechanisms, necessary to realise standards of quality, is ultimately a political question. Unfortunately, the communist parties, the social democrats, the centrist liberals and the right-wing ideologues all are on the same side in the education quagmire, together contributing to the growing schism between the rhetoric and reality.

The situation may seem grim. But as we look closer and listen carefully, young people across the world are not in a mood to take this lying down. May be there is a silver lining. There is an urgent need to re-imagine education, overhaul the system and link education to life, livelihood, peace and social justice. While striving for equality, the education system should be able to respond to both aspirations and opportunities while enhancing choices. A farmer should be able to enhance her productivity, weigh the pros and cons of traditional and modern technologies and make informed choices. Children living in a multicultural environment should have an opportunity to learn about each other while creating bonds of shared experiences and at the same time, learning from the catastrophic consequences of racism, parochialism and communalism on humanity. Skilled and unskilled workers should be able to negotiate just wages and resist gender and age inequalities that exist. The education system should have the depth as well as the range to span different worlds that people live in and also create bridges. A child born into a community that is rooted in a traditional occupation must have the opportunity to move out if she so wishes or infuse modern technologies or marketing opportunities into a traditional occupation. This has implications for the education system. We may have to reconstruct education in such a way that it provides multiple points of entry and exit, accommodate varying paces of learning and enable people to stand tall where they are and reach out to the world with confidence. Young people who do not want to pursue formal schooling after grade 8 or 10 should have the opportunity to pursue learning in a different stream. Equally, a young person who may have dropped out when she was just 14 should be able to pick up the threads at a later stage, if she so desires. There is a need to rethink the value of linear progression from primary right up to higher education. This can happen only if people who are committed to an alternative

vision have the courage to put an end to the mindless pursuit of numbers (also known misleadingly as "goals") and call the bluff. This is the only way we can strengthen the voices clamouring for meaningful education.

What can we do?

It is universally accepted that three factors influence the performance of a school system; namely: inputs (facilities, teacher–pupil ratios, student enrolment, no-detention policy, incentives, mid-day-meals); pedagogical process employed in the classrooms and the overall governance of the school system. We know that expenditure on inputs has been going up steadily, and (especially under DPEP and SSA) teacher training has been given importance. Research done in the last ten years does not show any positive correlation between the above inputs and student learning. (Karthik Muralidharan, 2013) For almost two decades now (since 1993–94) educational planners and administrators are pushing for more of the same and many of them refuse to acknowledge reality. It is time the education community started thinking differently and be prepared for sweeping reforms—however painful it may be.

Today is Teachers' day (5 September 2013), a day when we all remember our teachers and honour them. May be we need to start with teachers, initiate a dialogue with them and take them on board to reform the recruitment, academic support, monitoring and teacher management system. There is something fundamentally wrong with the way we have managed teachers as a cadre, teachers as professionals, teachers as individuals, teachers as experts and teachers as government servants. We have swung like a pendulum—from one strategy to another. Some state governments / administrators thought hiring local contract teachers was the way to manage absenteeism, some others thought that this was a bad idea and that protecting teacher tenure was the key, some others thought mandatory training would do the trick… we in India have tried many things at different points of time. Given that teachers have been seen as a powerful constituency, accountability systems were never designed or implemented seriously.

May be the best way to move forward is to announce that learning outcomes will the primary and most important goal in elementary education. This has to be made a non-negotiable ground rule that informs the entire education system. This is what the Twelfth Plan document says, but does not go into how this would be done. I am not arguing for mechanical testing of all children and adding to the burden of tests; but I am arguing for an effective system that will rescue children from the cumulative burden of non-learning. Let us not see the entire school system through the eyes of elite schools of Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai… majority of schools in the country do not care about what and how much are their students learning. The competition to do well in "board examination" does not dive these schools. The Right to Education is interpreted as the right to enrol, attend and be promoted from one grade to the next without mastering the basics of language, science and arithmetic.

We need to evolve a system whereby the learning levels of children are ascertained at periodic intervals in the school and presented to parents and other stakeholders in the immediate environment of the school. We still may not know how to do this, but it is high time we actively involved the parents, the education community, civil society organisations, local leaders and the media to keep the spotlight on what and how much are children learning. Yes, as many educational researchers would caution, testing cannot be an end in itself and that there is no guarantee that measuring learning outcomes and presenting it would automatically lead to improvement. It is the active interaction between teachers, parents and academic support structures that might help us arrive at a balance.

What are teachers expected to do? Cover the syllabus and go through the motion of completing it—never mind if the children are learning or not. Planners and administrators assume that all children in a class are of the same level and that teachers have to adhere to a time frame to complete the syllabus. They are accountable to completing the prescribed textbook and not to ascertain what their students know. Should we not turn the system on its head and start with what children know and who is at what level… Shouldn't our schools have adequate autonomy with powers delegated to Headmasters as school leaders

to work out what is best for the students? The dividing line between the syllabi oriented teaching and remedial needs to go. The two need to become a seamless process which allows children to learn at their pace and enables teachers to work with groups of children at different levels—even evening classes for children who may not get support at home. This means that we just have to reduce pupil–teacher ratios in primary to around 1:20—so that from classes 1 to 5 teachers have the space to innovate and work with every child. At the same time, teachers need to be made accountable to their children. The Headmaster as the leader needs to have adequate authority (power) to manage teachers, including sanctioning leave, determining the annual increment, withholding salary of those who absent themselves or do not teach, plan for their academic improvement and so on. They should also have adequate budget to hire additional local teachers to provide remedial instruction and support slow learners and children with disabilities.

This is essential to build a strong foundation at the primary stage—it is difficult for children to catch up at a later stage. There is a lot of global evidence to show that children who learn to read well in childhood have the potential to become autonomous learners at a later stage. Building a strong foundation is critical at pre-primary and primary levels.

We need to make sure every single school in the country comes up to a basic minimum acceptable level: one teacher for each class should be non-negotiable; the pupil–teacher ratio has to be calculated for every school (not every district); and a robust independent mechanism should be in place to audit the functioning of schools (through toll free help lines for students and parents to lodge complaints).

Further, teachers should be appointed to a school (and not to a state or district cadre) and they should be made accountable to the children. May be all teachers should first work in a school for a period of five to eight years before they can ask for a change. Many countries require teachers to renew their '*licence*' and periodically prove their knowledge and skills to teach. I do to know if such a system can be implemented in India, but it is worth exploring ways and means to enable teachers to update their knowledge and skills; show that they have the aptitude to continue as teachers and demonstrate their

commitment to learn and grow. The initiative has to come from the school and the teachers—they have to ask for training and also decide what they want, how and where. We just cannot continue with this mandatory 20-day training in SSA that has now become the norm in India. May be promotions and increments could be linked to a mechanism that acknowledges good teachers and discourages those who do not have the aptitude or interest. I know these are controversial issues in India… nevertheless we just have to search for ways to overhaul our school system.

What and how much do our teachers know is as important a question as what and how much are our children learning. There is a lot of evidence—in India and in the region as a whole—that point to the poor subject knowledge of teachers (Kingdon and Banerji, 2009 and Banerji and Kingdon, 2010).[18] Poor teacher competencies translate into poor learning among students, and this underscores not only the importance of knowing the subject but also have the skill to teach and transmit that knowledge. This happens because of a number of reasons—one of them being the kind of people who are attracted to the teaching profession. Countries that have been able to improve learning in schools have focused on who becomes a teacher. The experience of Poland and Finland is well known. The world is gradually waking up to the far-reaching reforms that China has been

[18] "Using School TELLS data Kingdon and Banerji (2009) found that in rural India at the Grade 5 level of difficulty only 28% of the teachers could solve an area problem, and only 25% could work out a percentage problem. About 60% of the teachers made spelling mistakes in their two-sentence summaries of a section from the textbook. As many as 80% admitted to having difficulty in responding to math queries from students… Of particular concern in both Bihar and UP, two of the most educationally and economically disadvantaged states, is the limited teaching ability of math teachers (Banerji and Kingdon, 2010). The best-scoring teachers—the *regular* teachers—scored only 55% in Bihar, and 51% in UP on a math test based on the primary mathematics curriculum they are supposed to teach, in which the authors tested not only the teachers' content knowledge, but also their ability to explain topics in simple terms and spot mistakes in written student work. (Dunder, Halil et al Forthcoming 2013).

attempting[19] (World Bank, 2012). As discussed in the preceding paragraph, another important reason is the mechanisms available within the school system for continuous academic support and guidance and opportunities to upgrade knowledge and also hone their skills.

Transfers, promotions and other career opportunities could be linked to the overall learning level of the children a teacher is responsible for. Equally, teacher training should also be based on ability and subject knowledge of teachers. Training-related decisions need to be taken at the school level and supported by cluster or block level institutions. This will happen only if the block and cluster level academic bodies created by the government are made accountable for the learning levels of children in their respective areas and are made to take the cue from Headmasters and not some official sitting in the state capital. In a nutshell, educational administrators have to take responsibility for learning.

The bottom line is that the entire education system—starting from pre-school (an essential prerequisite for school readiness) to higher secondary—has to make sure children realise their right to be taught and their right to learn in a non-discriminatory environment. Like in all other sectors, governance is the key. A school-upwards governance structure is critical to make education quality the heart of our equity strategy.

[19] "In Shanghai, the quality of teaching rests upon government policies aimed to attract the best into teaching, policies that match teacher skills to student needs and mentoring of new teachers. The government attracts the best into the profession through targeted scholarship programs, with an assignment system whereby teachers and principals are assigned to those schools where they are most needed. This is combined with a school accountability mechanism focusing on low performing schools. Professional communities play an important role in supporting teachers to improve instruction, monitoring teaching and learning, and motivating teachers to perform well. Teaching Study Groups bring together teachers in the same subject and level so that they can jointly plan their lessons. Teachers' workload is structured so that teachers can regularly observe their peers during actual lessons. Novice teachers are supported by Master teachers during their first year of classroom experience, and can observe more seasoned instructors to learn from them through apprenticeships. The underlying theory of action in Shanghai is that no individual teacher is perfect, but that capable teachers can help each other improve. In this way, the government creates the mechanisms for teachers to support their peers and hold them accountable, but rarely intervenes directly." (World Bank, 2012).

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