A Vision for Quality Education

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Recent years have seen a growing concern with the quality of education being imparted in schools, especially within the government school sector. Every survey, be it the Annual State Education Report (ASER) report or the National Achievement Survey of NCERT or the international test [PISA], all have shown levels of learning, even in basic competencies of reading and math, to be much lower than what they should be. The alarming results have led to heated debates over the causes of decline in quality and possible solutions to the problems. In addition to issues related to the essentials of education, concerns about governance have also emerged as contributing factors to the declining quality of schools and education. Questions have even been posed about the credibility of testing methods, the validity of quantifying learning, the nature of assessment indicators used and so on. However, in the absence of adequate research-based evidence, sharp lines have been drawn between the proponents of different approaches with no signs of a consensus emerging.

In the midst of the heated discussions, there is a real danger of getting distracted from the core vision for education to the detriment of all – education, the children, and the nation. Are we losing sight of the broader vision, in the rush to find 'solutions' ? Are we willing to cut corners and neglect essential processes in order to show 'results?' Are we avoiding engagement with institutional factors and circumventing them instead, to hasten the pace of achievements without worrying about their desirability or durability? Are we losing sight of the purpose of education and allowing it to be driven by concerns of the economy instead? On the eve of a New Education Policy, it is an opportune moment to step back from these contentious debates and focus on where we stand on our real vision for education. Three strands in the current discourse, that appear to present a threat to the larger goals and vision, are discussed here.

i) Skill or Education?

Perhaps, the most fundamental element of how we perceive education lies in the distinction often made in academic and policy discourse between the "instrumental" and the "intrinsic" value of education [Dreze and Seṅ, 1996]. The former refers to education as a means to improve opportunities for social and economic mobility measured

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largely in terms of employment and income growth, whereas the latter refers to improvement in the quality of life of an individual going far beyond the quantifiable benefits that education provides. While there is little argument over both being important, recent years have seen far too much attention paid to the instrumental values, especially for the poor who tend to swell the ranks of government schools, and much less attention to the intrinsic values. In the current context, this trend has taken the shape of a focus on skill development as the driving force in school education. This thrust derives unfortunately from the objective of preparing the young for the labour market, as quickly as possible, and not from the objective of providing an opportunity to realize their full potential as individuals. Acquiring skills early in one's educational life, as is being proposed, not only takes away the opportunity to learn and grow, it also runs the danger of condemning the individual to a life of low-wage employment, based on skill development and not education. Acquiring skills for the job market is thus, a narrow and parochial view of education serving the short term interests of a few. In addition, it ignores the fact that even to acquire skills, a basic level of education is necessary. With the elementary education sector still miles away from delivering the goal of universalization, the focus on skills can thus, serve to distract from the primary goal of quality school education for all.

This is not to deny that "skills" have no place in the life of a child or in a school curriculum. They do – but they are of a different nature and play a different role. "Life- skills", for instance, have emerged as a crucial element in the learning grid of children. Other non-academic or non-cognitive skills too have an important role to play in the educational development of children. The problem emerges when policy advocates life skills for some and vocational skills for others, especially at the level of school education. In

so doing, it not just contravenes the constitutional objective of equality of opportunity, widely interpreted in educational terms, but does not serve the long term objectives of the economy either.

Scientific Temper or Social Science Perspective

It has been acknowledged the world over that education is instrumental in 'nation building', through preparation of children for the roles they will play in the future development of the nation. While, the roles will undoubtedly encompass many spheres of engagement covering, even expanding the scope of current knowledge values of citizenship, especially as enshrined in the Constitution, play a foundational role in the education matrix of any

> The push for better teaching of science and math, while necessary, must be balanced with an equal emphasis on better methods of teaching social science. The neglect of social science as a field and as a perspective misses an important link with the core areas of thought that social science engenders — that of critical enquiry, historical review and structural analyses. These are as basic to the educational development of an individual as are the essentials of science and math.

individual. These values of democracy, social justice and equality, which have a far reaching impact on all spheres of adult life– personal and professional - are imparted early on through a well-developed social science curriculum. Unfortunately in the current discourse, improving education quality is being viewed through the exclusive lens of 'building a scientific temperament' with little or no discussion on inculcating values fostered by social science. The push for better teaching of science and math, while necessary, must be balanced with

an equal emphasis on better methods of teaching social science. The neglect of social science as a field and as a perspective misses an important link with the core areas of thought that social science engenders – that of critical enquiry, historical review and structural analyses. These are as basic to the educational development of an individual as are the essentials of science and math. As such, the envisioning of quality education must strive to achieve a balance between both perspectives of knowledge by giving an equal push to both in the new policy framework.

Building Institutions or Finding Quick-fix Solutions

A large part of the failure to maintain [and improve] quality is attributed to "implementation" failures, which are in effect related to the failure of public institutions of delivery. These encompass all aspects of institutional functioning within the public education sector– from rules and norms governing procedures [recruitment, planning and monitoring] to incoherence of internal structures [intra-agency coordination, communication flow and authority structures] to broader structural relations impacting the interface of state institutions with non-state actors, as well as the dis-connect with communities. This discordance affects all institutions from the schools to the highest level of the administration, and the associated institutions in between, contributing greatly to the 'crisis' in education today. I use the word 'crisis', advisedly, knowing that it will ring alarm bells, but, knowing also that the moment for bells to toll is here, and must not be ignored. Unfortunately, instead of dealing with the dissonance, and focussing on building strong and durable institutions, the solutions being sought either pretend institutional constraints do not exist or find ways of circumventing them. The assumption for the latter usually involves a rigid view of state structures as being fundamentally given to inefficiencies and corruption. In other words, small attempt is made

to rigorously identify institutional or governance related problems that are the real bottlenecks to reform and work on altering them. Instead, the focus is on finding 'quick-fix' solutions, often based on technology without a clear understanding of the institutionlal or structural arrangements required for embedding technology. For instance, the thrust on ICT, is utterly unrealistic for large parts of the country, who are far from computer literacy or even access to computing facilities. In the schools where computers have been provided, they lie locked up – either for the fear of 'spoiling' them or for the lack of electrical power to use them. Teachers, routinely pay school electricty bills from their own pockets, as there is no line item for electricity in school budgets. Similarly, the lack of integration of teacher qualifications with recruitment rules or scope of work, is a contributing factor to low motivation levels of the teacher, which as a simple introduction of teaching-learning inputs is unlikely to impact. Thus, tinkering with the teaching methods, with a sub-set of teachers in any given school, without integrating with broader teacher education and training processes or the institutional conditions of teacher employment is unlikely to yield long term results. Even fixing accountabilities of teachers cannot be seen in isolation from accountabilities in the system as a whole, or from issues of autonomy and agency at the school level. Introducing piece-meal solutions, may in several instances even add to the dissonance, rather than reduce it.

Other institutional elements such as monitoring, planning and policy making are rarely even on the radar of conversations around education, even though they have an impact on all aspects of implementation. While decentralized planning is an avowed objective, in reality, the systems to facilitate and integrate decentralization have not been put into place. Hence, DISE formats are routinely submitted in lieu of School Development Plans and used at a higher level to devise state plans that have little inputs from local levels. The distribution of resources across districts and schools is arbitrarily done with little reference to plans or needs. Monitoring systems do not feedback into planning or policy either, as information collected by the monitors is not used by planners and policy makers. The data and information system in general, suffers from numerous infirmities related to definitions, methods of estimation, collection processes, dissemination and management. As a result, while an excessive amount of data is generated, no real time data is available. What is collected, is unavailable for use where it should be. Aligning the use of data with collection processes and disemination methods would go a long way in improving its efficacy. Further, developing templates for locally generated and managed data systems would enable decentralized monitoring, planning and implementation, allowing administrators, teachers and the communities to develop a greater sense of ownership of the schools and education systems, than they currently have.

While community engagement like decentralization, has long been an important component of the vision for education, the efforts in that direction belie the seriousness with which these objectives have been taken. As a result, they have either been 'forgotten' [like decentralization] or parallel structures of community empowerment experimented with, without dealing with the core structural constraints that impeded the functioning of the earlier structures. Hence, PTAs, MTAs, VECs, SDMCs and now SMCs have been formed, with little change in their empowerment, engagement or impact. Unless, the system gears itself to treat these elements with the emphasis they deserve, investing financial and human resources to empower and facilitate their functioning, SMCs are also likely to go the way of the other structures.

Conclusion

In the end, institution building is a long drawn process that requires a clear vision and an ability to stay through the course. It cannot be achieved through short-term goals, quick fixes and technological tinkering. It requires the foundations of the systems to be strengthened and enabled to allow for sustained and long term improvement. Unless we are able to make that investment, we may find yet more generations waiting on the margins of educational opportunity and development.

As a New Education Policy is on the anvil, the framers would do well to remind themselves of the vision that they hold for education and how the policy framework can align with the institutions of education to buttress that vision, rather than weaken it. ❑

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