



Practitioner Researcher

## **A discussion of the quality of education with emphasis on early years in rural India**

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A range of literature has engaged with the efforts made by the Indian government to improve the status of early childhood education in the rural areas of the country. Studies show that, despite some improvements, there remains much to bring about significant change. This paper will explore four main questions: (i) the condition of early childhood education in India immediately post-independence; (ii) what measures have been taken by successive governments to improve the status of early childhood education; (iii) what is the current scenario of early childhood education in rural India; and (iv) what can be done to bring about further improvements in rural education?

### ***What was the condition of early childhood education in rural India post-independence?***

According to Shirname (2007), at the time of independence in 1947, Indian education was characterised as not only being small, but also showing many structural imbalances, both interregional and intra-regional. Only 14% of the population was deemed literate at that time, with one out of three children enrolled in a primary school. Hence, the need for pre-primary and primary universal education was seen as vital for successful nation building. At the time of adopting the constitution in 1950, the proclaimed aim was the Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE), to be implemented by 1960. However, this was quickly realised as far too ambitious a goal, keeping in mind the limited educational infrastructure in the country at that time. As Aggarwal (2002) states, even in 1944, the report of the Central Advisory Board of Education on Post-War Educational Development in India recommended that pre-primary education should be an essential addition to any national system of education, although the object of this report was to give children a social experience, rather than formal education.

By 1950/51, 303 pre-primary schools were set up in urban and rural areas, which rose to 3500 by 1955-56, covering nearly 28,300 students. However, urgent attention for other areas of education, like higher education, necessitated more expenditure, and thus pre-primary education was no longer a priority. The Committee on Pre-Primary Education in Mysore state, set up in 1961, reported that the lack of funding, especially for education in rural areas, was mainly responsible for the low level of achievement in education generally. Widespread provision of facilities in the pre-primary sector was needed, it was claimed, to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor, and between urban and rural children. This was followed by the setting up of the Report of Education Commission in 1964-66, which recorded two controversial views on the subject of pre-primary education: one suggested qualitative improvements and the other quantitative improvements to cater for the large proportion of children in this age group.

### ***Improvements made to the status of education in India***

According to Kaul, Mathur, Kohli and Chadha (2012), as early childhood education (ECE) started to gain grounds in India, the government drafted several policies to support ECE. One of these being *The National Policy on Education* (1986, then revised in 1992), which considers ECE to be a crucial



component in the development of human resources. It advocates for play as important in ECE and joyful teaching/learning at this level, without emphasis on formal teaching. *The National Policy for the Child* (1974) considered the state to be responsible for the growth and development of the child, both before and after birth, to ensure optimum conditions for children's balanced development. *The National Plan of Action* (1992) aimed at the protection, survival and growth of children. Finally, *the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act* (RTE, 2009) was released. Although the 2009 act provided free and compulsory education to children between 6 and 14 years, it made a provision for ECE under section 11 by stating that children above the age of 3 years should be provided free education until they reach the age of 6 years, to prepare them for elementary education. The *Constitution of India (Amended Article 45)* included the age group below 6 years and made a provision for the state to provide free education to all children up to the age of 6 years.

According to the National University of Educational Planning and Administration (2014), the purpose of all these policies for ECE was expansion; equity and inclusion; excellence and employability. For the expansion of ECE services, the government initiated the *Integrated Child Development Scheme* (ICDS), which aimed at providing early childhood education to all children and breaking the vicious circle of malnutrition, reduced learning capacity and mortality by improving the physical, nutritional, emotional and psychological support for children. For achieving equity and inclusion at elementary level in rural areas, the central government, in partnership with the state government, introduced the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA). Its aims were: (i) all children to go to school; (ii) to bridge all social and gender inequality gaps; (iii) universal retention; and (iv) education of satisfactory quality.

To enhance retention and attendance in schools, the government introduced the Mid-Day Meal Scheme in primary schools to improve the nutritional levels of children. Although these policies and measures were introduced with a view to improve education qualitatively and quantitatively, not many addressed the importance of early intervention of education in the formative years of children between 0-6 years old. The importance of a proper curriculum framework in ECE is not included in these policies. Yet, a curriculum is the basis for building educational capacity. As the *National Council of Educational Research and Training* (NCERT) (2006) explains, these policies do not reach the small marginalised groups in the rural and tribal areas. There appears to be no provision for disabled children, children with special needs and other diverse groups. There is also a lack of adequate information on these services available to make them accessible, and no provision to evaluate their performance (NCERT, 2006). The main reason for this, according to the NCERT, is that there is no single body or agency responsible for the implementation and evaluation of these policies and no plan to alter the situation with insufficient funding for delegation of responsibilities to implement these policies.

### ***What is the current scenario of early childhood education in rural India?***

According to the Centre for International Higher Education (2012), under the SSA scheme launched by the government of India, Rs. 21,000/crore [ten million] was sanctioned in the 11th Five-Year Plan. Progress through this amount under the SSA scheme was made by giving consent for opening up new primary and upper primary schools in all states, the construction of additional toilets and classrooms, providing drinking water facilities, and creating judicial numbers of teachers. However, this did not improve the learning standards of children in schools. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2014), a governing body that evaluates the performance of education in rural India every year, visited 577 rural districts, 30 randomly selected villages in each district, and 20 randomly selected households in each village, and questioned children between the age of 3 to 16 in the household in that particular year. Their report stated the following: (i) 96.7% of the children were enrolled in schools in rural India, but at the time of the visit at any random day through September, October and November, only 71% of the children actually attended school. There was, however, a lot of variation in the daily attendance record. Further, a consistent increase in the enrolment rates in private schools, rather than government schools could be observed, with the percentage rising from 18.7% in 2006 to 30.8% in 2014. It was found that (ii) only 49%



of the schools complied with prescribed teacher to student ratios. Further, (iii) only 72.8% of the schools complied with classroom to teacher ratio norms, which meant that there were less teachers than the given number of classrooms. (iv) In only 75.6% of the schools were drinking water facilities available, and (v) only 65.2% of the schools had usable toilets; 55.7% had a usable separate girls' toilet. Of the assessed children, (vi) only 23.6% of Std. 2, which is the age of 6, could read Std. 1 textbooks that are for children aged 5. Close to 20% of the students of Std. 2 could not recognize numbers from 1-9. This means that quality teaching and learning did not take place in Std. 1. As reading is a foundation skill, without being able to read well, a child cannot progress. Thus, this report clearly states the pitiful condition of education in rural India. The reason for this low quality teaching and learning in rural schools is attributed to various reasons.

Some of the reasons for the poor conditions and subsequent performance of schools were: (i) a lack of basic infrastructure, such as a proper school building, sufficient classrooms and furniture, and a lack of books and stationery. (ii) Low income and under-trained teachers. The salaries of teachers were so meagre that teachers were deterred from teaching in rural schools. Teachers were also found not to be sufficiently trained, which strongly affected the learning of children. Further, (iii) a lack of transportation facilities to enable children in remote villages to reach schools was identified, as well as (iv) a lack of basic amenities, like toilets, drinking water and others, as indicated above. Finally, (v) a lack of public awareness in the rural areas of the government schemes, such as free education to all children and mid-day meal schemes, due to the existing lack of education in the rural public, which hinders them from finding out information about these schemes on their own. Hence, adults do not encourage their children to go to school. These are some of the hindrances that come in the way of spreading education to children in rural India.

### ***What can be done further to bring about improvement in rural education?***

Probably most scholars and researchers in education in India, and in most parts of the world for that matter, will agree that, to make a government program/policy successful, a sufficient amount of investment needs to be pumped in. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (2006) is of the opinion that there will have to be a vast enhancement in resource allocation. Aggarwal (2002) suggests that, although there is a substantial amount of schools in remote villages, many lack basic facilities. Hence, more allocation should be provided to them to improve their quality of service, rather than neglecting them. The National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA) (2014) states that, in order to provide good quality infrastructure to rural schools, like play materials, benches and chairs, blackboards etc., capital is required, and thus the government has to fund its policies adequately to achieve the desired results. There is no denial that money is required to improve the quality of education, but allocation alone is not enough. According to the NUEPA, one has to make sure the funds allocated are being put to judicious use by the states or the concerned local authorities. For this, it is important to delegate some authority to oversee the allocation of resources, budget and utilities, and evaluate if the funds are yielding good results.

Another recommendation made by Kaul et al. (2012) is to bring ECE under the ambit of the RTE Act 2010, since the RTE act covers only children from 6-14 years old. By doing so, any provisions made for ECE will have far-reaching effects, as the spread of RTE is vast. However, if ECE is to be included under the RTE act, it means that the scope of RTE will increase further and may lead to loopholes, such as non-compliance or non-implementation of certain features of ECE.

The National Council of Educational Research and Training (2006) suggests that all the policies implemented by the government should come under one core framework, so that it is easy to regulate them all, since all will have to follow the same guidelines, norms and standards. This will help in keeping a check on qualitative achievements of the policies, instead of only quantitative achievements. Although this is possible, it also means that all sectors, such as private, public and NGOs, will have to follow



standard guidelines, potentially removing the freedom to focus on their own areas of strength, which might lead to substantial changes.

According to Ward (2006), two major elements of infrastructure in rural areas are electricity and creating a literate environment. It is very important to provide electricity in schools, especially in night schools, residences and other public utility services, like libraries and parks. A literate environment means making literature materials available through setting up libraries, supply of newspapers, and other educational periodicals accessible to villagers and children so that the level of illiteracy can be reduced. Another suggestion put forth by Das (2003) is that, as the early childhood period is considered to be the formative years for physical, social, emotional and cognitive development, it is very important that a holistic curriculum is developed so that children are encouraged to come to school and parents are satisfied with the quality of learning taking place.

UNESCO (2001) has further made important suggestions for pre-primary teachers. It suggests that: (i) more teachers should be recruited from the block level, which is smaller in area and scope than the district level, for pre-primary teaching, so that rural women also get a chance to train and find employment. Problems such as transportation should be addressed simultaneously. (ii) There should be transparency in the recruitment process, so that there is more accountability from teachers. (iii) Induction training should be given to both qualified and unqualified teachers from established institutions, so that a standard quality of teaching is maintained. However, this suggestion will only be effective if the training given is free of cost and easily accessible.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, it can be said that, for successful implementation of education in vast rural India, where the majority of the population resides, quantity as well as quality in policies and measures are required. Both the central and the state government, along with the local governing bodies, have to collectively take responsibility for tackling such an onerous task. As the country is so large, there will be legislative and technical glitches, but with proper and sincere execution of policies, these glitches can hopefully be overcome.

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