

Schooling Deprivation in India

M VENKATANARAYANA

The high dropout rates in schools are often cited as the cause of educational deprivation among children at the elementary school level. The analysis here points out that it is not the dropout rate, but rather the high rate of non-enrolment which is the real reason for education deprivation. If the goal of universalisation of elementary education is to be achieved there is a strong need for an enrolment drive and an action plan to ensure the attendance and retention of those enrolled.

Given the fact that a large number of children remain out of school, the cited cause of educational deprivation among children, very often is the high dropout rate. The objective of the present note is to point out that it is not the problem of the high dropout rate but the high rate of non-enrolment which is the reason for the educational deprivation of children.

Enrolment

In the Indian context it is observed that there has been a rapid increase in enrolment since independence. According to the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) school-based information, the number of enrolled children in elementary schools (primary and middle, i e, grades 1 to 8) increased from 22.27 million in 1950-51 to 182.0 million in 2004-05, about an eightfold increase since 1950. Though it indicates a rapid progress in the number of enrolled children, it is unable to indicate the progress in the goal achievement, i e, universalisation of elementary schooling. Gross enrolment ratio defined as a ratio of total enrolled children in the elementary school to the total elementary school age children (5 to 14 age group) is a measure to indicate such progress. The gross enrolment ratio in India indicates the progress is still short of the goal of universalisation of elementary schooling. It was about 32.1% in 1950-51 and 93.2% in 2004-05, almost threefold increase since independence.

Although the progress is remarkable in the enrolment rate in India during last 50 years or so since independence, however it is an undisputable fact that there are a large number of children who remain out of school. Many of the out-of-school children might not have even seen the school premises. Moreover, one is not sure about the number of children who entered grade 1 and continued

until completion of grade 8 (the elementary cycle).

Wastage, Stagnation and Non-Enrolment

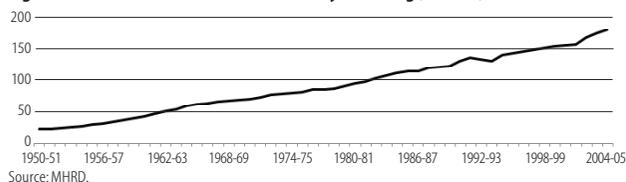
Wastage and stagnation have been major problems in the field of primary and middle school education. Non-participation (or non-enrolment) of some eligible children, dropout of a considerable number of children enrolled before they complete the elementary cycle (7/8 grade) and stagnation (grade repetition) of a sizeable section of students are some of the major problems of elementary schooling in India. Premature withdrawal of a student from school before completion of the last class/grade (elementary cycle) leads to wastage, while stagnation implies retention of a student in a class for more than the required period of stay due to unsatisfactory progress. As a matter of fact, both the individual and social cost of dropping out of school have increased. It is true that some of the facilities – physical, material and human – go wasted for various reasons, including non-enrolment of the requisite number of pupils. The problem of wastage and stagnation in terms of dropouts and repeaters was initially brought out in India during the colonial period in the Education Report of 1921-22 by the British government. Then onwards the problem has been seriously taken into consideration and concurrently significant education resources have been applied to student retention efforts. But, despite the efforts of the governments of both the colonial and that of independent India, this problem in the education system continues to persist.

In order to understand the problem of wastage and stagnation in school education, one has to examine the schooling experience/history of these (currently) out-of-school children, i e, whether these children have previously attended school at any point of time during their school-age period. If a child had attended school but withdrew after sometime (days/month/years) due to some reason and the child is presently not attending school, then the child is said to be a dropout. If the child did not have any experience of school

M Venkatanarayana (venkatanarayan@gmail.com) is a consultant at the Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Hyderabad.

attendance earlier and is also currently not attending school, then the child is considered to have never attended school. Enrolment is a prerequisite for school attendance. In other words, if a child is to attend school, the child has to be enrolled

Figure 1: Growth of Enrolment in Elementary Schooling (in million)



Source: MHRD.

in the school. One has to note that it is possible for a child to attend school that ensures enrolment but the enrolment in a school does not ensure attendance. The child's enrolment is governed by the child's and/or the parents' interest in education (voluntarily) and favourable socio-economic conditions at home on the one hand, and government that ensures the enrolment of children of school-age (enforcement) on the other. Further, the child's attendance and continuation in school is governed by several factors involving the home/family and school. The interest of both the child and the parents in education has to be supported by the socio-economic conditions of their family and the school has to encourage and nurture their interest in education. Moreover, the school has to facilitate a learning process and an environment that ensures the child's enjoyment while learning. If one or none of these factors are not favourable for attendance and continuation, the child may discontinue attending school and remain a dropout.

One has to note that the state's (government) enforcement mechanism may enforce enrolment but does not enforce and monitor each enrolled child for continuous attendance in school till the child completes the minimum level of education, i e, elementary cycle (grade 8) or till the child completes the upper limit of school-age, say 14 years. In this situation it has been observed that there is a huge gap between the number of children enrolled and the number of children actually attending schools. The gap indicates the number of children that dropped out. It is an established fact that there are instances where overenthusiastic school teachers try to meet their targets under the government

enrolment drives, gather names of the children who are not enrolled and fill up the enrolment register sometimes even without the consent of the child or the parents. It also happens that to reach the target the teachers enrol both under-aged (below five years) and over-aged (above 14 years) children. But they do not ensure that all enrolled children attend school. One of the reasons for the high dropout rate, according school-based information (MHRD), is due to this kind of "fictitious enrolment".

The child's performance and conduct at the school may also lead to the problem of wastage and stagnation. On the one hand, the bad conduct of the child may sometimes be the reason why the child was forced to leave school or the child may be retained in the same grade as a punishment, although rare. On the other hand, under the detention system of education, the poor performance in a grade or failure in the examination may lead to either stagnation (repeating a grade) or dropout. But the non-detention system, a system of automatic promotion, followed in India does not allow the detention-led wastage or stagnation. The non-detention policy prohibits the use of examinations in first few years of schooling. Under this system, the students are automatically promoted to the next class provided their attendance conforms to the stipulated percentage.

The severity of the problem of wastage/dropout – the dropout rate – is measured by the percentage of dropped out to the total enrolled children. Calculating an accurate dropout rate with the available statistics is almost impossible but arbitrarily possible. For information related to dropout children, the school and household are two important sources. The school-based information helps us to get the dropout rate among the cohort of children who enrolled in grade 1 and completed certain years of education, i e, primary or elementary cycle. Studies on wastage and stagnation in primary education are beset

with the usual difficulties. If the attendance registers are properly maintained, it is possible to calculate cohort-based measures of wastage and stagnation. But they are not properly maintained in the Indian education system especially as the schooling stage. Given the dearth of information, arbitrary methods are exercised.

According to MHRD the dropout rate was 78.3% in 1960-61. It indicates that out of those who entered grade 1, about 78.3% were withdrawn from school before reaching or completing grade 8 and only 21.7% completed elementary schooling, i e, grade 8. Over the period there has been a positive change in terms of decline in the dropout rate where it declined to 50% in 2004-05. But this figure again is unacceptable. Of those enrolled in grade 1 only half of them are able to complete the elementary education and the remaining 50% dropped out before the completion of grade 8. The high dropout indicates that a large number of children who are enrolled in schools are withdrawn before the completion of the particular grade without entering the next grade and thereby they are unable to complete the elementary education cycle. The high dropout rate in school education (i e, elementary cycle including primary and middle) is undermining whatever the achievements made in growth of enrolment over a period of time. The school dropouts remain out of school so that these children are said to be deprived of even the minimum level of schooling.

Table 1: The Current Attendance in Educational Institutions: Status of Children Age 5 to 14

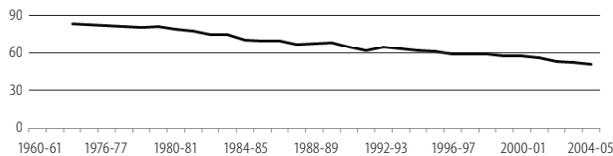
Age Group	Currently Not Attending			Currently Attending (CA)			
	Never Attended (NE)	Ever Attended but Currently Not (DO)	Total	Non-formal	Pre-primary	Formal School	Total
5-9	17.8	1.0	18.8	0.4	6.4	74.4	81.2
10-14	8.8	7.2	16.0	0.1	0.3	83.6	84.0
5-14	13.3	4.1	17.4	0.2	3.3	79.0	82.6

NE- Never attended/Non-enrolment; DO – Dropouts; CA – Currently attending. Source: NSS Employment and Unemployment Survey 61st (2004-05) round.

Household level census/survey can collect information on the current school attendance status of children and track their previous experience attending school. The Census of India that takes place once a decade, does enumerate the number of school-age children in each household and their current attendance status along with the other household's demographic particulars, but it does not track down the

school attendance experience/history of the older age groups children who are currently not attending school. Thus, based on the census data one can figure out the number of children currently not attending school but cannot differentiate between dropouts and non-enrolled children among those who are currently not attending school. One has to note that the school-based information related to enrolment and dropout takes into account only the teachers' viewpoint leaving out both the child and the parents'. The household survey-based information considers the parents' viewpoint about the children's current and history of school attendance status.

Figure 2: Dropout Rate in Elementary Schooling (Grade 1-8) (in %)



Unlike the census, the recent national level surveys like the National Sample Survey (NSS) and National Family Health Survey (NFHS), however, seem to track down the schooling experience of children who are currently not attending school. The NSS sixth quinquennial survey on employment and unemployment (2004-05), covered the status of current attendance (whether attending or not) in educational institutions for persons below 30 years of age including the 5 to 14 years age group the cycle. Moreover, for those children not attending school, it enquired about whether the child ever/never attended school earlier and if it is attending, the level of education or the grade.

One may observe the distribution of children in the school-age (5 to 14) by their current attendance status and previous school attendance experience of currently not attending children from the latest available estimations of NSS from Table 1 (p 13). The children are categorised, firstly, into those who are attending school and those not attending. Of those not attending school, again categorised into those who never attended and those who (ever) attended but currently not attending. The former category (never attended) is treated as non-enrolment and the latter category (ever attended but

currently not) are treated as dropouts. The survey (NSS 61st Round) data indicates that about 13.3% of total children were never enrolled, only 4.1% were dropouts and both together, 17.4%, were not attending school. In other words about 82.6% of the children in the 5 to 14 age group are attending school including attending non-formal (0.2%) and pre-primary (3.3%) institutions in 2004-05 (Table 1). In terms of size, of the 241 million child population (5 to 14 age group) the number of children found to be out of school were about 42 million, of which children, those who never attended were 32 million and the dropouts were 10 million. In other words, while non-enrolment is about 76.4%

of the total out-of-school children, the rest, i.e., 23.6% are the dropouts.

Likewise the NFHS-3 (2005-06) also enquired into the school

attendance status of the 5 to 18 age group children for the previous two academic years of 2005-06 and 2004-05 and the grade of those attending school in the household schedule. Based on the information collected for these two subsequent academic years, the child's academic experience is recategorised – as never attended if the child has not attended school for the two

Table 2: School Attendance Status

Attendance Status	School Age		
	5-14	5-9	10-14
Never attended	21.53	32.9	10.2
Entered school	9.10	17.2	1.1
Advanced	62.40	45.8	79.0
Repeating	1.81	2.2	1.4
Dropout	1.29	0.2	2.4
Left school 2+ years ago	3.86	1.7	6.0
Total	100	100	100

Source: NFHS-3 (2005-06).

consequent academic years; entered school if the child reports attendance in current academic year 2005-06 but not in the previous academic year 2004-05, advanced if the child was attending two academic years and promoted to the next grade in the current academic year from the grade of the previous academic year; repeated if the child attends and studies in the same grade for two consecutive academic years; dropout if the child attended previous academic year but not attending

the current academic year. Also if the school age child has reportedly completed a particular grade of education but during the last two academic years the child did not attend the school, then the child is categorised as "left school 2+ years ago".

The attendance status of the 5 to 14 age group children based on the NFHS-3 (2005-06) shows that about 21.5% of the children never attended (Table 2), there were about 1.3% dropouts and about 3.9% left school two plus years ago, together 5.2% are dropouts. Altogether about 26.7% are currently not attending school.

One may point out that though the attendance level varies with the information based on two national sample surveys (maybe owing to difference in sample design), both the surveys indicate that the real problem of non-attendance is largely associated with the problem of non-enrolment rather than the problem of dropout.

On the whole it is important to note that though school-based information indicates a high dropout rate, the household survey (NSS and NFHS)-based information indicates a high incidence of non-enrolment among the school-age children when compared to the incidence of dropout. The prevalence of a high dropout rate based on school-based information could be due to fictitious enrolment especially at primary schools. The high incidence of non-enrolment based on survey information shows that a large number of children are yet to enter school.

Concluding Remarks

A severe problem faced by Indian society is the educational deprivation of children of the school age group (5 to 14 years). Another problem that the Indian education system has been experiencing is high "dropout". The recent evidence, however, shows that the problem is not the high dropout rate but the non-enrolment of school age children. Given the facts, to attain the goal of universalisation of elementary education, there is a strong need for an enrolment drive by which the enrolment of non-enrolled children takes place. There is also a need for an action plan to ensure the attendance and retention of all those enrolled.