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Why Children Don't Learn

The influential Public Report on Basic Education (PROBE Report 1999) carried out its field work in 1996 in States like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan to say that there were not enough schools, teachers and classrooms for children. The state of schools was abysmal, the infrastructure inadequate and the learning outcomes deplorable. The PROBE Report celebrated Himachal Pradesh for actually doing a 'Schooling Revolution' by ensuring that all children were in schools.

It was in these tumultuous times that Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) brought hope for Universal Elementary Education (UEE) at the turn of the Century. There was a confidence that a scheme for UEE comprehensively providing for bridging all gaps, will settle the supply side constraints. Being a follow-up to judicial activism and Court rulings, SSA naturally focused on norm-based provisioning for UEE. The Right to Education Act (RTE) only formalized many of those commitments, without any assurance of additional funding.

In 2006, the same team of researchers carried out a PROBE Revisit Survey after a decade of efforts for UEE. The Revisit Study recorded major improvement in School participation, decline in social disparities, and improvement in schooling infrastructure, school incentives, but learning outcomes remained a challenge. Prescriptive school level Parents-Community-Teacher interface and School effectiveness seem to have been limited, in the absence of real parent- community connect and local level accountability.

In 2014-15, the 71st Round NSS survey found the Net Attendance Rates of boys and girls identical, both in rural and urban areas. Surely, the girls had voted with their feet for quality public education. It was the State that had failed to provide learning outcomes for all. Initiatives for quality outcomes needed a functional support of institutions tasked with quality.

The Annual School Education Report (ASER) brings out the learning outcomes challenge.

Even though most children are in school, barely one four acquire appropriate literacy and numeracy skills. The New National Education Policy 2020 must address this challenge with resources and reforms. The ASER 2023 Report on adolescents brings out how the gender gap in enrolment has nearly disappeared even at Secondary school level across the country. However, the learning outcome challenges persist even in their adolescence!! The National Achievement Studies of NCERT, the World Bank studies on learning outcomes have also found unsatisfactory learning outcomes as the biggest challenge, in spite of improvement in schooling provision. Covid has only made the learning challenges worse.

As every survey is pointing out, our children's learning (already poor) really suffered due to school closure during Covid. Studies also confirm how woefully inadequate the on line learning was in the absence of phones, Tablets and Computers with most children. Innovations by a few teachers across the country by holding classes outside classrooms, use of the public address system, etc. proved inadequate as a system.

Teachers faced an uphill task of catching up on the learning losses. Many struggled to ensure learning and catch up. Loss of incomes drove more children to government schools. Parental motivation for children's learning however, still made households squeeze out money for private tuition of children on a very large scale. Compromising basic food intake, even the poor vote for education as the gateway to prosperity. A democracy cannot fail the aspirations of its deprived households; learning must be allowed to happen.

The burden of non-teaching responsibilities of teachers has been the subject matter of discussion for decades but policy has not

seen the kind of response needed. During a season of elections, and census, one shudders to think how children will suffer as teachers would be on election/census duty for extended periods. Not every State is like Himachal Pradesh, where even a decade ago, parents would protest school closure and therefore teachers on election duty disturbed schools only on the voting day. In many other States, it becomes a time for teachers to be busy with training, material collection, and so on. We must limit the school closure to not more than a couple of days for very necessary roles in elections/census, and make up by working over weekends.

Added to these non-teaching duties, is the management of the mid-day meal programme. Why cannot Panchayats and women self-help groups of the Livelihood Mission manage the mid-day meal and leave teachers to teach? Non-teaching responsibilities should be with Panchayats and strengthen them with a community cadre of human resource to do that. Human capital development cannot be sacrificed and therefore teachers must be insulated from non-teaching responsibilities.

All political parties must recognize the fundamental right of every child to have an opportunity to quality learning in schools. The Central, State, Local Governments must immediately ensure a basic minimum learning condition from this academic session itself for children up to the age of 14 years. With the Constitutional amendment to make elementary education a fundamental right, classification of education in the concurrent list, and the experience of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Centre and States should settle for a 50-50 sharing over ten years of the additional funds that may be needed to create the minimum learning condition.

The pre-school matters and after making it an

integral part of the foundational learning and development of a child 3 year onwards under the new National Education Policy 2020, we must provide for universal coverage of all children in the 3-14 age group with teachers, teaching learning materials, learning spaces, technology enabled learning opportunities, toys as learning materials, and so on. The Village Organizations of the SHGs in every village can be given the responsibility of managing programmes of Aanganwadis and Schools, under the Local Governments. Aanganwadi Workers can be better trained for pre-school learning for better outcomes.

There must be a common minimum commitment from all governments at all levels for the following basic learning guarantee for 3-14 age children if India is to secure the demographic dividend. The following should be non-negotiable when schools start the new session. Transformation in learning levels can come over a three to five-year period if governance of schools is simultaneously improved with long tenures of the leadership team. The consensus priorities are as follows -

1. Every school to have adequate number of teachers by rationalization/appointment.
2. Every classroom made attractive by a Mission Kaya Kalpa (like UP, Delhi and Punjab).
3. Panchayats directly responsible for Schools and Aanganwadis with funds, functions and functionaries immediately (Like Kerala).
4. All children with teaching learning materials/textbooks, technology enabled learning opportunities through tablets, phones and sound boxes (Lessons from Activity Based learning in Tamil Nadu).
5. No teacher to be assigned any non-teaching responsibility with immediate effect. Under any circumstance, such duty should not disrupt learning by closure of schools. Minimum 250 working days in

schools per year.

6. Women Self Help Groups to take over mid-day meal responsibility with the oversight of Panchayat/Ward Samiti/ School Management Committee. Teachers must be free from the Mid-day meal (as in Tamil Nadu).
7. Quarterly Parents Teachers Association Meeting to share progress of children (Experimented in Karnataka).
8. Panchayats to ensure adequate gadgets to harness on-line learning materials.
9. Zero teacher vacancy policy. Authorize Panchayats to fill up all vacancies with Teacher Eligibility Test pass candidates on ad hoc basis till regular teacher joins (zero vacancy policy as followed in Kendriya Vidyalayas).
10. Provision of Special Needs Teachers in every Cluster to ensure learning by all divyang children with support for gadgets.
11. Ensure monthly Sports and Cultural Events in every school.
12. Provide all Budgetary funds to schools through Panchayats.
13. Ensure periodic assessment of learning by third party agencies/civil society organizations with capability.
14. Train all teachers in use of on line materials as supplemental to regular classroom teaching Being attempted in work of Sampark Foundation in seven States).
15. Promote community learning spaces by establishing Public Libraries (like Karnataka and Jamtara district of Jharkhand).
16. Periodic assessment of teachers to ensure that those not equipped to teach must be out of the system after being given multiple chances (Provided in the Panchayat Teachers' Act in Bihar. Interference has not let this happen effectively.)
17. Thrust on making Teacher Development and excellence in Cluster/ Block and District level through professional partnerships. Provide for multi medium blended learning as the way forward in all

schools.

Parent-community connect alone can make schools community institutions that build on experiential learning. Decentralized management of schools with funds, functions and functionaries under the charge of local governments and women's collectives is likely to improve teacher accountability and learning outcomes. Local governments converging initiatives for social development can take care of the inter sectoral challenges, provision of gadgets for learning, and address wider social determinants of school effectiveness.

Teacher development needs vibrant institutions of excellence at all levels. We cannot have uninspiring training institutions. Technology offers an opportunity to work with a diligent and dedicated teacher (not necessarily outstanding) who opens the world of knowledge and skills to children through an equitable access to e-learning supplementation of books and peer group learning. The National and State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), the District Institutes of Education and Research (DIET), the Block Resource Centres (BRCs), the Cluster Resource Centres (CRCs) have not been able to function as an integrated system of support for improving learning outcomes. The entire institutional system of quality has been dysfunctional in many States. Use of innovative pedagogy has been a one off activity rather than a mainstream effort to improve learning outcomes. Intensive teacher development, recognizing a role for supplementation through e-learning materials, and continuous non-threatening evaluation, are needed on priority.

We need to subject teachers to competency tests and dispense with those who do not have the basic ability to facilitate learning. We cannot let certificate holders masquerade as

teachers. We have to be ruthless in developing a performance-based system of respectable, incremental compensation for teachers. The jury is still out after so many years as how do we select good teachers. The late J.S. Verma Committee brought out the unsatisfactory and unethical state of pre service teacher education in this country. In service support is also not very satisfactory given the inability of institutions to become centres of excellence.

For governance improvement, SSA provided for a 6% management cost to bring in the finest professional skills of Programme Managers, Pedagogy Experts, Finance Managers, Planners, etc. Schools need Head Masters and better management for effective outcomes. Community oversight helps. There is a very strong case for institutionalizing the new skill sets through the state Public Service Commissions.

Sukanya Bose makes a very strong case in the 9 March 2024 issue of the Economic and Political Weekly for a renewed focus on right to education with more financial resources. Allocations in school education have continued to lag behind normative resource needs. The infrastructure gaps in secondary schooling continue to be large, as also the deployment of trained subject specialist teachers. The innovations of the new National Education Policy 2020 with a commitment to Universal Secondary Education, cannot happen effectively, if not accompanied by governance reforms with higher decentralized funds, functions and functionaries under the local governments.

Resources and reforms are both needed as quality does not come for free. The success of the Kendriya and Navodaya Vidyalayas is a confirmation that it is possible to craft credible public system for school education, if normative per child costs are adequate to meet quality needs with good governance.

A common school thrust for school education will go a long way in further strengthening the social fabric and bringing down hierarchies of schooling opportunities. Measuring outcomes in a non-threatening and community owned

way, will bring a focus on excellence. Schools as Community Institutions is in the realm of the possible. Its absence will make us become old before we become rich. The challenge is now.

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