

# **Equity and Quality in Education**

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1. "Let every child bloom!" This is a pious wish, one can pray for it.
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3. **“Every child irrespective of her circumstances and place of birth and with individual strengths and weakness has a fundamental right to quality education.” This is a political or rights based statement. Create societal pressure for implementation.**

## **I. Introduction:**

Today educationists and child right activists from all over the globe are struggling at the level of social intervention. Let us keep in mind that we are not alone. Many movements, activists, thinkers, pedagogues, NGOs, international bodies and even part of corporate world are with us. Of course, to understand the strengths and limitations of all those who are with us one must constantly try to get in to reasons, logic, philosophical viewpoints, etc. Those apart, let us concentrate on the level of social intervention. Article 29 (1) of “Convention on the Rights of the Child” (UN)<sup>1</sup> enumerates following aims of education and urges States Parties to agree to direct their policies and efforts in that direction:

- a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
- b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
- c) The development of respect (*why not affection instead?*) for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;
- d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;
- e) The development of respect for the natural environment.

To this list of the lofty aims, one must add a down to earth one. That refers to role of education leading the child to her economic upliftment. Dr. A P J Abdul Kalam<sup>2</sup> perhaps underlined this by saying, “The root cause of poverty lies in illiteracy, unemployment and lack of basic healthcare and there is a need to sharply increase public spending in these areas”. In short, President of India wishes that India should move towards equity. To attain equity India needs to offer quality education for all. In absence of equity in quality of education, the nation will increasingly resort various types of reservations as second option, and still be far away from fair play of opportunities.

## **II. Equity in Education:**

A primary and explicitly stated objective of education policy of a welfare state must be to ensure equality of opportunities by way of securing that all citizens have access to the resources necessary.

**1. Equity makes education fair:** Equity and Efficiency are the two cornerstones of any educational policy. Equity makes education fair (or lack of it makes it unfair). Thus, it is very important to disentangle the effect of pupils’ background from the effect of school quality. It requires that per pupil funding needs to be larger for disadvantaged pupils. If every child could make appropriate

academic growth each year, equity could be achieved and can reflect in to equality of simple group averages (like say a group of illiterate persons or that of Degree Holders) across various demographic subgroups (say caste, religion, region or gender groups).

## **2. The three overlapping core dimensions of equity refer to**

- a) The pursuit of equal life chances for all citizens. Education policy need not necessarily aim at achieving identical end-results for all, but rather aim at what might be termed *equivalent outcomes*. It assumes a strong emphasis on identical treatment of all students to greater individual autonomy and diversity. The aim of equity should be all children will complete the equivalent of upper secondary school and that all be given the opportunity to pursue higher studies if they so desire.
- b) The egalitarianism is inseparable from the feeling of security in life. Insecurity in life hampers individual self-realization and also parents' ability to make the best educational choices on behalf of their children. Thus, the aim of education policy should be to eliminate performance anxiety among children, and to inculcate a culture that promotes the desire to learn.
- c) The universalism in terms of accessibility to quality education, financial and other help to the needy to facilitate individual accomplishment.

## **III. Obstacles to Equity:**

“Let every child bloom!” is a pious wish. We cannot keep on praying for it. Rather we should move towards the fundamental right of children. We as a nation should recognise that every child irrespective of her circumstances and place of birth and with individual strengths and weakness has a fundamental right to quality education. This resolve if backed by a scientific research, it might gather strength. Scientific Research fails to prove that children of particular races, casts or nation<sup>3,4</sup> are superior that some other in terms of being potentially able and creative. In realising this potential on national plane, many inherent problems do exist in our society. Unless the society evolves some mechanism to tackle them, it is difficult to overcome them. Let us see those briefly.

1. Education as any other commodity: Whether we like it or not, today education has become a marketable commodity. The quality of this commodity in general depends upon the cost of it. There is a plethora of schools catering to the students with varying paying capacity. Normally the Government schools are for poor people, Government aided ones are for middle classes and the unaided are for the rich and super rich population. These categories of schools in general sequentially offer better quality. It results in to the fact that no more than 25% of all working-class youngsters complete a preparatory programme for higher education, as against 70% of all children of high-level white-collar workers<sup>5</sup>. One finds its expression in large-scale teacher absenteeism in government schools. A snap shot survey of this phenomenon shows that twenty-five percent of teachers were absent from school, and only about half were teaching, during unannounced visits to a nationally representative sample of government primary schools in India. Absentee rates varied from 15% in Maharashtra to 42% in Jharkhand, with higher rates concentrated in the poorer states.
2. Question of social inheritance: Students do not inherit only economic status from their parents. They inherit social divides like cast, religion, gender, level of urbanisation and the customs and biases based upon all these divides as well. Students coming from rural

background, lower casts, belonging to minority religions and of feminine gender are a disadvantaged lot. A recent study Jyotsna Zha and Dhir Jhingran<sup>6</sup> discuss the impacts of these factors in the light of Universalisation of Primary Education.

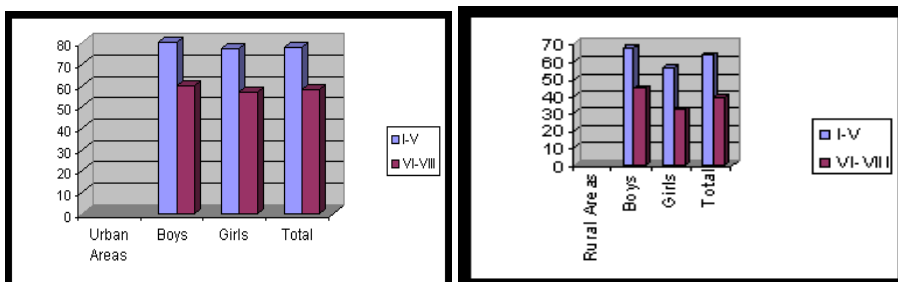
#### **IV. Absence of Equity is reflected in:**

**1. Unequal Enrolment:** Please note the gender difference in both the ratios for boys and girls.

Table 1: State wise (for few) Gross Enrolment/Net Enrolment Ratio (1997-98) At Primary Level (6-11 years)<sup>7</sup>

States	Gross Enrolment Ratio			Net Enrolment Ratio		
	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls
Kerala	90.10	91.30	88.80	71.5	72.5	70.4
Madhya Pradesh	102.40	114.50	89.40	88.1	97.4	78.2
Maharashtra	112.90	115.70	110.00	84.4	86.2	82.5
INDIA	90.3	98.5	81.5	71.1	77.7	64

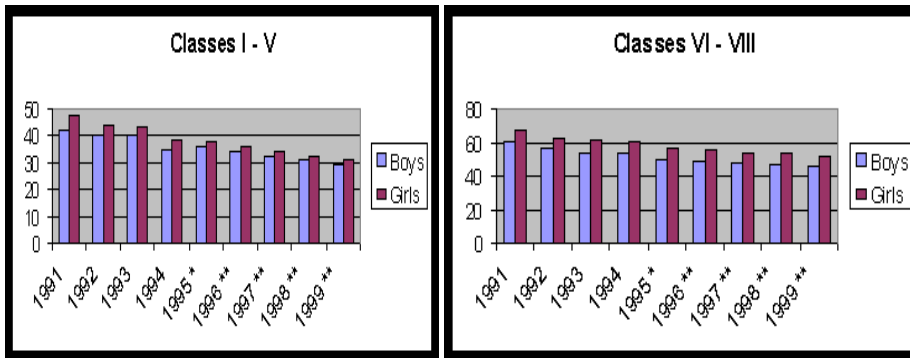
**2. Attendance Difference<sup>8</sup>:** The chart-1 below shows an urban-rural divide and that between boys and girls as well regarding Net Attendance Ratio. The left hand chart is for the urban areas while that on the right hand refers to the rural areas. Both the charts indicate the net attendance ratios for both primary and higher primary classes in different colours.



3. **Drop out rates:** Chart 2 provides<sup>9</sup> the dropout rates at primary and upper primary stages For the sake of equity, India needs to address the reasons behind higher drop out rates of girls. Unfortunately, I could not access similar information on the differential drop out rates for different students of different religions, caste, coming from urban and rural areas. It is quite likely that the inequity among these subgroups is appalling. For example, Sonia Sarkar<sup>10</sup> notes, “Amid quota push, dropout rates soar”. She says that “the number of dropouts increases in higher classes, as it is 36.56% among SC children studying in the Class I-V

group, it goes up to 59.42% till Class VIII. The picture is as grim for dropout rates of ST students from Class I-V, which is 48.93%, and 70.05% till Class VIII.” It is an urgent task to search for the reasons behind such divides and to remove the obstacles to equity.

Chart 2: Drop-out Rates at Primary and Upper Primary Stages



\* Provisional

\*\* Estimated (5 percent decrease at I-V and 2 percent decrease at VI-VIII)

## V. NCF 2005 On Equity:

National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCF)<sup>11</sup> is a document that bases itself, before anything else, on the constitutional vision of India as a secular, egalitarian and pluralistic society founded on the values of social justice and equality. Therein lies its strength and conviction. The aims of education are identified within this broad framework. In chapter 4 (Page 83-84) under the title “PARTICIPATION OF ALL CHILDREN”, NCF reiterates its stand in the following words, “Children cannot wake up one fine morning when they are 18 and know how to participate in, preserve and enhance a democracy. ... The participation of children is a means to a much larger end, that of preserving and adding a new vibrancy to our culture of egalitarianism, democracy, secularism and equality. These values can be best realised through an integrated and well-designed curriculum that enables children’s participation. The existing environment of unhealthy competition in schools promotes values that are the antithesis of the values enshrined in our Constitution.” NCF talks of equity at least on two occasions:

In Chapter 3 (Page 49-50) under the title “Outlook”, NCF brings to surface three issues with reference to the complex scenario of science education in India. Though the context is that of science education, most of the arguments are valid (in varying degrees of applicability) to other disciplines as well.

1. Science education is still far from achieving the goal of equity enshrined in our Constitution. (*One fails to understand whether it is talking of equity in education or in other fields.*)

2. Science education in India, even at its best, develops competence but does not encourage inventiveness and creativity. (*This is a comment on the quality of science education. In reality, this is valid for other disciplines as well.*)
3. The overpowering examination system is basic to most, if not all, the fundamental problems of science (*and that of other disciplines*) education in India.

The NCF recommends (to whom? states?) using textbooks (TBs) as one of the primary instruments for equity. The question is can the TBs (even granting the plurality of TBS) be capable performing the ascribed role by NCF? This is not going to change the situation for better. However, it is a step forward.

In Chapter 4 (Page 81-82) under the title “NURTURING AND ENABLING ENVIRONMENT” NCF says, “As public spaces, schools must be marked by the values of equality, social justice and respect for diversity, as well as of the dignity and rights of children. These values must be consciously made part of the perspective of the school and form the foundation of school practice. An enabling learning environment is one where children feel secure, where there is absence of fear, and which is governed by relationships of equality and equity. Often this does not require any special effort on the part of the teacher, except to practise equality and not discriminate among children. Teachers should also nurture their classroom spaces as places where children can ask questions freely, engaging in a dialogue with the teacher as well as their peers, during an ongoing lesson.”

## **VI. Quality Education:**

The repetitive nature of urging for equity itself is a concrete proof of its grand failure in its realisation. Amongst many reasons behind this grand failure, “absence of quality education for all” stands out starkly. Many National and International commissions and committees on education have referred to Equity (and a slight misnomer equality) that is closely linked to the quality of education. For example, UNESCO at a Ministerial Round Table (on Quality of Education), held in 2003 had reaffirmed the importance of good quality education to all. Rather the report promotes access to good-quality education as a human right. The meaning of the term “quality of education” depends upon the perspective one holds or the conceptual frameworks one uses to define what education is.

A Report to UNESCO<sup>12</sup> education throughout life as based upon four pillars:

- Learning to know acknowledges that learners build their own knowledge daily, combining indigenous and ‘external’ elements.
- Learning to do focuses on the practical application of what is learned.
- Learning to live together addresses the critical skills for a life free from discrimination, where all have equal opportunity to develop themselves, their families and their communities.
- Learning to be emphasizes the skills needed for individuals to develop their full potential.

This way of conceptualisation of education provides an integrated and comprehensive view of learning and, therefore, according to the report constitutes quality of education.

The same Report carries an article “Upgrading the Quality of School Education” by *Isao Amagi* (PP 41-42). According to the perception of the author, the present basic functions of formal school education are likely to survive in this century. As a result, “Educational Policy” should address the question of the quality of school education from the following three aspects:

**1. Upgrading the quality of teachers**, through the adoption of the following policies and measures:

- *The level of pre-service education of teachers*, which is carried out at secondary school level in some countries, should be raised to higher education level, as in the case of many industrially developed countries, which have created teachers’ colleges and universities. In some of those countries, graduate courses are offered in teacher education.
- *Teachers’ certificates* should indicate whether they are for primary school, secondary school, technical or vocational education, teaching the handicapped etc., according to the pre-service education.
- *Recruitment and placement* of teachers should reflect an equitable balance between the various subject-areas, experienced and less-experienced teachers, urban and rural areas, etc.
- *In-service training* is strongly recommended as lifelong education of all those engaged in the teaching profession to upgrade teaching capacities both in theory and practice. Curriculum development and related matters (see (2) below) should be taken into account in the in-service training of teachers.
- *Working conditions of teachers* – such as class size, working hours/days and supporting facilities – should be considered.
- *Teachers’ salaries* should be high enough to attract promising young people to the teaching profession and a reasonable balance achieved between their salaries and those of other civil servants.

The formulation of a comprehensive teacher policy, combined with above-mentioned measures, should be a matter of prime concern to the authorities concerned.

**2. The design and development of the curriculum and related matters** should be carried out by the authorities and professional groups concerned. The school curriculum reflects the contents of teacher-training courses.

Teaching methods, textbooks, teaching materials and aids should be developed simultaneously with the curriculum. Academic research achievements in natural and social sciences, and humanities should be taken into account in curriculum development. The important role of experimental studies, and experience of working and living with nature, should also be considered in the development of teaching and learning methods.

**3. The improvement of school management** is the third area in which school education can be upgraded. School is a fundamental educational establishment where practical educational activities are carried out systematically. Although in most cases teachers work alone in classrooms, they are members of a group, which works together to develop what could be called a ‘school culture’. We can hardly expect high-quality school education without good

leadership on the part of the headmaster and active co-operation of teachers in school management.

Finally, improving the quality of school education considered from the three aspects mentioned above should be a fundamental policy issues in all countries, whatever their circumstances, in the coming century.

## **VII. Indicator Questions for quality:**

The answers to the following and similar such questions can help judge the extent of quality up-gradation in education:

### 1. Curriculum Related Questions-

- How far teaching is textbook centred?
- Whether the syllabus or the content of every discipline is age appropriate or is it out of the compulsions of higher level of courses?
- Whether the system considers learning as a process or is shaping a finished product?
- Does the system encourage students to critically analyse the ways in which formal knowledge is produced and transmitted in the process of learning itself?
- Whether the system seriously attempts to contextualise learning vis-à-vis the life and culture of students and helps them to transcend the existing boundaries of their life?
- Does the curriculum that is followed in a school is referred by the name of the Board of examination (CBSE, ICSE, IB, SSC etc)?
- How far the purpose of teaching and learning is to prepare pupil for examination?
- Whether the examinations follow the curriculum or curriculum follows examination?
- Whether the curriculum is standardized, prescribed, externally defined or controlled?
- Does the curriculum help learners to construct their own meanings and for flexibility?
- Is the curriculum rigid or flexible with respect to the individual learners' circumstances and needs?

### 2. Teacher related Questions-

- Whether the education system expects teachers to instruct, give information and manage or control a class?
- Do teachers generate active participation by learners in a classroom?
- Do the teachers act like senior friends of students who lead and help them to experience the process of learning?
- Whether the salary and working conditions are attractive enough so that the system can attract creative and academically expert persons in the teaching profession?
- How frequently teachers get opportunity to participate in the in-service training and capacity up-gradation?
- What is the class size that a teacher has to manage?

### 3. Assessment related Questions:

- What role the educational system assigns to the assessments?
- Does educational system equate performance in tests and examinations with learning?

- Do the tests and examinations act as main means to give rewards or punishments to students?
- Whether the performance in examinations is used to either give or deny entry to further opportunities?
- Do the tests and examinations give only marks/ grades to the students or they give information and feedback about the quality of individual learner's learning?
- Whether systems of self-assessment and peer assessment exist? If yes, what weightage it carries?
- Whether the assessments help teachers to modify her/his methods of teaching, paying better/ more individual attention to children?

Assessment of student achievement should change, largely because they will face a world that will demand new knowledge and abilities. Today's students will need to understand the basics and will need to learn to think critically, to analyse, and to make inferences. Helping students develop these skills will require changes in assessment at the school and classroom level, and of course at the external board examinations. Regarding the assessments and examinations one must remember that

- Students' achievements do not "grow" by simply increasing the amount of testing.
- Designing good test items and questions to assess learning of students is a skilled job. Teachers should spend time thinking about and devising such questions.
- As long as examinations and tests assess children's ability to remember and recall textbook information, all attempts to reform the curriculum are bound to fail. That is because what gets assessed is what gets taught in the classroom.
- The nature of External Board Examinations (irrespective of their names) percolate down right up to the lowest level classroom even in the remotest of the area.

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