

No Education in the Schools

On paper, school enrolment is up but learning levels are way down.

School education in India is like a blank blackboard on which the teacher writes with disappearing ink. There are more children going to school today than ever before. But they are learning and retaining less knowledge than they did before. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) based on a survey conducted by the non-governmental organisation Pratham Education Foundation has been regularly illustrating the alarmingly skewed state of affairs in schools. This year, the report based on a rural household survey has exposed the dismal status of schooling and basic learning in rural India. While school enrolment numbers have gone up (96.5% of all children in the 6-14 age group go to school) and school infrastructure has improved, attendance (in government schools) and the overall ability of children to read and do simple mathematical exercises have dipped drastically in India's rural classrooms.

It is clear that merely increasing enrolment does not add up to better education. The more challenging job is to retain those who enter school. Here the government has failed as the drop-out rate in higher classes continues to grow.

The ASER survey has routinely highlighted the poor quality of teaching in government schools. The 2012 survey found that 67.8% of the students in class v could not read or comprehend the study material of class II. While there are a number of complex strands responsible for this situation, the generally poor training and status of the primary schoolteacher is one major reason. Another, according to the ASER, could be the continuous comprehensive evaluation (CCE) carried out under the Right to Education (RTE) Act. Added to this, the absence of the traditional annual examination (students cannot be detained in the same class until class VIII) means that the student's failure to grasp what is being taught does not ring any warning bells before class IX. Although the ASER has pointed to this as one reason for the decline in quality, it is an issue that requires greater study. The ASER also claims that primary school outcomes have deteriorated since the RTE Act came into force in 2010. How can the RTE within a year of being unevenly and hesitatingly implemented around the country have had

this kind of impact (or for that matter, any impact) on outcomes? A significant finding is that children in private schools seem to be doing better academically than their counterparts in government schools.

The problem of poor quality of learning due to the poor quality of teacher training has been addressed by several other studies and the government has also taken note of it by earmarking funds in the Twelfth Five-Year Plan to address this issue. The basic qualification to apply for a diploma teacher training course is class XII. Only a minuscule number of these courses are up to the mark. Such teachers are recruited on low salaries and have to work in abysmal conditions. It is hardly surprising that they are unable to impart good quality education.

The other more worrying aspect highlighted by the ASER is the increase in enrolment in private schools. Between 2006 and 2012 it has risen from 18.7% in 2006 to 28.3%. At this rate, predicts ASER, it could be 50% in a few years. Clearly, people in rural areas are choosing private schools over government ones. However, educationists are divided on the finding that children in private schools are doing better. The irony is that most of the government schools not only have better infrastructure but better paid teachers compared to the many small private schools. The Pratham study also showed that students attending government schools across states tend to patronise private tuition classes more than their counterparts in private schools, underlining again the absence of quality education in government schools.

Ultimately, ensuring quality education for children is a task that involves not just individual families but the entire community. Experiments to involve the community as a whole and ensure that the village representatives have a say in teacher recruitment, monitoring and accountability have been successful where the involvement is high.

None of the factors mentioned above can alone make a difference. Quality teacher training, infrastructure, teaching resources and community involvement in ensuring teacher and school accountability must go hand in hand. The quality of our children's education will determine the quality of our citizenry in the coming years.