

Policy Article

Access to quality education, a basic right of every child

Abstract

Quality education is paramount for every child. Making quality education accessible to children will have a positive impact on the future of a child. The issues and challenges the school education system face in the present time in multi-dimensional in nature. Shortage of quality trained school teachers is directly / indirectly linked with lack of quality education, school dropout, etc. Non-availability of quality Early Childhood Care and Education has a long-term impact on children. Making quality education accessible to every child will depend on how the policy (NEP 2020) will be implemented in reality. NEP 2020 is the hope for millions of school children. This article is based on a secondary source and tries to analyze the issues and challenges of providing quality education to every child in a multi-dimensional approach.

Keywords: Quality education, School, Children, Human rights, teacher

Introduction

The proposition that education is a fundamental right for everyone can date back to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948. It is to recognize that education is the fundamental requirement for a human to understand their rights and empowered them to overcome poverty. This declaration is followed by many more assertions on access to education as a human right. Over the decades, there has been significant improvement in school education, especially in enrolment and infrastructure. Nevertheless, access to quality education remains a challenge.

Going by the data available on access to education around the world projects the non-fulfillment of basic human rights. According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics and UNICEF(2015), around 63 million adolescent between the age of 12 and 15 years are denied their right to education. According to UNESCO for Sustainable Development Goals, about 260 million children were still out of school in 2018 – nearly one-fifth of the global population in that age group. And more than half of all children and adolescents worldwide are not meeting minimum proficiency standards in reading and mathematics.

Over the past decade, major progress was made toward increasing access to education and enrollment rates at all levels across the world. Nevertheless, increasing enrollment and improve in universal enrolment don't necessarily reflect the objective of quality education. The United Nations has for the first time included 'quality education' in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). Providing quality education to every child is a core part of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) adopted by all the United Nations member states in 2015. Incorporating 17 SDGs in Sustainable Development Goal recognizes that action in one goal will affect the outcomes of others' goals.

India since its independence has given top priority to education. The constitution of India enshrined several Articles and Clauses that reflect education. Article 45 Right of free and compulsory education, Article 21A Right to education, Article 15(1) (3) Education for women, Article 46 Promotion of education and economic interests of SC, ST, and other weaker sections, Article 25,28(1)(2)(3) Religious education, Article 29 Education of minorities, protection of interests of minorities, Article 30 Right of minorities to establish and administer educational institutions, Article 350-A Instruction in mother tongue at the primary stage, Article 239 Education in Union territories, Article 51(A) Fundamental duty to provide the opportunity

for education, etc. Apart from the constitutional provision, numerous visionary schemes and programs for school education were implemented to encourage quality school education and universal enrolment in the country. The schemes and programs such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Mid-Day Meal, Mahila Samakhya, Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan, Girls Hostels scheme, National Scheme of Incentives to girls for secondary education, inclusive education for disabled at secondary stage, nation merit-cum-means scholarship scheme, scholarship schemes for minority students, National scholarship, etc. For the past decade, India has witnessed tremendous improvement in the school education system. However, the question remains whether quality education is imparted along with the improvement in the system.

Aims of schooling: School is where the formal education for a child begins. It is a place where children joyfully learn the concepts. It is a miniature society where children from different socio-cultural backgrounds interact with each other. School is where children's potential is identified and the foundation for their future is built. Imparting education is to equip children with knowledge, skills, ethics, and values. Therefore, the aim of schooling is to provide quality education to every child.

Quality school education: Issues and challenges

- Access to Quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)
- Proficiency in reading, writing, and performing basic operations with numbers
- Shortage of trained teachers
- School dropout
- Infrastructure

Discussion

‘Quality of education is the core challenge of the next decade when it comes to improving overall educational standards, retention, transition and equity in academic achievement.’ (UNESCO).

Early childhood (the period from birth to eight years old) is the most crucial period for child development. In National Education Policy 2020, this period falls under the ‘Foundational’ stage which is a time for remarkable growth with brain development at its peak. In this period a child is highly influenced by the socio-culture environment. Therefore, Early Childhood Care and Education are more than preparation for primary school it aims at the holistic development of a child’s social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and well-being (UNESCO).

In India quality, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is not available to millions of young children, particularly children from a socio-economically disadvantaged background. In Census 2011, India has 158.7 million children in the age group of 0-6, and if the age group between 6 to 8 years is added the figure may go up making the task more challenging. Making quality ECCE accessible to this age group is a paramount task for the future of the country. Non-availability of quality early Childhood Education hinders children’s cognitive, motor, and socio-emotional development. National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 projected to strengthen Anganwadi centers with high-quality infrastructure, play equipment, and well-trained Anganwadi workers/teachers. It envisioned preparing an initial cadre of high-quality ECCE teachers in Anganwadis, current Anganwadi workers will be trained through systematic efforts by the curricular/pedagogical framework developed by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT).

Proficiency in reading, writing, and performing basic operations with numbers by a child reflects the quality of schooling. Learning to read, write and do basic numerical problems is a basic skill mostly developed in school. Much research conducted by government institutions and non-governmental organizations indicates the poor performance of children. According to the NITI Aayog report (2020-21), 71.9% of class 8 students achieved minimum proficiency in language and mathematics. NEP 2020 highlights that there is a large proportion of students currently in elementary schools- estimated to be over 5 crores in number have not attained foundational literacy and numeracy, i.e., the ability to read, comprehend basic text, and the ability to carry out basic addition and subtraction with Indian numerals. NEP 2020 has set a target to achieve universal foundational literacy and numeracy in primary school by 2025.

A shortage of trained teachers is a matter of serious concern in India. According to UNESCO '2021 state of the Education Report for India', 'No Teachers, No Class', around 1.1 lakh schools in India are single-teacher entities. 8.9 percent of these single-teacher schools are in rural areas. To make quality education accessible to every child, top priority should be given to addressing the acute shortage of teachers. Many schools are been managed by guest teachers and teachers appointed under government flagship programs. Indian school education system with nearly 97 lakh teachers is one of the largest school systems in the world. The system has 15 lakh schools (private and Govt) and 26.5 crores students (UDISE+ 2019-20). On average every school in India has 6.4 teachers and students – teacher ratio is 27:1. Insufficient teachers in the school and student dropout are interlinked. NEP 2020 has put teachers at the center of fundamental reforms in the education system. It says the entire transaction and outcome of quality education envisioned in NEP 2020 will depend on teachers. It further stated that the quality of teacher education, recruitment, deployment, service conditions, and empowerment of teachers is

not where it should be, and consequently, the quality and motivation of teachers do not reach the desired standards. It environed to restore the status of teachers or gurus.

School dropout is a major challenge in the school education system. Despite different interventions to address school dropout, the issue continues. UDISE (2020-21) shows a 14.6 percent dropout rate at the secondary level and 0.8 percent at the primary level. Although it shows a 16.1 percent improvement from 2019-2020, still it accounts for lakhs of dropouts. National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21) revealed that the “net attendance ratio falls from 82 percent in primary school to 71 percent in the middle, secondary, and higher secondary school. The main reason for not attending school was a child’s lack of interest in studies.

As per the UDISE+ report, the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) at the elementary level is 97.78 % which declines to 77.97% at the secondary level indicating some serious issues in retaining children in the schooling system. The report shows a sharp decline in enrollment from primary (63251749 Boys and 58434954 girls) to upper primary (6-8) (33427571 boys and 31445816 girls). The enrolment declines in the secondary level (20072356 boys and 18392077 girls) to the Higher Secondary level (13330949 boys and 12616211 girls). A huge proportion of dropout and children out of school comes from rural area and marginalized group of people. Parents generally struggle to provide quality schooling to their children as their priority is a daily livelihood. Financial constraints, engagement in domestic work, taking care of their siblings, etc. are some reasons why children developed disinterest in schooling life. Unfortunately, depriving early quality childhood education and schooling has a long-term effect on a child’s life. It will be a top priority to bring these children back into the educational fold as early as possible and to prevent further students from dropping out, to achieve a 100% Gross Enrolment Ratio in preschool to secondary level by 2030 (NEP 2020).

State of Art infrastructure motivates and enhances the teaching-learning process. Such infrastructure will promote quality education. Smart classroom enhances the interest of learners and teachers, it promotes joyful learning by integrating images, animations, video, audio, etc in teaching-learning. According to UDSE+, 82.9 percent of the school have an electricity connection, 41.3 percent of schools have computers, and 24.5 percent of schools have an internet connection. Infrastructure such as proper toilets for both girls and boys, inclusive friendly toilets, drinking water facilities, playground, etc. will ensure students' interest and quality learning.

Parents play an important role in a child's education. It is often said that 'Home is the first school and parents are the first teachers.' children learned basic values and ethics from their parents. Parents involved in their child's education motivate and develop a positive attitude, improve kids' behavior, develop kids' interest in studies, etc. To achieve quality education accessible to every child, parents' responsibility is equally important.

Conclusion

Quality education for every child is not a new concept that got introduced in Sustainable Development Goals Agenda which was accepted by the United Nations member states. It has existed ever since the inception of the education system. Every education system is for quality education and every policy on education is for quality education. The new National Education Policy 2020 has highlighted every aspect of issues and challenges the present school education system is facing.

The assertion to provide quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) brings hope to millions of Children in the country. One of the biggest challenges school education faces is the shortage of trained quality teachers. Shortage of quality trained teachers is a matter of great concern as it is related to learning outcomes and students' dropout from school. Quality of

education cannot be achieved unless there are sufficient teachers in the school. NEP 2020 has envisioned addressing the problem of teacher shortage by filling the vacancies at the earliest is a positive step towards providing quality education and controlling dropouts. The ability to comprehend and be proficient in reading, writing, and doing basic numerical problems remains a problem for millions of children. This issue will minimize once the school has sufficient teachers and the required infrastructure.

The objective of quality education is to make children competent individuals and responsible citizens. It is to equip them with the necessary values, skills, and knowledge to face the challenges ahead of them. School should be a place where a child's potential is nurtured and developed and not where a syllabus is taught and tested.

Long-term research and a deeper understanding of the school education system are vital to address the issues and challenges of providing quality education to every child.

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