

Quality Education at Elementary Level

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ABSTRACT: The main objective of this paper is to analyse the quality of education imparted to students at elementary (primary and Upper primary) level in India. Elementary education is the first step towards a bright future in a student's life. Elementary schools lay down the foundation of a child's skills, attitude, abilities and capabilities which expedite his/her overall development. This is the level at which a child learns the basics, for instance reading, writing and learning. Hence, it becomes essential to oversee the quality of education received by the children, identify the shortcomings and, plan and implement strategies and policies that might help in removing these shortcomings. This paper aims at performing a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) Analysis of the quality of elementary education in India since 1950s. This has been facilitated by various parameters such as Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), access to schools, pupil-teacher ratio, infrastructure, curriculum, student composition, financing, linguistic and mathematical abilities, etc. Secondary data has been used in this paper, namely Annual Report Part-I 2014-15, Education For all: Towards Quality and Equity, Educational Statistics at a Glance 2014 and Educational Statistics at a Glance 2016 of the Ministry of Human Resource Development. National Report on Quality Intervention in Elementary Schools and Reports of Educational Survey Division of the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT) have also been referred to.

KEYWORDS: Elementary Education, Quality Education, NCERT, SSA, RTE.

INTRODUCTION:

“All the wealth of the world cannot help one little Indian village if the people are not taught to help themselves. Our work should be mainly educational, both moral and intellectual.”

- Swami Vivekananda

Education is confined not only to acquiring knowledge, but it also includes learning how to practically apply that knowledge for self-development, as well as for development of the society. Economic and social development of a country depends upon the quality of

education its citizens are receiving. That is why after independence India focussed on universalising education and the first step was Education Policy, 1968. It was revised in 1986 and again in 2005 to keep up with the changing times. But the major change came with the turn of the century, when the focus was shifted to making education more equitable and inclusive.

CONCEPT OF QUALITY EDUCATION: After Independence, major focus of India has been on social and economic development, and for both, education is an indispensable part. “Education should not only be available and accessible but also acceptable and adaptable.” (Right to Education Project)

Quality is not a static but a dynamic concept, which has evolved throughout the years and has even changed with the turn of the century. Some decades back, the concept of quality education was confined to operational schools within reach, with teachers having knowledge of just limited subjects. Globalisation has broken down these confines, expanding the scope of quality education many folds. The term ‘infrastructure’ has expanded and is now no longer limited to just the building, classrooms or teachers. The limited number of subjects that had been taught earlier has expanded exponentially due to the evolving dynamic requirements.

There are two concepts of quality education: a narrow and a broad concept. According to the narrow concept, as for most of parents and students, quality in education means simply improving and raising the level of academic performance, which is usually measured in terms of test scores. While the broader concept defines quality education as enhancing children’s skills, making theoretical education more practical and relevant to day-to-day life, imparting moral values, nurturing creativity, and physical as well as emotional development.

PARAMETERS: Student Composition-Increase in the number of schools, various awareness programmes and campaigns and incentives by the government and NGOs have pushed people towards enrolling their children into schools. The numbers of children belonging to reserved communities enrolled in elementary classes has grown overtime. Also, girls have surpassed the number of boys enrolled in eighth class. This is a big step towards equitable education for a society where even letting girls step out of the house has been a taboo for centuries.

Gross Enrolment Ratio:

	All			Scheduled Castes			Scheduled Tribes		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Primary(I-V)	98.1	100.6	99.3	110.8	111.2	111.5	111.9	108.8	110.2
Upper Primary(VI-VIII)	84.9	90.3	87.4	93.2	96.5	94.8	86.5	85.7	86.1

Gross Enrolment Ratio (Educational Statistics at a Glance , 2014)

	All			Scheduled Castes			Scheduled Tribes		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Primary(I-V)	67223	62769	129992	13469	12614	26083	7458	6994	14452
Upper Primary(VI-VIII)	33746	32035	65780	6568	6257	12825	3280	3121	6401

Enrolment in Schools (in Thousands) (Educational Statistics at a Glance , 2014)

Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is the total student enrolment in a given level of education, regardless of age, expressed as percentage of the corresponding eligible official age group population in a given school year.

No doubt Table 1. Shows a very good picture of GER, showing satisfactory GER in all categories, even among students from SC and ST categories However, a look at table two suggests that the reality is somewhat different. It is visible that the dropout rates of students, when they shift from primary to upper primary, are very high. This is not a healthy indicator. This can be attributed to factors like lack of access in the form of unavailability of teaching staff, unwillingness on the part of the students to learn or on the part of the parents to send their children to schools, etc.

AccessTo Schools

Type	Number of schools
Primary(I-V)	8,58,916
Upper Primary(VI-VIII)	5,89,796
Elementary(I-VIII)	14,48,712

Number of Schools (Education For All, 2014)

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan has been the major factor of easing the way to the classrooms for children, especially in rural areas. Since its commencement, 97% of the schools that had been sanctioned by the government have been built and made operational, thus making education more accessible. According to statistics, 98% rural inhabitants have primary schools within a kilometre and 96% have upper primary schools within three kilometres.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

Year	Primary	Upper Primary
1950-51	538	86
1990-91	1616	1073
2014-15	2670	2560

Number of Teachers (in Thousands) (Educational Statistics at a Glance , 2014)

Year	Primary	Upper Primary
1950-51	24	20
1990-91	43	37
2009-10	42	34

Pupil- Teacher Ratio (Educational Statistics at a Glance , 2014)

Pupil-Teacher ratio is the average number of pupils per teacher at a specific level of education in a given school-year. The pupil-teacher ratio was earlier very low due to fewer students as well as very few teachers. But with the advent of time, as the people became aware of the merits of education and knowledge, the number of students grew and a greater need for teachers was realised, since the teachers had to handle a large number of students at once. As per RTE, this ratio should be 30:1, but in reality it still is much more than it should be, which is quite problematic.

Attendance:

Students' attendance has been a matter of concern for quite some time now. Just 55% of the States/UTs report good attendance of students. Steps to improve the attendance at elementary level are being taken in some States and Union Territories, the primary step being interaction with the parents/guardians.

Linguistic and mathematical ability:

As visible in the above bar chart, southern states tend to perform better in language and mathematics, since emphasis is laid on language from the early years of a child's life. Most of the states which are below the national average are not very far behind, except a few.

Infrastructure

	Work Completed	Work In Progress	Total
School Buildings	280060	16440	296500
Additional Classrooms	1629990	156506	1786496
Drinking Water Facilities	225440	2066	227506
Toilets	717036	73917	790953

Infrastructure Facilities in Schools (MHRD, 2014-15)

Infrastructure plays a crucial role and also has a significant impact on enrolment, attendance and retention of children in the school. In addition to the basic infrastructure such as buildings, classrooms and toilets, infrastructure also covers laboratories, smart classes and computer facilities among others.

Financing:

	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
States/ U.T.	514	648.3	763.9
Centre	181.2	219.4	222.7
Total	695.2	867.7	986.6

Expenditure on Elementary Education by Different Departments, in Billions (Education For All, 2014)

	GOI Budget Allocation	GOI Release	Expenditure(State Share)
2004-05	50.8	51.1	65.9
2009-10	131.0	127.8	210.4
2012-13	238.8	238.4	442.8

Central Budget Allocation for SSA Programme, in Billions (Education For All, 2014)

Table – gives a clear picture that expenditure on elementary education by both, the centre and the state governments, is increasing every year. This shows the enormous focus of government towards education. These funds are further spent on improving infrastructure, training programmes for teachers, providing free of cost study material to those in need and to organise extra-curricular activities for all-round development of the children.

Above, the parameters which already exist in our education system have been discussed and a need to revise them to ensure quality is felt. Following are the initiatives by the government to impart quality education at elementary level that aim at providing learning opportunities to all.

Inclusiveness-Here inclusiveness will be discussed in respect of bridging gender gaps and social category gaps.

Sarva Siksha Abhiyan attempts to reach out to girls belonging to SC, ST and Muslim minority. It also gives special attention to urban deprived girls, prepares gender sensitive curriculum, syllabus and text books, focuses on infrastructure and performs many other integral functions. Under SSA several programmes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao have been launched.

Under Sarva Siksha Abhiyan a special group named CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS (CWSN) has been formed, irrespective of community, category or degree of disability. These children are provided meaningful education, which does not let their disability prove to be a hindrance for them. It also arranges special training programmes for these children.

Training for Teachers-The primary step is to make teacher available, then to train them. SSA provides for annual in-service training up to 20 days for all teachers. There is also a 10 day training programme for headmasters.

Curriculum-There have been many changes in curriculum as a part of SSA. Many states have been adopting the CCE (Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation) pattern of assessment whereby every child's learning process is examined and tracked continually, throughout the year. This mode is not stressful and threatening for children. Though, as per a circular from CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education) dated 31/01/17 remodelled assessment structure has been introduced that will be effective from the Academic year 2017-18, that targets the upper primary classes. The curriculum is being changed after every few years to ensure that the children are kept-up with the changing times.

SWOT ANALYSIS:

Upon deliberations, we reached the conclusion that the strengths and opportunities that would benefit the students as well as the nation are not being tapped properly.

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Gross Enrolment Ratio(GER)	Pupil-Teacher Ratio	Access to Schools	Dropout Rates
Composition of Students	Untrained Teachers	Linguistic and Mathematical Abilities	Infrastructure
	Curriculum	Inclusiveness and Equity	

The GER has increased multiple folds since 1950 with elementary GER being 96.9% for the year 2014-15. This is a sharp increase that has been recorded. Girl, who earlier did not constitute even half of the class as the boys, have now surpassed them. Though, the scenario might differ geographically, according to the national average, girls comprise 53% of all the elementary students as against 47% of boys.

The prescribed standard for pupil-teacher ratio by SSA is 30:1 but in primary it actually was 42:1 in the academic year 2009-10. Such a large number of students are difficult to handle single-handedly, especially since each of them requires special attention as these are the base-building years of their life. Also, all the teachers at elementary level neither have right attitude towards education, nor do they have the ability to teach. They lack the finesse required to interact with the children or to control them. Moreover, the curriculum just focuses on theory, practicality of studies are ignored. It should be designed in a manner that it encourages student participation, focuses on physical fitness, inculcates moral and cultural values and teaches equality, all at the same time.

According to the government reports, 97% of the sanctioned schools under SSA have been made operational and on an average the citizens have an elementary school within the reach of three kilometres. The truth is however quite different, since the government reports might amplify their works. Still, a very high GER suggests that there is not much discrepancy, though, not all the population still has access to schooling. For instance, in Jammu and

Kashmir students are unable to attend schools because of the on-going tensions, and those in tribal areas are, due to social and geographical constraints are bound to their homes. These cases reflect the need for making education more accessible and inclusive. The language and mathematical ability of children differ geographically. Southern states tend to perform better in this respect. Though, statistics donot show much difference with the national average for a majority of the states.

Dropout rates in upper primary are so high, that the GER of upper primary is around half of the primary classes. This can be attributed to poor infrastructure in the form of lack of proper classrooms, toilet facilities and drinking water facilities. Social problems such as poverty also influence the GER of upper primary as parents from economically backward families prefer to engage their children in child labour than to send them to schools. No doubt the government has taken a lot of measures to increase GER but none of them have been properly implemented. The food provided under the Mid-day meal scheme, which is the main incentive for the rural and urban poor, is unhygienic and undercooked which is affecting the health of the students. Also, it has been decided to link it with Aadhar Cards, which not all of the students have.

POLICY SUGGESTIONS: Following are some suggestions to improve elementary education:

- Policy formulation should be done through both the approaches, i.e. top-down and bottom up, to ensure that all the parameters are taken into consideration that would enable effective implementation.
- All the stakeholders of education in our society should be involved, especially the weaker sections.
- Children should be made interested in learning by engaging them in creative activities, in school or after school.
- Expenditure on education should be increased, which is a meagre 2% of our annual budget while departments like defence get more than 15% of the annual budget.
- Standards should be set at par with world standards and efforts should be made to achieve them.
- Co-ordination with agencies at the world level should be increased for funding and advancement in technology with the help of innovative intellectual ideas.

- Higher education should too be taken into purview for policy making, especially for girls to promote equality and women empowerment.
- The attitude of the teachers should be altered and moulded in such a way that it becomes more student-friendly.
- Tribal areas, villages and backward classes should be targeted.
- Along with education, health issues should also be taken into consideration.

CONCLUSION: In addition to the parameters and suggestions discussed in this paper, the foremost, and probably the most important, is to alter the way our society perceives education. In India, majority of parents conceive education as a mere tool to land a job. Their only expectation from their children is for them to score good grades in their examinations. They don't even want to consider the other facets of education. Our government is spending funds worth crores of Rupees on education not to help students perform well in their examinations, but to make them able and competent. The right attitude of teachers and parents towards elementary education will decide the future condition of secondary and higher education, which in turn will influence the quality of education.

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