

TRANSFORMING INDIA THROUGH QUALITY ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

A country's ability and potential for growth is determined by the size and capability of its youth population. Hence all concerned stakeholders need to understand that this section of the population needs to be nurtured, skilled, streamlined and motivated to meet and confront the challenges ahead so that they may eventually contribute to the overall progress of the country.

According to the census data (2011), India accounts to have 229 million of 15 to 24-year-olds claiming to be the world's highest youth population. Further only 4.5 percent of the population in the country is educated up to the level of graduate or above while a majority of 32.6 per cent population is not even educated up to the primary school level. Also more than 20 per cent of the youth in the 15-24 age group is jobless and seeking work. This statistics is really worrying and needs the cognizance of all.

Out of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of Agenda 2030 for sustainable development, 'Quality Education' has been declared as the most important and the most necessary standalone goal for the success of the remaining 16 goals – health, poverty, inequality etc.

Quality Education means education that builds the character, increases the strength of mind, sharpens the intellect and above all makes the individual self – independent. In addition, it should help young India to become creative thinkers and entrepreneurs. But we need to think that whether the basic schooling of India preparing the 21st century learners or not.

The onus of quality education lies on the shoulders of teachers, who are the linchpin of the education system of the country. A good teacher in a classroom can beat and overpower any level of technology tools. But has India produced quality teachers, or are our existing teacher education policies capable enough to produce 21st century teachers.

The present paper is an attempt to explore the quality of young India that is being produced and the challenges faced by the elementary education system of the country in producing the 21st century learners. The paper would also try to suggest some strategies to strengthen the elementary education system of the country and hence achieve the UN goal of 'Quality Education'.

Keywords: Youth, Quality Education, Elementary Schools, Teachers

Introduction

Status of Education and Employment in India

According to the census data (2011), India is the world's second most populous country with about 1.21 billion population. Also India accounts to have 229 million of 15 to 24-year-olds claiming to be the world's highest youth population. By 2020, India is ready to become the world's youngest country with

the average age of 29 and 64% of its population in the working age group.

Also according to the census data (2011), only 4.5 percent of the population in the country is educated up to the level of graduate or above while a majority of 32.6 per cent population is not even educated up to the primary school level. India is the home of the largest population of illiterate adults in world – 287 million, amounting to 37% of the global total.

According to Labour Bureau's "Third Annual Employment & Unemployment Survey, 2012-13" the unemployment amongst the graduate youth that happened to be at 19.4 per cent in 2011-2012 increased to 32 per cent during 2012-2013 4.

Also, 60% of the eight lakh engineers graduating from technical institutions across the country every year remain unemployed, according to the All India Council for Technical Education.

So this means that sooner India will be the most populated country with highest youth population and working population but unemployed and uneducated. Such unemployed population will eventually put the country at high risk of social inclusion, cohesion and stability.

Reason Behind Uneducated and Unemployed Youth

The EFA Global Monitoring Report (2011) indicates that countries have shown tremendous progress in achieving the first three goals – access, enrollment and retention but the goal of quality education is yet to achieve. Report say that today millions of children passing out from elementary education system have far below levels of expected standards of reading, writing and numeracy. Further this cohort is transferred to the secondary level which too has poor quality curriculum and no connection with the world of work. The students belonging to the secondary education are aimless with respect to the career they want to pursue and this leads to entry of students with no career and professional aims into higher education.

Hence youth with low levels of basic skills and no career and professional aim in mind are produced.

And even if some of them attain higher degrees, they don't learn the important technical and soft skills that employers look for in them. The Labour Bureau survey states that in India, every one youth out of three with a graduation degree and above is found to be unemployed. Every year almost two lakh engineering students out of four lakh strive for jobs. This statistics is really worrying and needs the cognizance of all.

The mismatch of the world of education and world of employment has resulted into uneducated and unemployed youth.

According to a World Bank study, every extra year of elementary education improves a person's hourly wage rate (productivity) by 10-30%. It also states that an 8 percent increase in agricultural production arises from minimum four years of basic education. Also increase in girls' enrollment in elementary education decreases several health related issues (UNICEF, 2015).

Thus the above discussion clearly states that we cannot build upon a strong youth force until and unless the basic elementary education is made strong and competent enough to produce students efficient in the three basic skills – reading, writing and numeracy. **(Refer Figure 1)**

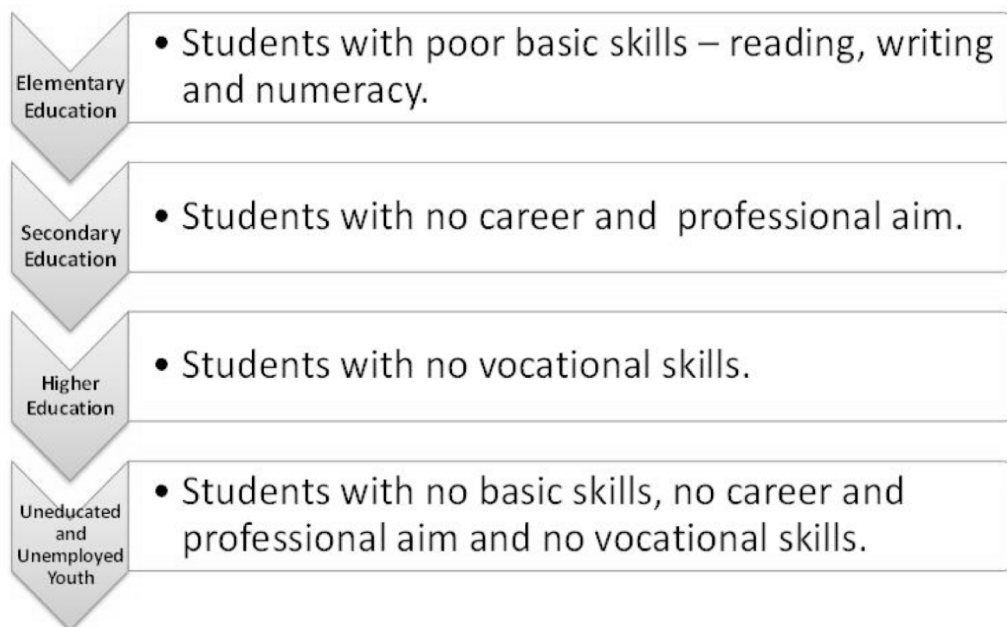


Figure 1: Education System of the Country

Status of Elementary Education in India

It is almost two decades of inception of basic education program - Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) – and today it proudly serves about 200 million children living in over a million habitations across the country. This has made, India, one of the largest elementary education programs in the world. The huge success of goal of Universal Access needs accolades.

However, today, almost 95 percent of Indian children attend primary school but just 44 percent enroll into class V. This shows that the goal of Universal Access is yet to be achieved in secondary education.

Now out of this 95 percent, only a handful of the elite group of learners which come from very well-to-do families of classes I-VIII goes to private schools of different boards. Next those who cannot afford private schooling attend English-language government-aided schools, affiliated to state-level examination boards. The last but not the least is the huge percentage of children who go to poorly managed government or municipal schools. This clearly reflects that both Universal Access and Quality of Education received by these students depend on their social status and economic background.

A study conducted by Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) shows that children of elementary level are not acquiring even basic abilities in reading and arithmetic. For example, ASER reported that about 53% (in 2009) of children in Standard V was unable to read a Standard II-level text book. In 2013, this figure changed to just about 47%. Also in 2009 about 36% of Standard V children were not able to solve a three digit by one digit division problem. Similar studies by ASER (2013) reported that

only a little more than 50% of standard V children could do a two-digit subtraction problem with borrowing. Further in a research done by ASER in 2014 showed that a downward trend has been observed in the ability of Class-VIII students to do a division problem from 2010 (68.3%) to 2014 (44.1%).

Such statistics clearly state that the elementary education of India is witnessing a lot of problems that need to be rectified soon.

Problems Faced by Elementary Education System of India

Focus on Input Parameters Rather than Output Standards by Regulatory Bodies

Till now all the regulatory bodies for elementary education system that decide norms and design frameworks for schools focus on input parameters such as entity format, land and infrastructure requirements, faculty-student ratios, funds available, admission criteria, fee structures etc for schools. But now it is high time that they work on making policies for an outcome based school system leading to schools and concerned bodies focusing solely on student learning, teaching methods and styles practiced by teachers and continuous training of teachers. Research has proved that learning deficits in elementary schooling have ultimately transferred unprepared children in terms of reading, writing and speaking skills to the secondary schooling.

Robust Theoretical Curriculum Taught in Schools

The curricula of various boards taught by schools in India are quite robust and theoretical in nature. Both the teacher and student are in a hurry to complete the syllabus prescribed for the standard and then focus on vomiting it out in the exams. Several studies have shown that the pace of learning that children exhibit are far lower than that of what is expected of them by the curriculum and textbook content. Hence the designers of the curriculum of different boards have to understand that the 21st century learners cannot be produced with the same 18th century education system.

The concept of studying too many subjects without understanding them and further without exploring on them and without focusing on any one leaves our students justify the saying "**Jack of all trades, master of none**".

The future world would honour and respect only those who do different things differently. Creative learners and thinkers would be held high than the rest.

Thus the curriculum to be taught should be according to the needs of the young people and the community they live in. Curriculum should help them acquire problem solving skills with apt knowledge, deep rooted study rather than broad coverage of subjects and most important learning by doing. Also theory and relevant realistic material on gender-sensitive issues and other emerging issues like pollution, water crisis, global warming etc. should be included in the new curriculum.

Uneducated Teachers

Research says that one of every five teachers of elementary schools in the country does not have the requisite qualifications to teach young children. This means, it may be that even a XII class passed student turned teacher would be teaching a IX class student or teachers without PTC or B. Ed would be allowed to teach in schools.

Actually, the qualification criteria set for the elementary schools' teachers is not at all suitable in today's competitive world. How can just a XII pass student with just two years Primary Teaching Certificate (PTC) become a 21st century teacher! When the student-teacher himself lacks the requisite subject knowledge, pedagogical and child development skills, how can he teach the students of classes I - V. This means that we train uneducated students to become teachers.

Thus qualification criteria to become elementary teachers need to be addressed soon by our educationists. India needs to learn from countries like Finland where the entry qualification for even pre-primary teachers is a master's degree.

Researches also state that the roles and responsibilities of teachers are constantly changing from a mere teacher to an able motivator, mentor and above all a friend of students. Also emergence of new areas of learning such as health problems, sex education, life skill training that never were talked about in past lay emphasis on teachers with strong social relations and interpersonal skills.

Thus we need to define the qualification criteria of teachers keeping in mind the changing roles and responsibilities of the teachers.

Untrained Teachers

Now the quality of pre-service training provided to the candidates is found to be quite low. The PTC or a B. Ed degree is just a means to get a job for a candidate but the curriculum of such pre-service trainings plays no role in the intellectual growth of the candidate. Also the manners in which teaching skills are learned and practiced during pre-service trainings remain quite different as they are used in the actual classroom settings (Bhargava, 2009). Hence pre-service trainings adds no value to the competence of the student-teacher.

Also there is very less focus paid to the in-service training of the teachers. Government teachers are provided 10 days training in a whole year by government run organization known as DIET (District Institute of Education and Training), but researches show that these trainings have nothing new to tell to the teachers, and teachers often find them boring, ineffective and repetitive. Further private schools feel a dire vacuum of efficient trainers who can train teachers.

It has been also found that the teachers and trainers have a tendency to teach what they may be familiar with instead of what their students need to learn. In India, it has been found that after starting practicing as a teacher/trainer, the individual is found to be rarely up grading and skilling himself/herself on a regular basis. Also initiatives taken up by the concerned educationists and authorities are so minimal that teachers and trainers themselves get obsolete.

Whereas in Finland and Singapore, trainers and teachers are found to be self aware of their training needs and most of the trainings are managed by universities that are directly linked to schools where student- teachers get training through practicing teaching in real classrooms.

Lack of Respect for the Teaching Fraternity

Does the society respect teachers who teach students of classes I-VIII? Do we call and acclaim teachers as professionals?

In India, teaching is a profession that has lost its glory that it used to have in its olden times. It is sad to

say that neither the teachers feel themselves responsible and accountable for their work nor the society gives them their expected admiration and respect. Teaching in schools and that too at elementary level is not at all considered to be valuable. Lack of infrastructural facilities and educational resources has added more to the problem and has resulted into demotivation of the existing pool of the teachers. Hence the cohort which comes to become teachers is themselves untrained, unprovoked and uninterested in the profession and the sense of professionalism and dedication towards teaching is found absent in them.

In countries like Finland, Singapore etc. teaching is the most sought after profession and thus the most educated and trained candidates enter the profession. Here in India, only few are found to be really interested in the teaching profession, rest enter it because they don't have any other job option to pick.

Suggestions for Improvement in Elementary Education System of India

In order to achieve improvement in the elementary education system and the learning outcomes of the children, the first three important things that needs to be done are: -

- 1. Define output outcomes for schools by authorities**
- 2. Revision of curriculum and**
- 3. Improved infrastructural learning environments in schools**

But above all these the most important pillar of elementary education system are the teachers. Research has proved that highly effective teachers can have an enriching effect on not only the daily lives of children but also on their lifelong educational and career aspirations in spite of poor educational facilities, textbooks and infrastructure. Well-educated, well-trained, learned and emotionally stable teachers make the children competent and confident individuals. **(Refer Figure 2)**

With respect to teachers, we have three subgroups – teacher educators, existing teachers and new teachers.

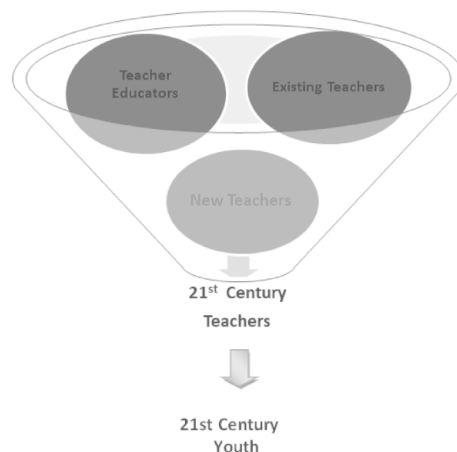


Figure 2 : Elementary Education System

In order to produce 21st century youth we need to develop and design schemes and policies that make the above three important subgroups as 21st century teachers which will eventually produce 21st century students.

Some of the suggestions to make Indian existing and new teachers and teacher educators of elementary education system of world – class quality are:-

Teacher Educators

Teacher educators, the often neglected group of professionals play a crucial role for maintaining - and improving - the high quality of the teaching workforce. Whether providing new teachers with initial teacher education of the highest quality or motivating the existing teachers to continue developing and extending their competences and skills throughout their careers, teacher educators have a paramount place in the education system. Also the adult style of learning is quite different and complex than that of children as they tend to associate lessons taught to them directly to their work. Hence role of teacher educators cannot be ignored.

- **Expertise with Knowledge as the Criteria for Selection of Teacher Educators (trainers)**

Educationists and school managements should ensure that the selected group of teacher educators should include professionals of requisite expertise with knowledge from different educational backgrounds, qualifications and work contexts. Today teacher educators from mere education field would not work and an inclusion of experts from engineering, management, medical, information technology, sociology, psychology and other fields is quite necessary to make a strong pool of trainers.

- **Professional Development of Teacher Educators**

Apart from recruiting experts from different fields as teacher educators, it is also necessary that continuous professional development of these experts is done through their active participation in conferences, writing research papers, exchange programs with universities of other countries, interaction with industry people and so on10.

Existing Teachers

- **Make Teachers Ready to De-learn Out-dated and then Learn New Theories and Practices**

In order to complete the skill - gap of existing cohort of teachers we need to first make an attempt to help existing teachers de –learn their old and out-dated concepts and theories and make them ready for change. Unless these teachers accept that a change in their traditional teaching style is needed, nothing can be done.

- **Strong In-service Trainings**

Next with the help of a strong group of trainers that comes from all sections of the society and from all disciplines of education, we need to devise strong in–service trainings that are given on a continuum basis to the teachers. This pool of trainers includes strong professionals like university professors, doctors, engineers, scientists and many more from the world of employment who may guide the existing teachers about the skills that they are looking for in their future employees. The existing cohort of teachers can be made 21st century teachers only through regular, continuous and updated

trainings and professional development workshops arranged specially for them keeping in mind their needs, and the requirements of the outer world of work. The methods and techniques used in the workshop and the content of the trainings should be novel with a direct relationship with the daily working of the teachers. Collective follow up of these trainings by trainers and school heads and evaluation of trainings have to be done in a judicious manner so that all efforts and pain put into the training exercise are judged. External agencies working in similar fields, NGO's, and universities should also be brought together to plan and give trainings to the school teachers.

- **Conducive Working Environment**

In order to apply the teaching styles and methods learned during the trainings, the existing cohort of teachers are required to have all necessary resources and infrastructure in schools. Providing such a healthy working environment is the sole responsibility of the school managements and the government bodies.

- **Autonomy with Responsibility**

Ample time and autonomy to explore about subject knowledge along with pedagogical and student – centric issues should be given to teachers so that they can themselves research, discover and think for new things and devise new effective teaching styles. Researchers, teachers and students need to work as a team to solve problems related to them and their subjects. This type of learning activity would definitely promote critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, and community involvement skills in students to make invaluable contributions to the society (Kanyike, L., Namanya, P., & Clair, N., 1999). Thus autonomy to teachers to research along with the responsibility to produce learned students would result in efficient and motivated teachers.

- **Meaningful Feedback for Instructional Improvement**

School heads, senior colleagues and peers should work as a team to give regular, timely and meaningful feedback to each other to improve in their teaching and administrative styles. This calls for building up of a sharing and trustworthy culture in the organization. This exchange and share of teaching practices helps teachers to solve their day to day problems and queries related to their subject and classroom management with their colleagues.

New Teachers

- **Revision in Qualification Criteria of Teachers**

The world's best performing school systems of countries like Finland, Singapore and South Korea frame policies to ensure that the most talented educators are attracted, developed and retained and are made to teach students of all socio – economic backgrounds. This has been done only by raising the entry qualification and stringent examination pattern being practiced for elementary teachers.

India hence, needs to learn a lesson from the same and should raise the qualification criteria of teachers of elementary as well as secondary level. An effective teacher should possess at least a thorough knowledge of the subject matter to be taught, an appropriate repertoire of pedagogical skills, and motivation to work and professional commitment.

Thus the new teachers produced in few years would be able to match the needs of the future

students.

• **Enhancement of Quality of Pre-service Training**

Due care for the revision and up-dation of examination pattern and syllabus of courses like PTC and B. Ed should be done keeping in mind the needs of the job market. The pre- service trainings of the new teachers should be grounded on the latest research done on the teaching styles of the teachers. Also during pre –service trainings student –teachers should get ample chance to practice teaching so that they get a real feel of the actual classroom. PTC and B. Ed should not be done just for the sake of name but concerned authorities, colleges and universities should check that the student –teachers are getting fully trained to become competent teachers.

Whether teacher–educators, existing teachers or new teachers, trainings should be made an integral part of their career cycle. The country needs a huge pool of such trainers who train our future teachers.

Conclusion:

In 2010, the no-detention policy was implemented as part of the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) under the RTE Act in India. The main objectives behind this policy were to reduce stress on students and to reduce dropout rates in schools. Educationists and academics accept the fact that the no-detention policy and CCE are grounded on sound principles of pedagogy and student assessment which are practiced in many of the top–performing countries of the world like Finland, Singapore etc. But both the schemes have failed to give the desired fruits. It has been accepted that the failure of CCE scheme is due to the inadequate training given to teachers to implement the policy. Some other reasons were:

- No module of CCE in pre–service training was introduced. Hence no awareness among the new recruits about the system of assessment of students. Moreover, 'Assessments' is an optional paper in pre-service training.
- Reduction of In-service training to 7-10 days, made it difficult to train the teachers about CCE.
- Procedures for applying CCE were not planned of properly which confused teachers and students in using them successfully.
- Dearth of trainers that could have explained the idea behind the implementation of CCE to teachers and train them on strategies to assess and evaluate students.

Hence failure of CCE scheme should be taken as a lesson and reasons for the same should be thought of carefully so that before imposing any new scheme on our teachers, a pool of trainers is ready to train them on the new scheme. It should also be ensured that such schemes should not be put in action in schools until all the teaching workforce is fully trained on the new scheme.

Thus the paper concludes that in order to produce employable youth - governments, academicians and educationists need to align education policies, curricula and training programmes, in such a way that they produce fully competent and trained teachers. Out of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of Agenda 2030 for sustainable development, 'Quality Education' has been declared as the most important and the most necessary standalone goal for the success of the remaining 16

goals – health, poverty, inequality etc.

Hence the government should understand that the education policies should be made keeping the nations' development as the main priority and having a keen watch on the international challenges and labour market requirements. Government of India has been striving hard to devise policies and programs like 'Skill India' and 'Make in India' to help youth of India to be skilled as per the world standards. But our government needs to understand that a strong building of youth cannot be built on a weak foundation of elementary education. And so the new goal of the education policy of the country should be: **“Access to competent, caring, qualified, trained and skilled teachers.”**

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