

EQUITABLE SCHOOL EDUCATION : FOUNDATION FOR SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY

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Abstract :At the outset, by way of disclaimer, this paper is not referring to schools and colleges in India that the elite have access to but those availed of by the poor and the deprived sections of society. There is a huge disparity between elite schools and those the poor go to. In European countries such as United Kingdom ,Germany , France , most parents send their children to state run schools.

Keywords:Economic Prosperity , Skill Development , Equitable School Education .

INTRODUCTION

In contrast, the poor in India do not wish to send their children to government run schools seeing their abysmal performance despite provision for free food, school uniforms and books.

Abysmal State of School Education

It is expected that the skills required to find a job would follow a five years college education. This unfortunately is not the case. The problem however does not lie in higher education alone which is supposed to be the icing on the cake. We are sitting on a time bomb if those going to school find that their education has not helped them to find employment. A study done by Pratham in rural India in 2004 and published in January 2015 found that one in every five Class two students could not identify numbers up to nine while half the students in Class five could not read a text prescribed for Class two. The ability to read English showed a decline. Just 46.8% of class eight students could read simple sentences in English in 2014, a decline from 60% in 2009. According to UNICEF, in 2013 around 42% of Indian children enrolled in schools dropout before completing grade eight. In a study done of the Municipal schools of Mumbai by Praja in 2014 majority of parents felt that the quality of education provided in municipal schools was not good. 30% felt that future scope for students studying in municipal schools is very limited. In the last five years (2009-10 to 2013-14), 51,649 children have dropped out of Municipal Schools, despite the fact that in the corresponding five years the Municipal Budget allocation to the Education department more than doubled from Rs.1255 crores to Rs.2,534 crores. The Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act,2009 provides the right to education and children admitted to a school cannot be held back till the completion of elementary education. Promotion to the next class is therefore no indication of the learning outcomes. A glance of how poorly children from municipal schools fare as compared to children from private aided and unaided schools demonstrates the poor performance of students from municipal schools. In the State run scholarship exams only 1.3% and 0.1% Municipal school students receive scholarships in the 4th and 7th standard ,while 9.4% and 8.1% students from other schools receive scholarships. The Mumbai Municipal Corporation gives twenty seven free items to every child, from notebooks to umbrellas and raincoats. Children are provided with flavored milk and a mid-day meal. No fees are charged. Despite this, there is a massive dropout rate in municipal schools. Those who drop out or are not interested could be given an opportunity to acquire some skills which could be taught at higher secondary school levels. Such training would make it easier to find a dignified place in the job market and perhaps a more remunerative one. Hence the need for monitoring concrete learning outcomes more particularly ensuring that education is related to the job market with the aim that students can hit the job market running.

The ability of students to succeed involves confidence of being able to learn. Negative attitudes such as: “I will not be able to do it.”... “no one in my family is educated”... “my friends and society treat me differently ..I cannot solve maths...I will never be able to compete with other students and well to do students with well educated parents” impair problem solving abilities. A child weighed down with such attitudes will have to overcome psychological barriers to solving problems. What may yet be possible is rote learning. Hence a equitable society free from prejudices and discrimination is a sine qua non for successful learning which is a precursor to skill development.

From Charity To Rights

We need to move from a charity approach to a rights approach when it comes to reaching out to children and the youth from the economically and socially weaker sections. According to the Confederation of Indian Industry , poverty and low levels of education are the biggest barriers for decent employment opportunities for the youth. School Education becoming a Fundamental Right in 2002, The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act 2009 , Corporate Social Responsibility in the amended Companies Act, 2013 have been positive milestones. The 12th five year plan has acknowledged the lacunae in the school education system and provided for various remedial steps to improve learning outcomes including initiatives for skill development. An example of encouraging endeavors at the high school level under the ‘ National Skills Qualification Framework’ initiated under the 12th five year plan was undertaken by the Wadhvani foundation called the ‘skill development network , in Haryana in 2012. In this program children from class nine to twelve were trained in functional English and job oriented courses such as IT, Security, Retail, Physical Education , Beauty and Wellness. Field visits, guest lectures and on the job training constituted an important part of their training and all trained students got campus job offers in places such as L&T and Big Bazaar. This program not only introduced skill based learning but also brought down the drop out rate. Around 13618 students of 140 schools benefitted from this program in 2013-14.

Skill Based Training For School Dropouts

School dropouts could be easily trained if training facilities were made available on a large scale as part of government policy. On the one hand there is a shortage of good plumbers, electricians, domestic help, caretaker for babies , the aged, fitness trainers and many other specialized services and yet on the other hand there are so many unemployed. There is a mismatch between the type of skills that a large section of society needs and the ability to provide services of an assured decent quality. The skills if any being imparted through schools and colleges are woefully inadequate for the majority of the population. To generate such jobs it is necessary to have : 1. Dignity of Labour as a value that society cherishes; 2. Skill based training to upgrade the quality of service which starts at high school and 3. A business model enabling such employments earn a decent income. The upgrading of skills, societies approval and encouragement for such professions, training courses to enable the persons to have a skill based diploma will generate better quality services which in turn provide better wages. These professions should be regulated and minimum wages ensured with the government providing for social security. This could generate quality employment . There is an urgent need to create and replicate successful business models for various services required at a mass scale such as transport, food supply, care of children and the aged and infirm which are in demand by large number of families and individuals across the country. For example, if a customer needs a taxi a phone call or SMS would ensure its availability at a premium not too high yet timely ,safe and comfortable. The person who owns the taxi and part of this larger network will be assured of continuous customers.

Apart from the organized sector requiring these services, these services are required in the unorganized sector and it is the unorganized sector that devalues these jobs and does not give them the value and remuneration they deserve. There could be various certificate courses which assure a certain level of competence and command higher remuneration. In countries such as Australia and South Korea 25-40% of high school students opt for vocational courses which get them ready for employment. Complementary to college education, these students could go through formal training courses which are certified and assure a good level of competence in the area chosen. Individuals who require such services, depend on luck to find a good crèche for their child, caretakers for the aged etc. Here again what is being refereed to are not the fancy play schools and crèches which already exist for the well to do but those which cater to a large section of people belonging even to the lower income groups, creating a mass market . If such models are set up and replicated, not only will it lead to employment and economic prosperity but cater to various demands of a changing society in urban India. Contemporary societies see more nuclear families, where increasing

number of women go out to work. Hence, the need for services such as day care and ready to eat /make foods. Unfortunately these tasks have been made the prerogative of the women in most families because of the patriarchal society which we still live in.

Toll On Higher Education

The abysmal learning outcomes mentioned above, take a toll on the learning that takes place in higher education when children from these schools join colleges. The college syllabus is based on the expected learning outcomes that the students should have acquired at the school level. Teachers have to cover the syllabus and if students are way below being able to comprehend the subject because of poor reading and writing skills, grasp of subjects taught at school level especially mathematics, the problem becomes insurmountable. A classroom of over 100 students compounds the problem. Thus neither is the teacher able to do justice to the students nor are the students able to take full benefits of the teaching-learning process. Skill development requires interactive learning methods whose scope is greatly reduced when class size is large.

With the implementation of the 6th pay commission recommendations, the lot of permanent teachers has improved financially and teaching has become a more lucrative profession than before. Yet there is a need for many more teachers whose skills are upgraded to reach out to this big sea of students joining college with handicaps mentioned above. We will require more teachers to bridge this knowledge gap by equipping students with the requisite skills so that they benefit from the system of higher education even in a situation where the teacher-student ratio in the classroom remains at the present levels,.

Pravin Krishna in his recent article noted the scale of the problem and to use his own words, “ There are around 500 million Indians under 20 years of age and will be of working age in the next 20years. This calls for a creation of about a million new jobs each month to provide them gainful employment”. Skills that need to be acquired at different stages of learning should be well defined and outcomes should be measured in relation to employability whether in industry or as an entrepreneur. Persons from the job market should be an integral part of curriculum designing from the high school level itself. A reorientation of the definition of success and failure in the education system is essential as dropping out of school isn’t failure if a person is able to earn a living and contribute to a society valuing the dignity of labour. School teachers should be better paid and made accountable. The low learning outcomes at school level and the drop out rates are worrisome. There are many stake holders in the mission of improving learning to make our youth employable. It is not the job of the academic institution alone but the interest of the industry also to see that youth are well trained to be able to perform the functions required in industry so as to create economic prosperity for all.

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