

EDUCATION FOR ALL – MID DECADE ASSESSMENT

Reaffirming the Vision for Quality and Equality in Education

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Preface

The World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal approved a comprehensive vision of Education for All (EFA) to be achieved by 2015 based on the six goals. The six goals relate to the areas of early childhood care and education, universalising primary education, gender, youth and adolescents, adult education and quality of education. The main focus is on 'reaching the unreached' for ensuring complete coverage of education. With this background the *Mid- Decade Assessment of Education for All* was initiated to take stock of the progress made with respect to EFA Goals. Corresponding to this exercise, a comprehensive review of the progress made with respect to Education for All in India was conducted jointly by Government of India and the National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA).

The present work which is a sequel to the National Report consists of a series of thematic and state review papers. There are nine thematic review papers covering all the six goals including three additional papers on three other themes, namely, Teacher and Teacher Education, Management Strategies for EFA and Financing of EFA in India. These thematic review papers are further followed by a series of analytical papers covering progress of EFA in twenty seven states of India. State reviews attempt to present a quick picture of the current level of progress in each state of India assessing the magnitude of the task involved in achieving EFA goals and projecting a realistic time frame as well as strategies needed to reach the goals. Each thematic review as well as state-specific analytical review paper has been prepared by an established expert in the respective area/state in close collaboration with national and state governments.

The review papers along with the National Report present a comprehensive and disaggregated picture of the progress made towards EFA goals in the country. The papers are coming out at a very opportune time when the Parliament is engaged in debating the legislation to make education for all children a Fundamental Right. While the thematic papers highlight state of development of education with respect to different goals of EFA, the State papers present the diversity of the situation across the country. The whole series would serve as an invaluable independent documentation on various aspects of EFA ranging from early childhood care and education to universal elementary education and adult literacy programmes using authentic data sources accompanied by a review of relevant empirical research.

The whole Project involving the National Report along with the series of thematic and state analytical review papers were conceived and executed by Prof. R.

Govinda, NUEPA who led the entire exercise and would like to thank him profusely for his leadership. Dr. Mona Sedwal who as a part of the Project Team at NUEPA contributed immensely to the whole exercise also deserves appreciation. The Team immensely benefited by the advice given by the Technical Advisory Group set up under the Chairmanship of Professor A.K. Sharma for guiding the entire exercise. I would like to express my sincere thanks and gratitude to Prof. A. K. Sharma for his invaluable guidance. Finally, I would also like to acknowledge the generous financial support provided by UNICEF and UNESCO.

Ved Prakash
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Editorial Note

Indian Constitution directs the State to provide free and compulsory education for all children upto the age of 14. This goal has been pursued by the country for nearly six decades through successive development plans. The last two decades have witnessed significant improvements in children's participation in schooling, accompanied by substantial increase in investments. The recent effort to raise resources for the sector through imposition of an education cess is major effort in that direction. Even though school education has traditionally remained a subject for action by State Governments, Government of India has, during the last two decades following the National Policy on Education – 1986, begun to play a leading role. This culminated in the launching of the national programme of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan in 2001. Despite all these efforts, the final goal of providing quality education for all has eluded the country.

Urgency of reaching the goal has been heightened in recent years due to several national and international developments, including commitments made under the Dakar Framework for Action for providing quality Education for All by 2015, which not only covers primary education but also focus on literacy goals, gender equality and quality concerns. The Dakar Framework of Action listed the following six specific goals to be achieved by all countries.

1. Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
2. Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality.
3. Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes.
4. Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.
5. Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.
6. Improving every aspect of the quality of education, and ensuring their excellence so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

The National Plan of Action for Education for All (2002) in India reflects this sense of urgency felt within the country by proposing to reach the targets much ahead of the international dateline. At the national level, the Constitutional Amendment in 2002 declaring education in the age group 6-14 which corresponds to the elementary education stage of schooling a fundamental right has brought the issue of universal

elementary education (UEE) to the centre stage of public discourse. The country is in the process of drawing up the legislation for effective implementation of the right for translating the constitutional provision into reality. With the progress made in recent years the goal seems to be achievable by the international time frame of 2015. But this requires systematic assessment of the various goals the present exercise is one such effort.

UNESCO has been bringing out annual review of the progress made in moving towards the goal of EFA through the Global Monitoring Report. These assessments do not reflect an encouraging picture of the Indian scene. This is an issue of serious concern for the national leadership as one sixth of the world population lives in India. With around 65% adult literacy rate, there are more around 350 million adult illiterates in the country. This should not be taken to imply that no efforts are being made to meet the challenge of EFA. Besides, the national averages do not fully reflect the diverse reality characterizing educational progress in India. In fact, it is paradoxical that while certain pockets of the country are emerging as the international hub for creating a knowledge society, certain other regions and sections of the population continue to be deprived of even basic education. It is clear that in pursuing EFA goals, not all states and regions of the country are in the same league. The variety is too wide to draw any generalization. While some states have made remarkable progress in education, practically eradicating illiteracy and achieving near universal participation of children in elementary education, several other states continue to remain far from the final goal. What is needed to progress faster in moving towards the 2015 EFA deadline in all parts of the country? This obviously demands an analytical exercise - goalwise as well as statewise.

It is with this objective in view that the present exercise was taken up to make an independent assessment of the progress achieved in different states and with respect to different EFA goals. The present series of papers constitute the outcome of such a comprehensive exercise carried out by independent experts, in collaboration with Central and State Governments. The main purpose of the exercise is to place before policy makers, planners and the civil society as a whole an analytical picture of the progress made towards EFA goals and the challenges ahead for reaching the goals in a realistic fashion.

The exercise consisted of three parts. The first part consisted of presenting an overview of progress in the country with respect to six goals highlighted in the Dakar Declaration. This was largely based on the technical guidelines for assessment prepared by UNESCO. A national report entitled "Education for All Mid-Decade Assessment: Reaching the Unreached" has been prepared and published jointly by NUEPA and Government of India.

The Second Part consists of a series of nine thematic review papers dealing with different dimensions of 'Education for All' keeping in view the Indian context and

priorities. These include: (i) Early Childhood Care and Education; (ii) Universal Elementary Education; (iii) Adult Education; (iv) Towards Gender Equality in Education; (v) Education of Adolescents and Young Adults; (vi) Quality of Education; (vii) teacher and teacher education; (viii) Management Strategies for EFA and (ix) Financing of EFA. Each of these papers has been prepared by an expert or experts in the respective area. The papers were reviewed by another independent expert and revised based on the observations.

The third part consists of analytical papers covering all states of India. Each thematic review as well as state-specific analytical review was prepared by an established expert in the respective area/state in close collaboration with national and state governments. The state level reviews are prepared on lines similar to what was followed for preparing the national review. Each of them deals with comprehensively on all six goals of EFA specified in the Dakar Declaration.

While meeting basic learning needs of the children is at the heart of all educational endeavours, merely expanding the number of schools and getting children into them carry no meaning if the quality of the educational processes is not satisfactory. The National Plan of Action for EFA elaborates several measures being taken in India to improve the quality of basic education provided. Within this context, the review paper by Anita Rampal examines the adequacy of the measures being initiated and the impact these measures have been making on the actual learning and quality. While several factors are likely to influence quality of basic education, the main focus of the review paper is on curriculum, learning material, pedagogic processes and quality of learning.

This elaborate exercise of assessing the progress in EFA should be viewed in the context of repeated assertions by the UNESCO Global Monitoring Report on EFA that Indian is at the risk of not making the global targets with respect to several EFA goals. The findings of the review clearly points out that the situation across the country is very diverse. While some States have registered fast progress on all fronts, some others continue to lag behind. Also in general, access to schooling has improved every where even though much remains to be done with respect to other goals of EFA. It is hoped that the various volumes brought out through the exercise would together present a realistic analysis and a disaggregated picture of the Education for All process and achievements in the country.

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This comprehensive exercise of reviewing the progress of EFA has been done through active involvement and support of a large team of experts and officials from Government of India as well as various State Governments. The exercise was carried out under the constant guidance of the members of the Technical Advisory Group under the leadership of Professor A. K. Sharma. The task could not have been completed without the commitment and support of Professor Ved Prakash, Vice Chancellor, NUEPA. Special thanks are due to Smt. Anita Kaul, Joint Secretary, MHRD, Government of India who played a central role in conceiving and implementing the whole exercise. Financial support for the exercise came from UNICEF and UNESCO; in particular, thanks are due to Mr. Samphe Lhalungpa who took personal interest in ensuring that the Project is completed smoothly. We would like to record our appreciation for the technical support and cooperation given by the NUEPA Publication Unit and for printing and publishing the volumes.

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INTRODUCTION

On our sixtieth Independence Day the government had proposed to set up six thousand 'model' quality schools, one in each block. In addition, the XI Plan also has focused on quality in education in order to empower the poor to participate in the process of growth. In a way it acknowledges that many children go to school but learn very little because *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* has not yet addressed systemic reforms, with a broad based objective of affording equal opportunities and life chances to all children. The Plan thus addresses quality and equity as a long-term goal, to achieve universalisation in secondary education, comparable to that of Kendriya Vidyalayas.

It is significant that issues of quality and equity have again come up in the forefront in policy statements. Indeed, recent research across countries shows that heterogeneity in school quality contributes to increased inequality in educational outcomes; raising overall quality is achieved by reducing inequality of both outcomes and opportunity. Countries, such as Finland, Japan and Korea, have shown that a 'culture of integration' in schools leads

to a 'culture of success', where keeping students in mixed-ability groups together for ten years, without grade retention, helps counteract differences in the cultural resources of their families, and leads to high average attainments for all (Dupriez and Dumay, 2006). Moreover, the experience of school also fundamentally influences pupils in developing their perceptions of what constitutes a fair and equitable society (Gorard, 2006; Green et al, 2006). Socially inclusive schools are seen to exhibit racial, social and religious tolerance, which helps develop greater civic awareness. India needs such an inclusive public school system now more than ever before. A 'selective' approach of providing disproportionate support to only a few 'good quality' government schools is not the most appropriate. Policies that promote islands of 'excellence' are being given up by several countries, in favour of inclusive and mixed ability schooling for higher systemic quality.

A fitting tribute to our children on this occasion would be to enact the long pending law on the Right to Education of equitable quality. Ironically, as the

country has surged ahead with high economic growth, it has lapsed to notify Article 21 A of the 2002 Constitutional amendment, and is even reluctant to enact a central legislation on grounds of 'inadequate funds'. More worrying is the fact that over the past decade, it has sought greater access to education through a highly differentiated school system which compromises on quality for the most disadvantaged.

'Quality' is a popular term in common parlance but may not be simple to delineate in its educational import. For instance how do we look for 'quality' beyond the school building or narrow examination scores of individual students? How is quality tied to the vision of education a country has defined for itself, including the quality of society it aspires for? What conservative policies for 'efficiency' have led to differentiated provision across the world, resulting in highly inequitable quality for different children? On the contrary, how have some countries enhanced the overall quality of their systems? Why is equity seen as a more important

benchmark for quality rather than efficiency?

This paper, in section 2, looks at the vision of education in our national policies, and how, when policy translated into curricular frameworks quality and equality were obscured into 'uniformity', crafting the 'slow/fast' class divide, are dealt with in section 3. Section 4 examines the contours of the present global quality debate and different policies followed by countries to achieve universal schooling. Section 5 reviews research on assessing quality as children's progress, not through competitive tests; Section 6 analyses why equity and not efficiency is a benchmark for quality and how children voice their concerns. Sections 7 and 8 examine the widening quality divide in India and the differentiated participation of different social groups. Section 9 discusses how privilege and the power of money pass for 'quality' in private schools, while Section 10 views the role of transformative curricula for better quality of life, especially in the context of work and education.

POLICY CONCERNS: A VISION OF QUALITY

With a commitment to Universal Elementary Education (UEE), the National Policy on Education (NPE) (Gol, 1986) underscored that the poor quality of schooling demotivated children and parents, while a differential provision hampered universalisation and resulted in unequal outcomes. It called for 'substantial improvement of quality' in every tangible and intangible aspect of the child's educational experience, including the content and process of education, the school building and environment, adequate provision of teachers and a comprehensive programme of teacher education (Gol, 1986:10). "The education system will strive to have all children in whole-time schools of good quality, and till that becomes possible they will be provided opportunities of part time non-formal education" of 'comparable quality' (Gol, 1986:11). Paradoxically, while the NPE reiterated the equalising role of a Common School system, so that children of different socio-economic backgrounds might get opportunities to achieve success comparable to those from the better-off sections of society (Gol, 1986:11), it also promoted well

resourced Navodaya Vidyalayas for the 'high-achievers' and the 'gifted' (Gol, 1986:26). The Ramamurthy Committee (Gol, 1992) had opposed this scheme on grounds of creating inequality, and going beyond 'equal opportunity for access' had called for equality 'in the conditions for success' "to remove prejudices and complexes transmitted through the social environment and the accident of birth" (Gol, 1992, Section 3.6). It recommended that the quality of all government schools be enhanced to transform them into genuine neighbourhood schools, while also making private schools freely accessible.

The Education Commission (Gol, 1966) had articulated a socialist democratic vision of 'quality', where equality of education "is deliberately used to develop more and more potential talent". Warning that "social groups have used education as a prerogative of their rule and as a tool for maintaining their hegemony" (Gol, 1966, Section 1.16), it had strongly recommended the 'neighbourhood school' to "compel the rich, privileged and powerful classes to

take an interest in the system of public education and thereby bring about its early improvement” (Gol, 1966, Section 10.19). It was concerned because schooling tended to “increase social segregation and to perpetuate and widen class distinctions....The position is thus undemocratic and inconsistent with the ideal of an egalitarian society. The children of the masses are compelled to receive sub-standard education ... while the economically privileged parents are able to ‘buy’ good education for their children. This is bad not only for the children of the poor but also for children from the rich and privileged groups. ... By segregating their children, they prevent them from sharing the life and experiences of the children of the poor and coming into contact with the realities of life. In addition to weakening social cohesion, they also render the education of their own children anaemic and incomplete” (Gol, 1966, Section 1.36, 1.37).

The earlier Secondary Education Commission (Gol, 1952:20) had envisioned schools for democratic citizenship, emphasizing that “democracy is based on faith and in the dignity and worth of every single individual”, where the “innate ‘worthfulness’ cannot be eclipsed either by economic or racial or social consideration ” As the first commission on school education of a country carved out of a traumatic partition, it sought education for patriotism and

cooperation, based on “an openness of mind and largeness of heart”, and not through the “dragooning of different beliefs, ideas, tastes and interests into uniformity, which may possibly make for efficiency in a narrow and inferior sense, but inevitably impoverish life and curb the free expression of the human spirit.” It envisioned schools with a passion for social justice “*inspired by the faith that social purposes are worth striving for, that life in a democratic set up is not playing for one’s own hand but calls for a strenuous endeavour to equalize opportunities for all, and an unremitting fight for justice for the under-privileged*” (Gol, 1952:21; italics added).

‘Equality’ in Policy Translates to ‘Uniformity’ in the Curriculum

The challenge of translating the strong policy vision of equality into a curricular framework, however, remained unanswered, and a series of National Curriculum Framework (NCF) documents (NCERT, 1975; NCERT, 1988; NCERT, 2000) reflected no consonant conceptions of what must form a democratic and ‘equalising’ curriculum. Doubts and tensions appeared in the 1975 document, which stated that “For a vast country like ours with its diversity of languages, social customs, manners, mores and uneven economic development, the needs and demands of individuals and society will have differential pulls on the school curriculum... *For the sake of uniformity*

of standards and of national identity, therefore it is necessary to develop a common curriculum within a broad framework of acceptable principles and values” (Section 2.1; italics added). It admitted that the ‘internal transformation’ of education to address the life, needs and aspirations of the nation was increasingly difficult under the pressure of growing numbers of children, and owing to ‘rigid postures and orthodox attitudes’.

Curricula have circumvented policy commitments in most nation states across the world. The “modern education, despite its egalitarian rhetoric, was never designed to provide equal or even appropriate education for all”, as it was created by and for the centre, to consolidate its power, through peripheralism of the majority (Cummings, 2003:277). The egalitarian vision of Basic Education (Hindustani Talimi Sangh, 1938) was similarly marginalised by the hegemony of ‘modern’ education. The Gandhian model had sought to impact the quality of life through ‘education for life, through life’, using a productive craft – weaving, carpentry, agriculture, or pottery, etc – as *the medium* of interdisciplinary hands-on learning, with the mother tongue as the medium of instruction. The model sought to reduce the divide between the traditional ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’ streams, through flexible overlapping tracks, where science,

home science or agricultural science were placed at par at the upper primary stage. This radical move was tied to the agenda of the anti-colonial freedom struggle – for inclusive schools independent of government funding, and to question the stigma against the low-castes and their vocations. However, after independence, Basic Schools did not receive support from the government and the elites, and ‘work education’ was dismissed to the margins of irrelevance, to the ‘low ability’ and low desirability ‘vocational’ tracks.

The first NCF projected the ‘diversity’ of children only in terms of “the special needs of the talented, the backward, and those coming from non-formal channels”. It asked schools to provide ‘advanced units’ for the high achievers, while those from “less fortunate schools or from non-formal education may also need remedial units” (Section 2.15). The 1988 NCF called for ‘remedial’ and ‘enrichment’ programmes for *slow* and *fast learners* respectively, reinforcing the deeply discriminatory notion that the ‘slow’ were sick and in need of ‘remedies’, while only the ‘fast’ deserved ‘enrichment’, thus reproducing social inequalities through problematic constructions of ‘high achievers’ and ‘failures’. It also suggested that ‘flexibility’ could ‘accentuate disparities in standards’ across the country (Section 2.2). The problem of

conceptualising 'flexibility' or 'diversity' was actually tied to the system's inability to define the role of the 'curriculum', which inevitably meant a fixed content or list of topics, that was variously called the 'syllabus' and also 'standards'.

'Standards' have remained a problematic notion, and instead of being articulated as criteria to assess whether or not the broad *aims* of education have been achieved, have been seen as indicators of performance, especially through examination scores (Pring, 1992). In India 'aims' have been indicated in policy visions but not spelt out clearly, and so standards have been ambiguously understood. Stress has been laid on 'learning outcomes', in extremely narrow and specific terms, as was done particularly unsatisfactorily in the case of MLLs (Minimum Levels of Learning), which were not 'standards' but were expected to serve as such (Rampal, 2002b; PROBE, 1999). Learning outcomes, in any case, do not relate to the country's aims of education nor show how well those have been met, but only define what needs to be learnt at a given stage.

To raise the quality of education, the Education Commission (1964-66) recommended 'national standards', through the "production of textbooks at the national level. *Such books can indicate the expected standard of attainment far more precisely than any curricula or syllabi*; and their practical

use in schools is the surest method to raise standards ... At present there is hardly any common book which all the students in India read and is one of the reasons why our educational system contributes so little to national integration (Section 9.19)". The Commission expected good quality textbooks to serve as exemplars, to be produced by the then proposed NCERT, but overestimated the role of a 'common national' textbook, especially in the case of setting 'standards'. The problematic role of the textbook as the repository of all information to be reproduced by the learner was reinforced by the conflation of its unquestioned authority with the ambiguous expectation that it would be the sole 'indicator of national standards' as well as the agency for 'national integration'.

Much has changed in the educational discourse in the intervening years, across the world and also in India, as reflected in NCF 2005 and its position paper (NCERT, 2005; NCERT, 2006) on the nuanced relationship between the textbook, syllabus and curriculum, though much remains unchanged in practice. It clarifies that NPE 1986 proposed curricular flexibility with only a 'common core' - of democratic and secular values - to help create an 'awareness of the inherent equality of all'. It underscores how the quality of learning can be enhanced when schooling is contextualised within the child's experiences and cultural

knowledge. It also stresses the need to adopt an approach towards 'equality of outcomes', not just 'equality of treatment', by consciously addressing disadvantage arising out of inequalities of gender, caste, language, culture, religion or disabilities, through the design of pedagogic practices. It questions the perceived chasm between public and private schools, where the latter carefully select students from privileged homes and are taken to have better 'quality' because of better

examination results. "The fact that they (private schools) often neglect the child's mother tongue, warrants us to wonder about the opportunities they are able to provide to the child for constructing knowledge in meaningful ways. The exclusion of the poor from their admission processes implies the loss of learning opportunities that occur in a classroom with children from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds" (NCERT, 2005: 8).

LESSONS FROM THE GLOBAL QUALITY DEBATE

Our national policies hold equality of both access and outcomes as germane to the quality of the system, to ensure social mobility, to break generational cycles of deprivation and to encourage overall economic growth. Equality of opportunities of educational achievement is defined as the lack of any statistical association between indicators of students' achievement and indicators of their social origin. We shall see how some countries have geared their education systems to achieve this. Ironically, the Indian system is moving contrary to the observations of the Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2005), which stresses that test scores cannot assess equity and quality of educational outcomes. Our system has failed to accept that 'learning' is an extremely complex process which involves relationships in a social context, and that schools can raise quality only when they recognise the inequalities among students and reduce the social distance between their own values and those that prevail in their students' families (UNESCO, 2005:77).

It is clear that there is much for India to learn from Canada, Cuba, Finland and Korea - four countries noted for having achieved 'high quality' performance. They hold the teaching profession in high esteem, invest efforts in selection and professional development of teachers, and make no concessions on teacher quality even when there are teacher shortages. Canada has laid stress on equity with respect for cultural diversity, ensuring high outcomes for its large immigrant population. In Korea and Cuba learning outcomes are viewed in broader terms, not in terms of examination scores of narrow cognitive tests, and students are expected to become 'whole' individuals, through education linked to life and work. Moreover, unlike the increasing stress on individual competition in India, Korea emphasises on 'emulation', achieved through solidarity and collaboration among peers, and also fares among the top countries in international assessments. Vocational education has continued to occupy the lowest priority in India, whereas Cuba fosters a 'collective consciousness' and

integrates work experience in the academic curriculum. It mandates 'schools in the countryside', compulsory work in factories or in secondary 'vocational schools', and allows a parallel course of entry at the university to workers coming directly from places of production (Carnoy, 1990). It thus avoids the sharp and iniquitous rural-urban and the mental-manual social divisions created by conventional education systems such as ours.

A fine example of systemic reforms for quality and equity is offered by Finland, which dismantled its two-track system at Grade V, abolished ability-grouping, and by 1995 had a comprehensive school structure, keeping all children together in mixed ability flexible groups. In international assessments, it has got the highest scores which show small variation with students' socio-economic status (OECD, 2005). It ensures strong support mechanisms where teachers and even students help those who may tend to lag behind. A remarkable 'virtuous circle' of high-quality teaching has in turn led to the profession being the most popular among upper secondary students, even more popular than career in IT, medicine, or the corporate sector with better salaries. After comprehensive school, students can go to secondary schools through competitive admissions, or to vocational schools. Those with inadequate scores

are not detained, but can take an extra 'tenth year' to improve their grades or explore an occupational area. India, with disturbingly high detention rates, needs to implement such 'second chance' mechanisms which are important elements of quality that enhance equity, and reduce terminal courses that tend to trap students of lower socio-economic status at lower levels of schooling. In Finland, after vocational education students can in principle go to universities or polytechnics, though the chances are still low. There are, however, demands to bridge the 'academic-vocational' divide at secondary stage (Grubb et al, 2005), and concerns that, under the influence of OECD, the country is shifting from its long history of egalitarian policy towards an emphasis on competition, markets and individuality (Rinne et al, 2004).

There is need to undertake longitudinal studies that can track the effect of policy shifts and curricular restructuring on the quality-equality dimensions in our system. For instance, it has been found that the 1988 examination reform in UK, shifting from the 'O' levels to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), helped offset the income inequality of children from poor families in completing compulsory schooling. The earlier 'O' level exam imposed a ceiling on the number getting a particular grade, 'rationed' post-

compulsory education, and separated children into high and low streams, using norm-referenced exams that assessed relative performance, whereas the GCSE uses a criterion-referenced system where, in principle, everyone can achieve the top grade. That a larger number of children take the GCSE and that there is an increase in participation, is also evidenced in the 'staying on' proportion of students after completing compulsory school, it rising sharply from 44 percent in 1988 to 73 percent by 2001. However, regressive financing policies have had the opposite effect in higher education, which saw increased participation with greater educational inequality. Proposals for further fee hikes with loan offers, similar to those being propounded in India, have raised concerns about aggravating inequalities at higher levels, especially for children from debt-averse families or those who cannot risk future uncertainty (Blanden et al, 2003).

The lack of an accepted language policy in India with respect to the medium of instruction at the early years, continues to be a crucial quality issue. There is also little understanding of how and when English should be introduced effectively as a second language so that, as seen in several countries, children who begin with their mother tongue get the advantage of later learning English better and more easily. Indeed, this was the focus of major

curricular reforms in Papua New Guinea (UNDP, 2004), that led to impressive improvements in children's confidence and performance, with tremendous increase in enrolments and reduction in drop-out rates. Introducing mother tongue as medium of instruction in the first three years of primary school, in over 400 indigenous languages, this small (about 6 million) but culturally and linguistically most diverse country in the world, demonstrated how new writing systems could be developed with the local communities.

Assessment of Quality as 'Progress', not Through Competitive Tests

In what ways can the quality of learning be assessed and how well do educational systems give feedback to learners about their progress? Unlike the behaviourist tradition, which greatly influences competitive selection procedures in education, the humanist tradition stresses on the quality of feedback to learners and rejects standardized curricula, seen as "undermining the possibilities for learners to construct their own meanings and for educational programmes to remain responsive to individual learners' circumstances and needs" (UNESCO, 2005:32). There are major concerns about large-scale tests, using traditional quantitative techniques, which rank children, schools and even countries, instead of empirical approaches focusing on the quality of

teacher-pupil interactions. It is recognised that production function analysis used in economics is 'hazardous' in education and diverts attention away from classroom practices that have the strongest association with achievement. The production function for, say a fence, describes the maximum feasible output (the fence) that may be obtained from alternative combinations of the inputs – e.g. nails, tools, planks of wood, and days of labour. "But the main difficulty with representing education as a production process is that some of its inputs and all of its outcomes are embodied in pupils, who have their own autonomous behaviour. Planks of wood cannot decide that they do not want to be assembled, avoid coming to the construction site, or refuse to interact with construction workers" (UNESCO, 2005: 64).

Studies on the quality of the 'conditions for learning' look at how some systems achieve a 'culture of success' even among students facing disadvantage or adverse conditions at home, and acknowledge that students perform better when they are given more confidence, motivation and a high sense of self-worth. Recent research shows that if poorly performing children are told that their brains are capable of 'growing', that 'intelligence, like a muscle, grows stronger through

exercise', they perform markedly better than those who believe they have a 'fixed intelligence'. It is pointed out that tests do not measure potential, and praising children for 'intelligence' or 'talent', rather than for *their effort and the processes they use*, saps their motivation to do better, just as labeling children as 'slow' hampers their learning (Dweck, 2006). These findings on processes of development and meta-learning are indeed crucial for systems like ours, which adheres to a 'fixed' mindset on intelligence, and oppressively labels children using outdated notions of IQ, even correlated to their socio-economic background.

There is also major rethinking on the use of assessment of individual pupils to monitor the quality of schools. It has been found that the more competitive the method of assessment is the more it correlates success with social advantage, testing the background of pupils rather than the quality of their education (Haahr *et al* 2005). A school must ensure that progress is made over and above its pupils' intake to enhance their achievement. Measures of 'progress' are found to be less susceptible to family background than measures of attainment. Moreover, alternate methods of 'authentic' assessment of pupils make use of portfolios and focus on 'performance indicators', rather than achievement

tests. Schools popularly perceived to be of high quality, begin with well-fed children of comparatively better off parents, and may actually be under-achieving in terms of their ability to *add value* to children's learning (Mortimore, 1992).

A study of the quality of schools achieving outstanding results with disadvantaged students in seven Latin American countries (UNESCO, 2002), showed that performance was highest where there was affection, respect, confidence, a sense of collectivity and belonging, and a special relationship with children. Mistakes that children make in such 'outstanding' schools are seen as learning tools, and students are encouraged to review the 'why?' and 'how?' of an error themselves to seek alternatives. Importantly, teachers of such schools have high expectations of *all* their students, and spend more effort on those who have difficulty in learning a particular theme.

Observation based performance indicators to monitor students' progress have been used in Australia, Canada and New Zealand. It has been seen that children enjoy assessment when they have to undertake tasks that are open-ended, engrossing and stimulating, and are designed to demonstrate a whole range of skills and competencies (Broadfoot, 1996). Performance indicators are defined and used by the

schools themselves, to see how they are doing in relation to the broad objectives they set for themselves. They are also used to give feedback in a formative sense, to help enhance the learning process, unlike the summative one-shot formats of standardized testing. Decentralised monitoring is linked to the process of school development planning, and improves quality in the long run.

In India, systems to assess students' learning – during school, in examinations or in surveys – are poorly designed, while exam reform remains a daunting challenge. Most studies show dismal results indicating that children are not learning well. However, the state of Kerala, which initiated curricular reform for quality improvement under DPEP, adopted a new assessment pattern that helped reduce anxiety and also ensured that disadvantaged children performed better, in a range of tasks and activities. Primary school exams were decentralised to the cluster/block level, accompanied with mobilisation in some Panchyats. In the alarming scenario of high suicides and exam related stress, which distorts personalities and stunts the creative potential of most children, the vision for reform reflected in the words of Hameed, a member of the Parent Teachers' Association of a school in Mallapuram, calls for imperative action:

“We must first ask ourselves why we take an examination! Earlier every teacher liberally used the red-ink pen to throttle children’s expression. Now children can think for themselves. There is no tension during exams. Children know that the exam is not to penalize them – ‘it shows what we know’, so they are not scared to show their results to their parents. Parents also do not ask ‘why didn’t you get this rank?’ There is need to also change the Board exam because *more than half of our children fail in that, but they do better in life*. What kind of testing is that? Should we not assess their *real* achievements, instead of their memorizing without any understanding?” (Rampal, 2002a: 2).

International focus on ‘efficiency and accountability’ of schools and teachers, through frequent ‘objective’ paper-and-pencil tests, promotes learning by rote and defensive ‘teaching to the tests’, to avoid official censure and financial cuts for low-performing schools. It offers much less incentive for activity and creativity, and causes greater marginalization of disadvantaged children who are considered ‘less attractive’ because they need ‘more time and attention and are seen to ‘deflate’ achievement scores, while all attention is on ‘gifted’ or ‘fast track’ children. The increased focus on testing in the UK is critiqued by a school headmaster: “We seem to believe that you can fatten a pig just by weighing it. The government wants to measure everything – what are they measuring?”(Peterson, 2003) Increased regulation of schools through a flourishing industry of ‘high-stakes’ testing, not just in the ‘No Child Left Behind’ regime in the US but also in other countries, has also caused concern regarding international ‘competitiveness’ in education arising out of a purely economic agenda.

In India too, the managerial mantra for ‘quality improvement’ by repeated testing to ‘measure’ achievement, to keep the system ‘on its toes’, has unfortunately been gaining ground. Several state governments are resorting to weekly tests on the same pattern as the term examination, pretending that this can substitute for ‘continuous and comprehensive assessment’. The Karnataka School Quality Assessment Organization (KSQAO), a new body set up by the state government with corporate financial support, propounds a problematic and instrumental notion of ‘quality’. Through ‘external evaluation’ of school performance, its focus is on comparing schools by measuring learning achievement of students in selected competencies across school subjects, using ‘scientific’ standardised tests. The notion and efficacy of ‘scientific testing’ is in any case questionable, but in some countries is now big business, with multinational companies producing textbooks making huge profits, pushing for accompanying tests. Moreover, caution is voiced against culturally insensitive tests that do not take cognizance of the child’s

indigenous knowledge, including language, aesthetics, etc. For instance, studies on ethnomathematics show that children perform sophisticated computations and measurements extremely well in culturally familiar situations though they may flounder in standardised tests in school (Nunes et al, 1993; Rampal et al, 1999; Rampal, 2003).

India must also desist from policies that promote 'quasi-markets' in education, such as the recent proposal for 'vouchers' in the XI Plan, claimed to promote 'equity and quality by creating competition' through 'choice' between public or private schools, while rating them through tests by independent bodies. There was, however, no consensus on "whether parental choice on schools through devices such as vouchers can improve accountability and quality or whether this would only increase existing divides and divert public money to private schools" (Gol, 2006a:60). The concept of a 'market' serves as a 'hands-off' policy, attempting to pass responsibility for the quality of education to the individual as 'consumer'. Parental choice of schools linked to public ratings, which usually allow funds to follow pupils, gives legitimacy to the principle that 'good schools thrive and poor schools perish' (Gorard et al, 2003). There is strong evidence on how 'consumer choice' in education, with published 'league tables' of school results in England and the US,

ensures that the socio-economically more 'able' children seek and are sought by the supposedly 'good' and better funded schools while the poor schools, serving poor children, are left to their meager resources and caught in a spiral of decline. Research in New Zealand also indicated that demands of the market had a negative impact on schools with large working class and minority populations, with an overall decline in educational quality (Lauder and Hughes, 1999).

Feminist critiques of the traditional discourse of 'efficiency' in production, which views notions of power, domination and equity in a marginal and ambivalent position (Kabeer, 1994), insist that gender justice must address social relations which constrain women's activities and resources. Calling for new analytical frameworks which challenge static notions of 'efficiency' based on unequal division of labour, Kabeer points to the need for a "struggle over concepts, meanings, priorities and practices" (Kabeer, 1994:289). Concerns about starkly unequal gender divisions of labour in the household need to similarly question the possible 'efficiency' of girl children at school, and the impact that long hours of domestic chores, coupled with low levels of nourishment, have on their performance. Children's daily schedules (PROBE, 1999) show that girls from poor households do not have 'equal opportunities' to study. Given their

hectic morning chores, almost 10 to 15 percent of children (majority of them girls, if they happen to be the oldest child) come to school without eating, so that a hot mid-day meal becomes all the more necessary to help them perform at school. When regularity can be ensured, most girls are found to perform as well if not better than boys in school (Ramachandran, 2004).

Schools for ‘Efficiency’ or Equity? - Pupils’ Voice on Quality

Some countries have followed a technocratic model of ‘efficiency’, with the belief that the quality of children’s performance can be enhanced by segregating them in streams or tracks according to their ‘abilities’. Studies have now shown that streaming has no effect on average learning scores (Terwel, 2005). Students in streamed schools do not outperform their counterparts in integrated (non-streamed) schools. On the contrary, comprehensive mixed ability schools have been found to be extremely efficient in reducing education inequalities. ‘Regardless of their own socio-economic background, students attending schools in which the average socio-economic background is high, tend to perform better than when they are enrolled in a school with a below-average socio-economic intake’ (OECD, 2004:189). Countries with schools less segregated by socio-economic

background tend to have higher overall performance. Frequent ‘failing’ or grade repetition, a form of differentiation used by some countries, causes severe inequity in outcomes, because weak students become weaker and strong students stronger, and leads to ‘unrealized potential’ to raise the quality of schools (Haahr et al, 2005).

Regional trends show that the (primarily) English-speaking countries, with the exception of Ireland and Canada, display high levels of educational inequality with relatively marketized education systems that promote selection. Alternatively, the East Asian and Nordic countries have more comprehensive education systems and mixed-ability classes and achieve much more equal outcomes in education. There is also compelling evidence that schools in the US with high student diversity have higher quality of outcomes, while the increasing level of segregation of Latino and African American students in low achieving schools, and in lower and vocational tracks, is causing half of them to drop out of high school (Orfield and Lee, 2005).

The same teachers who offer more creative worksheets, investigations and practical activities in mixed ability groups, resort to narrow chalk-board and textbook-based practices when teaching either of the groups - ‘high’ or

'low' ability - with a narrow range of attainment. Students of a 'low-ability' set voice their disapproval for the procedural methods used by teachers: 'Sir treats us like babies, puts us down, makes us copy stuff off the board, puts up all the answers like we don't know anything' and 'he doesn't believe we can do it.' (Boaler et al, 2000). Indeed, research consistently shows that students taken to be 'low-achieving' benefit much more from the challenging environment in a comprehensive and mixed ability school, and are more sensitive to its quality than are high-achieving students, who can rely more on personal 'resources' or cultural capital, including greater social exposure and support (Dar and Resh, 1986).

Interestingly, countries adopt segregation ostensibly for better efficiency, but their pupils' find it to be unjust. A large study (Smith and Gorard, 2006) on pupils' (aged 13-14 years) views on equity and quality of schooling, in five European countries, probed whether they thought a system was fair if it 'treated everyone the same' or if it sought to overcome early disadvantage and handicap. A large proportion of the children supported the notion that 'less able' students should receive greater attention from teachers, with a negligible number advocating 'more attention for the most able', which they confessed was what happened in schools. The perceived quality of schooling was also

related to how students assessed their own performance and whether they were satisfied with their marks. Thus while 23 percent of the sample from Spain felt dissatisfied, less than 3 percent of those from UK felt so, which corroborated with the relatively higher average school attainment scores in UK, and the fact that among the five countries it also had the highest proportion of schools under government control and lower segregation by parental occupation, family wealth and country of origin.

A preliminary study in Delhi (Ahuja, 2004), presently pursued as an expanded doctoral project, of children's values of justice and equality showed marked differences in the perceptions of children (aged 12-13 years) from a selective elite private school as compared to those from a more mixed group in a government Central School. In detailed focus group discussions, students of the selective private school advocated separate schooling for the poor and disadvantaged, explicitly stating that knowledge of books "is too difficult for them to grasp". They questioned "the purpose of teaching our knowledge of science, math, English, etc. to the poor..... who should (instead) be going to schools where skills - like making *gol gappa* (a snack), carpentry, shoe making, etc. - could be taught, so that they could learn to manage their basic needs of food, clothing and shelter" (p. 40). On the other hand,

those from the Central school, which was more inclusive and had children from working-class backgrounds, called for a more egalitarian system that helped the disadvantaged to overcome their sense of inferiority. A Grade VI child of a betel-seller said: "Children do not have a sense of discrimination to begin with, but when a poor child is repeatedly subjected to insult from those who are more privileged, and is put in a separate school, then he keeps wondering - why have I been segregated?" Another child questioned the differentiated quality of Indian schools saying, "All children should have similar kinds of schools so that poor children can also improve their understanding and can fight for their rights" (p. 41). This corroborates empirical findings which show that socially inclusive schools sensitise children and help shape their views on equity and justice (Gorard, 2006), while it eloquently interrogates the Indian state for its programmes of differentiated schooling, and its reluctance to grant children their Right to Education of equitable quality.

The Widening Quality Divide in India

The quality debate in India has taken a dialectical course. On the one hand, public education has resorted to low cost provisions for the poor, often compromising quality, while on the other, elite private schools unabashedly

brand 'quality' with the affluent trappings of 'inequality' – with air-conditioned classrooms and buses, food from five-star hotels, foreign trips, expensive books, computers and other prescribed paraphernalia. Courts are now being invoked to stem this flagrant segregation. Private schools in Delhi have been charged for having reneged on the condition on which they obtained almost free government land, by refusing to allocate twenty-five percent seats for poor students (Juneja, 2006). Voluntary groups, such as Social Jurist, have legally used the Right to Information to mobilise poor communities, so that children eligible for free seats do get admitted in private schools. Flaunting examination 'marks' to show outcomes of 'quality', some elite schools adopt unethical practices to poach toppers from other schools, while not giving re-admission to their own students who have not got high marks in the Grade X Board exam. Parents, especially from lower and middle income groups, have been caught in this 'quality' bind, often compelled to opt for dubious private schools at a heavy cost, because they fear their children might be left behind in the mindless race for marks and English medium instruction.

The past decade has seen a widening quality divide in public education, with a minimalist vision of learning and

teaching for children considered 'hardest to reach'. There has even been a sense of impatience with the 'fluff of quality' in large enrolment programmes, with quick-fix 'inputs' where 'joyful' teaching is often trivialised to song and dance, for the transmission of 'content' artificially divorced from teachers' pedagogical knowledge. Disregarding its legacy of policies, acknowledging the dialectical relationship of both 'quality for equality' and 'equality for quality', the state has promoted a deeply discriminatory system. 'Education Guarantee School' (EGS), 'Alternative School', '*acharyaji*', '*guruji*' or '*shiksha mitra*' are some of the euphemisms for its low-cost options, where a deliberate blurring of boundaries between the teacher and the volunteer, or the school and centre, was accompanied by an aggressive use of 'smoke screens' to obscure the compromises made in the quality of public education (Kumar et al, 2001).

Madhya Pradesh had in the mid-nineties introduced EGS schools as part of its neo-liberal reforms, recruiting almost two hundred thousand 'para-teachers' through the panchayats, on a fraction of the salary of a regular teacher. Leclercq (2003) documented how the school system was extended and differentiated, but not universalised – and social hierarchies and inequalities were reinforced. It was an 'incomplete Guarantee' – of schools for

disadvantaged communities, that functioned only nominally, with an unqualified teacher paid less than the minimum wages of a daily labourer, and kept on 'insecure' tenure to ensure better efficiency. Studies show that there is no basis to expect greater motivation from teachers on annual contract, who expect a permanent post and whose insecurity only adversely affects work. There were an estimated 500,000 para-teachers in 2004, having increased after all states became eligible for Central support for this scheme under SSA, and even states with a reasonably good teacher-pupil ratio appointing them to save on recurrent expenditure on salaries (Govinda and Josephine, 2004; Gol, 1999).

Parental satisfaction is a relative notion linked to expectations and aspirations, but has often been cursorily used as an indicator of 'quality'. The Pratiche Education Report (Rana et al, 2002) termed the Shishu Shikha Karmasuchi (SSK, on the EGS pattern) in West Bengal as 'great achievers at low cost', noting that parents seemed 'less dissatisfied' with the SSK schools than those of children in primary schools. Economic analyses use indicators of quality, such as the attendance of children or the time spent in school, without detailed classroom observations. However, another review of the SSK programme found that at the

heart of its 'low quality' was the political economy of its choice of subservient, 'over-age' women teachers and retired trainers, who brought with them traditional mindsets and limited motivation for change (Rampal and Bhagat, 2003). The inexperienced *sahayikas* (age 40 plus) were meant to be 'satisfied' with Rs.1000 per month and not expected to demand regular employment (being ineligible on account of their age). A lower pupil-teacher ratio and the community's involvement in ensuring attendance of the local teachers and children contributed to its 'functioning' relatively better than many existing primary schools. However, the classroom interaction was no different, often worse, because the *sahayikas*, older, inexperienced and not having been well trained at all, seemed understandably more insecure, insisting on distractingly mindless repetition in chorus.

There has been an increase in schools at all levels, and despite the ambiguous term 'primary stage schooling facility' instead of 'primary school' in the Educational Survey data, there are still large numbers of unserved habitations. Over 16 percent of the 'recognized' 6.5 lakh primary schools have only a single teacher for all the grades, and a substantial majority have at best two teachers (NCERT, 2007). A recent study with a large sample household

survey in the seven most educationally backwards states, noted that despite the 'apparent progress' in terms of schooling facilities, there is a high incidence of out-of-school children, particularly in the backward caste groups. Nearly one-fifth of children in the 6-10 years age-group are out of school in rural areas, and one-tenth in urban areas. Inadequate supply of teachers "has resulted in overcrowded classrooms, reflected in the high teacher-pupil ratios... (and) the increase in single teacher schools. As a consequence, the quality of teaching has deteriorated and has had a negative impact on children's performance" (Mehrotra et al, 2005:34). It wonders how without UEE some people believe that India can sustain economic growth and "leapfrog into the twenty-first century through the information technology (IT) revolution. However, given the low literacy level of the working age population and continuing low attendance rates for school age children, there is, perhaps a leap of faith involved in such a belief" (Mehrotra et al, 2005: 15).

With all kinds of 'alternatives' included in the category of a 'school', even bridge courses or camps, the 'out-of-school' constitute a highly contested category. Moreover, attendance of children in rural areas is irregular, affected by their seasonal participation in domestic

economic work, illness in the family or irregularity in the functioning of the school, so that the real size of out-of-school children is estimated to be larger than what is reported by most studies (Jha and Jhingran, 2005). Official statistics show that the drop-out rate in primary schools has reduced in the last ten years from 42 percent to 29 percent, more significantly in the case of girls, but remains disturbingly high at about 51 percent at the elementary stage. District-wise data (Mehta, 2006) on 'recognized' government and private schools - not including the EGS schools, non-formal centres or 'unrecognised' private schools - shows that states, such as Arunachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand, have reported a high average drop-out rate of 16, 15 and 14 percent respectively, with Haryana, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar reporting almost 12 percent. On the other hand, Kerala with 1.3 percent, Tamil Nadu with 2 percent and Himachal Pradesh with 2.9 percent drop-out rate have almost attained universal retention at primary level.

On an average, a student takes 9.1 years to complete primary school as compared to the requirement of 5 years (Ibid). In 2005-6 about 10 million children were made to repeat grades in elementary school, 85 percent of them in rural schools (Mehta, 2007). Despite policy decisions to stop detention of young children in the early grades, the

average repetition rate in Grade I was an alarming 10.5 percent. The states of Bihar (25 percent), Gujarat (15 percent), Sikkim (21 percent) and West Bengal (20 percent), all reported very high repetition rates in Grade I. This raises serious questions about what schools are achieving in the early years and, more significantly, the irreparable harm they are doing to children's motivation and self-image by 'failing' them. It also reveals the weakest aspect of our system, namely, poor teaching practices, especially at the early stages, including pre-school. The quality of classroom practices is in any case wanting, but teacher's beliefs about disadvantaged children result in demeaning 'pedagogies of poverty' (Haberman, 1991), where closed procedural teaching becomes the norm. Moreover, teachers are not trained in how classes must be structured to ensure adequate peer learning and collective working. This is the status of the 'recognised' sector, and it can be reasonably assumed that the states of 'unrecognised' sector, with poorer provision and little parental support for first generation learners, is likely to be worse. Indeed an important challenge lies in orienting teachers towards learning practices that ensure stimulating engagement of all children to compensate for inequalities early in school (Boaler, 2002).

Differential Participation of Social Groups

Differentiated quality of education results in differential participation of different social groups and communities, and Census 2001, for the first time sought information on levels of education according to religion. The Sachar Committee Report (Gol, 2006b) used this data to highlight the differential status of different socio-religious communities (SRC), and stated that there is a double disadvantage when

low levels of education combine with low quality. It pointed out that the literacy levels of 64 percent SCs/STs and 68 percent Muslims males are far below the 'All Others' level of 81 percent. Age-specific literacy rates as per the NSS 61st round data (Gol, 2006c) shows that in recent years, the literacy rates for the SC/ST population have risen more sharply than for Muslims, especially among those aged 6-17 years (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Literates as Proportion of Population by Age Groups

Age Groups	Hindus			Muslims	Other Minorities
	Gen	OBC	SC/ST		
6-13 years	90.2	80.8	74.7	74.6	88.5
14-15 years	95.7	87.5	80.0	79.5	91.9
16-17 years	95.0	85.2	78.6	75.5	91.3
18-22 years	91.4	76.9	65.0	70.5	85.8
23 years & above	74.0	50.6	36.5	46.1	67.0
Total	80.5	63.4	52.7	59.9	75.2

Source: Estimated from NSSO 61st Round, Schedule 10 (2004-05), Gol. (2006c).

Educational inequalities are understood to be a function of many factors, including availability and quality of schools, returns on education, parental demand for schooling as well as teacher quality. Educational inequalities between social groups show a declining gap between *dalits*, *adivasis* (tribals) and others, in the odds of completing

primary school, but not for Muslims (Desai and Kulkarni, forthcoming). The probability of completing different levels of school education has gone up for all communities in the last decade. On an average, about 62 percent of the eligible children in the upper caste Hindu and other religious groups are likely to complete primary education, followed by

Muslims (44 percent), SCs (39 percent) and STs (32 percent). However, *completion of primary education seems to be the major hurdle for school education*. Once children complete primary education, the proportion of children completing middle school is almost the same (65 percent) for Muslims, STs and SCs but still lower than 'All Others' (75 percent).

On an average, a child in India goes to school for only four years. Unlike literacy which is a stock measure and changes slowly over time, enrolment is a flow-variable that can be improved within a relatively shorter period. A larger inter-group disparity in school enrolment when compared with the disparity in literacy rates, suggests that the enrolment rate in elementary schools among the Muslims has been falling in the immediate past, especially so in case of females (Shariff and Razzack, 2006). Girls from poor rural households or disadvantaged communities, such as the SC/ST or Muslim communities, continue to be most educationally deprived. While the gender gap has narrowed in enrolments, the drop-out rates of both boys and girls of SC and ST communities are alarmingly high. According to the Select Education Statistics (MHRD, 2004-05), 51 percent of all children, 60 percent of SC girls and 67 percent ST girls drop out before they complete middle school. Further, 62 percent of all children drop out

before completing Grade X, but the percentage of SC and ST girls who drop out before finishing secondary school, is 74 and 81 percent respectively. Dalit girls suffer the multiple burdens of poverty, caste and gender and have to work the hardest to overcome the consequences of the poor quality of education doled out to them. The quality of the experience of schooling of Dalit children, through various overt forms of caste discrimination from their peers and teachers, is found to obstruct social access to education, by severely hurting their dignity and self-worth.

On the other hand, there is strong evidence that the disadvantaged, including girls deprived of their fundamental rights, are looking towards education as the only possible way out of their plight, and are, in fact, going the extra mile to catch up on lost opportunity. Given a slender second chance, they use education to help face many of their life's struggles even outside school. The overwhelming response of married girls coming back to school in Andhra Pradesh, and even courageously challenging the validity of their 'child marriages', is a strong case in point. Over 14,000 girls in the last five years in Rangareddy district alone, have been supported by the MV Foundation and rehabilitated to resume their studies through special bridge-school-camps. Like Susheela (age 15), who formally returned the 'mangalsutra' and persuaded the village panchayat to

annul her year-old 'illegal' (child) marriage to a much older man, a large number of girls have found courage and refuge through their passion for school to opt out of traumatic marriages and to chart a new course for themselves. Moreover, the quality of such 'second chance' courses is crucial to ensure that they go well beyond basic literacy and numeracy to sensitively address complex social issues, and acquire confidence to fight for change through 'pedagogies of power'.

'Quality' or the 'Power of Money'?

A comparative case study (Rana et al, 2005) of public and private schools in West Bengal forcefully refutes the rhetoric of improving quality through privatisation and 'voucher' schools. It shows that while the government schools serve much larger percentages of SC/ST and poor children, equivalent learning achievements are obtained at much higher cost in private schools. Correlating learning achievement with annual expenditure on education per child, the study establishes that the 'power of money' tends to pass as 'quality' in the case of private schooling. While the average annual expenditure per child in government primary schools was Rs 720, in private schools it was more than six times higher (Rs 4193). One-third of the poorly performing children (scoring below 50 out of 100) were from poor families who spent

below Rs 200 a year, while children from the higher expenditure group (Rs 1001-2000) formed only 13 percent of those who performed poorly. Among private school children, the influence of expenditure was starkly evident: while only 4 percent of the lowest annual expenditure group (Rs 501-1000) children scored more than 50 out of 100, the figure was 56 percent for children of the higher annual expenditure group (Rs 3000-9000 and above).

Significantly, despite larger enrolments and worse pupil-teacher ratios, the number of working hours per day and working days in the year was higher for the government schools. Whereas children seemed to be 'caged in' the private schools, there was generally more space for play in government schools. Children in private schools are often coerced to take private tuition and pay doubly for better performance; 25 percent of the children of private schools, who took private tuition, received it from the teachers of the same schools. In government schools, the figure was only 1.5 percent. Moreover, widespread hunger was seen to be the reason for the lower rate of attendance in government schools – 57 percent as compared to 82 percent in private schools – and the cooked mid-day meal helped raise attendance rates. "A majority of parents of children enrolled in private and other non-

government primary schools maintained that *they would prefer to enrol their children in government schools, provided quality education was ensured*. Only a small fraction of parents of private school children were found to be strong supporters of distinctive schools that they believed would earn their children and them a special status in society” (Rana et al, 2005:1555).

DISE data (Mehta, 2006) shows that the average number of teachers (at all levels) per government school is 3.6, while it is almost double at 7.1 for private schools, but with average lower salaries. Some economists view the private-public segmentation in the teacher labour market as arising out of the reasonable ‘market wages’ paid by the private sector and the higher ‘bureaucratically set wages’ of government and aided school teachers (Kingdon, 2007). However, educationists contend that this relates to the political economy of assigning ‘market wages’ for teachers, within the ambience of large unemployment, without firmly establishing norms and processes for quality in the profession of teaching. Only when education is viewed as a social system and not as an enterprise or a ‘market’, will teachers be understood as an important resource and agents of educational reform, and not as an expensive, difficult to manage, dispensable ‘input’. Ironically, the

interests of the growing software industry often exploit such thinking to advocate for computers and distance learning technologies, to supplement or even substitute teachers.

Private schools meet ‘differentiated’ demand and create further inequities, attracting and segregating children from higher-income or advantaged social groups (Tilak and Sudarshan, 2001). The PROBE Report highlighted that the quality of public education affected the size of the private sector, observing that: “In rural Himachal Pradesh, thought there is a good deal of purchasing power; but as the government schools function well, there are fewer private schools. In central Bihar, by contrast, poverty is endemic, yet private schools are found in many villages due to the dysfunctional state of government schools (PROBE Team, 1999:102). Claims of better quality in private schools is further refuted: “States with the poorest enrolment record – UP, AP, Bihar – may need to give much greater attention to the quality, effectiveness, and infrastructure of schooling in the public school system (though the latter prescription would also apply to the richer states), especially since the literature gives no indication that the cognitive achievement in private schools is better than that in public ones” (Mehrotra et al, 2005:237).

TRANSFORMATIVE CURRICULA FOR BETTER QUALITY OF LIFE

There is ostensible tension between the criteria of ‘quality’ of a curriculum on the one hand, and its ‘relevance and practical usefulness’ on the other, when ‘quality’ is often defined in a narrow way to suit the needs of privileged groups. With the traditional divide between high/low status groups, those whose children grow up in stimulus-rich environments judge the ‘quality’ of a curriculum by its ability to cultivate special or exclusive skills and talents, while parents of less privileged children would look for the system’s ability to foster more equitable learning opportunities for a larger number of people (Weiler, 1993). Conventional curricula have been equally ‘irrelevant’ for rural and urban children, and have not achieved much useful learning. Ironically, ‘lack of relevance for urban children’ and ‘dilution of academic standards’ were cited as reasons for the middle-class resistance to a transformative curriculum even in the state of Kerala, where there is no sharp rural-urban divide, but where, despite near-universal enrolment (and consistently high social indicators), the

quality of learning has remained dismal (KSSP, 1999). This unfortunately resulted in significant reversals in a programme that, in a relatively short span of time, had indeed made a difference to the school performance of the poor, whether rural or urban (Rampal, 2002a).

A particularly neglected area has been curriculum development for out-of-school children and youth, especially girls, for non-formal education as well as the increasingly popular option of open schooling. This demands much more concerted effort through academic-activist partnerships, to bring insights from theory and praxis, to address the situated knowledge and often fragile literacy’s of adolescent learners. Such an effort was evident in a few programmes on women’s education and empowerment and the National Literacy Campaigns. The campaign had sought to define ‘literacy’ not in the narrow sense of an ‘autonomous’ variable which unproblematically ensures ‘progress’ or social mobility, but more as an enabling process of cultural and

social mobilisation, with greater participation in development. Inspired by the Friarian approach to 'read the word and the world', the campaign in some districts went beyond reading and writing, to encompass issues of social justice and transformative action, and an attempt was also made to decentralise curriculum design and material production at the district levels.

NCF 2005 brought together several strands of work and experiences across the country, where curricula were recast to address the alienation faced by the large underprivileged majority, whose lives, experiences and knowledge systems were not acknowledged. It focused on the processes by which learners actively construct knowledge, and directed the syllabus to remove rigid disciplinary boundaries, to relate to children's diverse lives, and depart from the traditional approach of 'imparting information'. Textbooks have been developed in teams which include professional academics, educationists, school teachers and persons from NGOs working collaboratively. Many of these books incorporate oral narratives, representations of different genres of folk and contemporary art, true life experiences of ordinary people, humour, satire and also complex questions that promote criticality even on controversial issues. However, the curriculum still continues to be located within the broad parameters of an academic domain, not having engaged enough with the more

difficult and critical issues of work and vocation.

It is somewhat ironical that in a low-income country such as India, vocational education curricula are perceived as having 'low quality', meant only for the 'non-academic' or 'low-ability' learners, even as working class families despair that schools continue to alienate their children from their own vocations and livelihoods. Institutes or polytechnics that offer these 'low track' courses are themselves not creatively or academically engaged with education or curriculum development, and some are even placed under the Labour Department. In a new globalised avatar of the 'brain vs body' skills dichotomy, higher order 'twenty-first century skills' of creativity and interpersonal communication are being competitively nurtured by school education in industrialized countries, to somehow justify the outsourcing of 'low-skill' jobs to low-income countries. This offers a challenge for India to break fresh ground and design indigenous vocational curricula which have an innovative, creative and academic 'high skill' edge for the majority of our learners. Instead of drifting with the often instrumental rhetoric of the 'knowledge economy', and focusing narrowly on the glamour of ICTs, we need to address the entire spectrum of indigenous knowledge systems that relate to the work and production patterns of the majority of our people,

especially in the unorganised sector. Indeed, there is need to challenge the dominant discourse on education and globalization, to redefine the relationship between education and 'quality of life', and to recognise that western industrialised nations are not knowledge economies, but are perhaps models of a questionable 'economy of knowledge' (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2008).

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