

Urban Schooling

Mired in Apathy and Prejudice

Policies and programmes designed to ensure universal elementary education have failed to capture the specific situation of urban children. Despite the provision of schools, deprived children in urban areas face systematic and schematic barriers in accessing education opportunities, even as the quality of education offered leaves much to be desired.

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It is not easy to work in urban areas, especially in the area of universal elementary education (UEE). For over six decades now educational backwardness has been synonymous with rural and remote areas, with small habitations and poor infrastructure and connectivity. Urban deprived children were largely synonymous with homeless and street children. However, systemic issues of teacher absenteeism, lack of motivation and overcrowded classrooms have also been associated with urban India. But we have all heard of the travails of teachers working in tribal areas; we rarely hear about the urban school teacher or the municipal schools.

What are the issues that frame UEE in urban areas? For a start, a quick tour around municipal schools of Delhi will tell you that schools are overcrowded, buildings are in a terrible state and teachers, if present, are sitting around drinking tea, or shelling peanuts or smoking beedis or knitting. Hardly any teaching or learning happens in many schools. The few teachers who do teach will tell you that children are highly motivated and they want to learn and that they are desperate to break out of the cycle of poverty and illiteracy and see education as the only ray of hope. People working with the urban poor will corroborate such observations. Yes the poor want education, they are hungry for good quality education and they hope it may be the only way out of poverty and powerlessness.

Recently, I went around urban schools of Hyderabad during a holiday camp for children who could not read and write. Around 90 camps were organised by a local organisation in collaboration with Pratham, Mumbai. Here I got to talk to a different set of teachers. When I asked them why children in class five could not read or write they told me “these children

are not interested in studies, they are irregular, they come from families that do not value education...” These views are not uncommon. Walk into any municipal school in a very poor locality and you will hear teachers complaining about children and their parents.

The fundamental issue is that the government and international agencies funding elementary education have neglected urban education. Close to 35 per cent of our population now live in urban areas, ranging from huge metropolises to small urban centres that have sprung up in almost all parts of the country. Driven out of their villages due to poverty, lack of opportunities for farm and/or non-farm employment, urban areas have witnessed a steady inflow of migration. Equally, large cities have also witnessed the steady trickle of children who have either run away from home or from abusive/exploitative situations. Most recently (May and June 2005) the entire country witnessed with shock the rescue of child workers in urban sweatshops of Mumbai and Delhi.

UEE in Urban Areas

What then are the issues framing universal elementary education in urban areas?

Firstly, access to good quality and relevant education remains a big issue in urban areas. While children may technically have access to primary and secondary schools, these do not function effectively. The time spent in teaching-learning is cause for concern. As the government essentially monitors enrolment rates, dysfunctional or poorly functioning schools are not noticed in official monitoring reports.

Secondly, while broad policies and programmes are certainly important, they fail to capture the specific situation of urban children. Organisations working in urban areas repeatedly point out that there are systematic and schematic barriers to

access, continuation and transition. Given the steady immigration into cities and cross-migration within cities, problems faced by children who migrate with their families are rarely factored into planning. Persistent demand for identity proof, birth certificate and transfer certificate continue to block easy access. The specific problems of child workers, street children (who have run away from home) and children in difficult circumstances are not factored into schematic patterns. While political leaders talk about the complicated situation in urban areas, administrators are not willing to mould or adapt schemes and programmes for the urban poor. For example, in Mumbai six wards account for 70 per cent of out-of-school children (Survey by Pratham 2004). The ongoing Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan is yet another example of how planning in broad strokes leaves huge gaps on the ground.

The third issue pertains to defining a community around a school – who are the stakeholders? Are they the parents, neighbourhood leaders, local voluntary groups or social action groups? People working in urban areas point out parents have little time to come to school and they may be away from their locality all day. Children are often left at home with elders or with siblings. Social workers working in the area see themselves as the primary stakeholders. Again, the concept of School Education Committee (SEC) and Village Education Committee (VEC) were designed for rural areas and do fit into the urban context.

The fourth big issue is one of quality. It is now widely acknowledged that quality education is not only about learning outcomes, it has to do with relevance, happiness index and what the child takes away from the school other than just reading and writing. But even if we were to limit the quality discourse to learning, evidence from across the country shows that there is very little learning in urban municipal schools. But to emphasise a point, even if we are to keep quality education value-neutral, we still need concrete measures to see whether we are making progress on holistic development of children.

Fifth, attitudes of teachers in urban areas remain a big issue. The social distance between teachers (who are middle class) and vast majority of children (who come from extremely poor families) reveals vast and abusive behaviour, derogatory language and punishment which in turn affects the self-esteem and confidence of children. The government has to

acknowledge that quality is not just about buildings and toilets. Education is about building capacities, confidence and concrete skills.

Tracking Progress

How then can we track progress and measure processes and outcomes?

We need indicators that tell us whether the school is functioning. We need mechanisms to ensure teachers not only come but also teach. We must insist teachers treat children with dignity and respect, upholding the fundamental tenets of our Constitution. We may have to identify and appoint monitors drawn from the larger community of stakeholders who are authorised to inspect schools and record what is happening or not happening. A periodic survey among children is necessary to take on board their experiences and their "happiness", maybe the time has come to develop a "happiness index". Corporal punishment, abusive behaviour of teachers and day-to-day experiences of children need to be recorded by an independent group or committee.

We also need to monitor learning outcomes of children through periodic activities such as competitions, exhibitions of the work of children, science and mathematics fairs and so on. Examinations are not adequate to measure outcomes, we need to go beyond these and involve local groups of young people to ascertain what and how much are children benefiting from schooling.

Getting out-of-school children back into the formal school system needs to be addressed systematically. One-off bridge courses are not enough. Special classes and regular interaction with children who have entered the formal stream through bridge courses are necessary. This is particularly important in the light of the experience of pioneering organisations like M V Foundation and Pratham, which show that "mainstreamed" children tend to drop out quickly for a range of reasons. Providing such children with ongoing academic support as well as counselling is important.

The government and civil society organisations need to seriously review systemic and norm-related issues that hinder access and quality in urban schools. The issues and challenges may vary from large metros to small towns and mofussil areas. We need to deconstruct the omnibus financial patterns of programme like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and develop norms to suit a specific area or situation.

The school plays an important role in the life of the child. Therefore we need to build meaningful linkages with the community – not only parents but also interested stakeholders and social workers.

Lastly, we need to increase energy levels in the system. Today cynicism and apathy

is more a norm than an exception. Structured activities (competitions, fairs, exhibitions – in every school) and regular monitoring is essential to infuse optimism and hope. **EPW**

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