

2020 Vision

Improving secondary education is not just a numbers game

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Despite the importance of secondary education in preparing young people for higher education and the world of work, little has been done in the last few decades to improve the overall quality of our secondary schools. The recent launching of the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, to provide good quality education to all young people in the age-group 14-18 years by 2020 is therefore to be welcomed.

Though universalising secondary education by 2020 is totally unrealistic, we should at least provide a reasonably good quality education to most students by this date. In this connection, what can we learn from the national experience of attempting to universalise primary and elementary education through similar large-scale government schemes like the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)?

In terms of physical facilities and learning materials, we have better schools than before and are closing in on the goal of getting all our elementary school-going age children into school. But these successes have been overshadowed by the tragic failure of most of our schools to ensure that students acquire even the most rudimentary competencies in reading, writing and mathematics. For example, the large-scale Annual Status Of Education Report (Rural) indicated that in 2008, about two-thirds of students in Stds3-5 in rural government schools were unable to even read aloud fluently –not necessarily understand - a short Std 2–level story.

If this is the net result of 15 years of large-scale government schemes to improve the quality of primary and elementary education, will the RMSA scheme fare any better? By 2020, will all secondary schools have

computers, but pass out millions of students with extremely limited knowledge and skills? What can be learnt from the failure of DPEP and SSA to make a significant improvement in the learning of elementary school students?

A large part of this failure can be attributed to those responsible for the administration of the large-scale schemes of DPEP and SSA. Despite DPEP starting in the mid-nineties, and despite a huge amount of empirical evidence showing very limited learning in our schools, it was only a few years ago that educational administrators started to take the issue of improving children's learning seriously.

Most educational administrators had an extremely limited view of what to do to improve classroom teaching and learning. Since discussions and manuals on universalising elementary education began with provision of schooling, enrolment and retention, and ended with improvement of children's learning, some administrators mistakenly felt that implementation in the field had to follow this sequence. The suggestion that focusing on improving teaching and learning first could in fact significantly improve enrolment and retention came as a revelation to administrators from the Bihar Education Project, the first large-scale primary education scheme which began in the early nineties.

The RMSA scheme should therefore begin immediately to ascertain what it is that our secondary school students are learning, and then give the topmost priority to making immediate and significant improvements in this area. We should not be lulled into any false complacency about standards of school education because of the spectacular increases in the marks obtained by students in some recent board examinations. This inflation of

marks is due to political and other non-academic considerations. The limited available evidence indicates that a large proportion of secondary school students in India, predominantly from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, have very poor command of language, especially English, and mathematics skills. This should not surprise us, given that these students have acquired very limited language and mathematics skills in their elementary schools.

What is required is that all states should immediately undertake quick and reliable studies to gauge the subject matter knowledge of students – in science, for example, to ascertain students' understanding of scientific principles and ability to apply this knowledge, and not test their ability to recall facts from their textbooks. We need to understand the magnitude of the task, and take appropriate measures like providing bridge courses and remedial programmes for students. We do not want RMSA educational administrators in 2020 admitting that they were unaware that many students were completing high school or higher secondary education without acquiring even primary school competencies.

A similar exercise needs to be simultaneously undertaken to understand the level of subject matter competence of our secondary school teachers. There is clear evidence that many primary school teachers, some with graduate and postgraduate degrees, have not themselves acquired even the basic competencies that Class 4 and Class 5 students are expected to know. Despite various recommendations regarding improving the subject matter competence of elementary school teachers, one of the most serious deficiencies in the SSA programme has been the lack of any serious attempt to deal with this issue. How can we possibly expect students to learn English and mathematics from teachers who themselves find it difficult to speak English or do simple arithmetic problems?

Significant improvements in subject matter competence of students is only part of the larger process of providing quality secondary education, including vocational education and examination reform, as articulated in the 2005 National Curriculum Framework. And therefore, while the teacher knowledge studies are bound to reveal grave deficiencies in various subject areas, improving their understanding of subject matter should form only part of the continuing education of teachers. But providing merely 5 days of inservice training every year to all teachers and principals, as recommended in the RMSA scheme, will certainly not equip them to undertake the great national mission of providing good quality secondary education for most young people by 2020.

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