

Quality Concerns in School Education

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Abstract

This paper is based on the observations and experiences gathered during a three-month teaching assignment at a Kendriya Vidyalaya in a small town of eastern India. It was precisely the quality concerns that repeatedly troubled this author, since the school being a Kendriya Vidyalaya it had all the necessary amenities that anyone can ask for in a secondary school. It is even more troubling because the prevalent educational discourses devote more time to material requirements for education and little to the quality/ essence of education.

I consider that the great national sin is the neglect of the masses, and that is one of the causes of our downfall. No amount of politics would be of any avail until the masses in India are once more well educated. (Swami Vivekanand)

The first thing that caught the author's attention was the school environment. Nothing was amiss outwardly – beautiful locale, clean surroundings, proper ventilations, safe drinking water, adequate rooms, playground, well-timed assembly, prayers, notices and speeches, school bells, routine wise classes, cultural activities, regular tests and score cards. It was observed that all 1500 odd students in the school looked much happier than their teachers,

which points to some serious problems with teachers.

It had something to do with teachers' lackadaisical attitude towards students. Whether all of them are really fit to handle students' needs remained a nagging question during the whole three months observation because the living example of a teacher is more important than his knowledge. Therefore, finding a real teacher is the first task of education. But during selection process the

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schools should carefully take into account the thoughts, mindset and character of the prospective teacher. Many job seekers do merely for a living with little understanding of what it takes to be a good teacher. Worse, many of them show no intent to learn also. As a result after being employed they carry out their duty as an ordinary job with little regard for one of the most crucial tasks for students in the world. The ill-will of many teachers indicates a missing link in our education as many of them lack the character or will to be a good teacher, yet are manning the schools. (Administrative and bureaucratic pressures also affect even a good teacher's conduct, a point we skip for the moment.)

QUALITY OF TEACHERS

One cannot but to recall here the great educational philosopher Rabindranath Tagore. He was not only a great thinker but an active teacher as well. Hence his observations should have been taken even more seriously. Discussing the Problem of Education (1906), he wrote: "When making plans for some work for public welfare that we have undertaken, we concentrate on the preliminaries, such as house and furniture, and we get many headaches over what they will cost, although they are mostly superfluous. The tendency to care more for inessentials than for essentials is now seen in every aspect of our life." He considered finding the real teachers, the *gurus* and the

scholars as the most essential part in educational efforts. Everything else should be done next to it. However, in practice our educational enterprise works the other way round. Budget, infrastructural supplies and other issues remain all through in the centre of almost all discussion and policymaking process. Appropriate selections and ways to find good teachers remain a peripheral concern and hence adversely affect the quality of education.

This is the reason why, when one looks closely at the faces and behaviours of teachers in the school, it gave the impression that something is missing. Do they lack affection, regard, devotion and sensitivity to the needs of children? Such elements have little to do with monetary and material supplies. Somewhat of spiritual nature, it is found only in those people who have the right feelings for being a teacher. Quality concerns for school education have to address this issue in all earnest. Without real teachers, who work more for love than for money, even world class infrastructures cannot ensure good education.

Many incidents in KV proved this assumption right. As already mentioned, the school had no scarcity of material supplies. Teachers were well paid. Sufficient rooms, furniture, toilets, drinking water, games and sports etc. were all there. Yet the copybooks and answer books of students did show many shortcomings. Poor language,

in general, was the most prominent indicator. Even some teachers made glaring mistakes. For instance, a language teacher wrote on blackboard incorrectly even the title of the lesson he was teaching. What he taught was also below the mark. He spent much time scolding the children for not bringing the textbook, being inattentive and so forth. Moreover, copybooks of children had several linguistic errors which were left uncorrected, even after the teachers had gone through and signed it. Either the teacher had seen the copies carelessly or he/she himself has poor command over the language. Some teachers lack in adequate knowledge of English language and literature, English/American life and thought, yet they are the teachers to whom we trust our children's introduction to English learning. A serious concern about quality education is that teachers knowing neither good English nor good Hindi (or Bangali, etc.) cannot do justice with teaching. It results in bad quality of learning for children, many quite talented, in the most important subject. Teachers are expected to have good command over the medium of instruction, most importantly because only through language one learns almost all others.

Then, many teachers were obvious slackers. They go late to class without preparation, talk irrelevant topics, and do not attend the questions of students with due care, etc. Beating children, sometimes quite unnecessarily, was another evidence

of poor teacher material. All these are indicators of sub-standard education, despite no lack of funds for a school. Such cases are reported in thousands of other schools in our country. The point here is that such problems have no remedy even after providing more funds or making strict rules for teachers.

WRONG ORIENTATION

Another stumbling block is that teaching and learning in schools has become mainly examination oriented. Despite tall talks about aims and objectives of education or curriculum, the education remains merely score centric. Teachers, parents as well as students all seem concerned mainly with test grades and scores. It was, therefore, no surprise that the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 as such has never figured in their formal or informal talks. The impact of the document must be hidden through the course contents made after it. But there was a snag here too.

For various reasons, many students and teachers do not use standard textbooks. Unavailability of textbooks, occasional use of difficult and complicated language and tendency to study only for writing exams are said to be the reasons for opting for easy question-answer type help-books. Although teachers and parents have high regard for NCERT textbooks yet they were not very enthusiastic and willing to use them, as the whole teaching-learning

being score-centric make guide-books more in demand among the students. Though help-books are not always accurate in contents, yet they contain syllabi based questions and short answers usable for examination purposes. Hence its popularity is on par with, if not more than, the textbooks.

TEXTBOOKS AND HELPBOOKS

Examination centric education and popularity of guidebooks seem interlinked. If abilities like comprehension, capacity of expression, character and personality development are not given due importance, at least in comparison to getting good scores in scholastic subjects, then run of the mill help-books make sense. It helps students obtain better marks with modest effort. It is futile to criticize them. Of course, the examinations and tests can also be so structured as to test the genuine abilities, scholastic and non-scholastic, of a student. But frequent and mass scale testing is not always so arranged. Usually test questions make a set pattern. Publishers and professional writers accordingly produce suitable help-books, thus making it more attractive than the textbooks.

The result is particularly harmful for learning language and social science subjects. A fairly intelligent student of Class X said forthrightly that he never study social science books. He takes up a help-book of the subject and cram for hours

only before the examination day. Whatever is retained in memory after this, he writes in the test and then forgets it later. He studies regularly only Maths, Physics, Chemistry and sometimes English. This must be the same case with large number of students. My own experiences there, especially in higher classes, made me think that teaching social science and humanities for the sake of learning and knowledge, not for scoring in exams, is less popular with students. Most of them take social science as extra burden. In other words, social science is studied merely for passing the exam with good grade, and not for developing a sound understanding of the contents.

It means that the whole range of lofty goals set in our discourses and educational documents remain largely neglected in practice. Other than becoming good technicians and professionals in different fields a large part of our new generation lack in their literary, ethical, social and national perceptions. Many of them become good moneymakers but not a poor human being and citizen. They have not received education in true sense, the education in actual sense of the word that cultivates refined sense and thoughts – the qualities developed through reading great books of literature, philosophy and history. (When a boy or a girl reads something for pleasure, such as a story, fable or biography, his/her capacity for reading increases imperceptibly and his/her power of

comprehension, assimilation and retention grows stronger in an easy and natural manner.) But these very subjects, clubbed as humanities and social sciences, are taken as burden by students and parents. Hence, social science teachers are accordingly given less importance than the teachers of natural sciences.

CONTENTS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

Some reason for this “burden” feeling is also attributed to contents in social science textbooks, as all teachers constantly grumbled. Frequent changing of contents, syllabi and textbooks in social science subjects was also a complaint. “Look, there is one combined book for Science and three for Social Science in class VII. Why make it so burdensome, that too for underage students?” It is sad that even those who campaigned for ‘learning without burden’ could do little to ease the problem. Sometimes it is just the opposite that happens.

Besides, it is certainly difficult to explain so many complicated concepts to young students who find it beyond their ability to comprehend, especially the concepts that are heard little even in academic discourse and not found in standard dictionaries. For instance: ‘majoritarianism’. The term has a derogatory connotation and still has to be accorded a meaning with wide acceptance among scholars. A school textbook has little scope to present it in detail to be understood even by teachers, let alone by children. Even in thousands of small towns and rural

locations it would be hard to find anyone or anything helpful to make one understand such unfamiliar issues. It is not used even in media discussion. This, in addition, means it has little to do with fundamental concepts of social science the growing children should learn first. Load of such complex contents makes the subject more burdensome.

As the great Political Scientist Ernest Barker emphasised, we must not expect children to turn out complete citizens from school. We should be content with children to have only rudimentary understanding of political issues – understanding fundamentals of some political concepts and institutions should suffice. ‘Learning fewer but better’ should be our goal in social sciences. If we aspire prematurely for more, then we are putting the children in danger and leading them to intellectual dishonesty. The young minds would accept and proclaim unrealised generalisations, unrelated to their experience. This should be avoided at all cost while teaching social sciences, especially history and political science.

There is another reason for such caution as political science and history are tricky subjects. Even familiar concepts such as justice, freedom, law, rights, diversity or unity can be taught with entirely different meanings because politics is also a battleground of various interests. Interests of nations, classes, races, parties, groups are part of the subject.

Children must be spared in fighting this battle, otherwise we would do them great harm.

A quality education in social sciences, therefore, must first of all try to generate interest among the learners. Interest is the basis of concentration. Lessons must be taught with child's attention. If interested, he/ she would much prefer to get to the end of the subject rather than leave it unfinished. Starting with terms like 'majoritarianism' does just the opposite. It is not an exceptional case. In a single Political Science textbook for secondary students one can find many terms that is difficult to understand even by teachers. Terms like ethnicity, Maronite Sect of Catholic Christians, Sunni and Shia Muslims, 'coming together' federations and 'holding together' federations, 'regular' rules, Civil Rights movement in the USA, The Black Power movement, Dalit and Dalit activists, Apartheid, Migration, Roma people, Feminist movement, gender division of labour, patriarchy and patriarchal society, caste hierarchy caste system, urbanisation, occupational mobility, Maoism, pressure groups, partisanship, morality and politics, economic growth, etc. are some examples cited from just one book. A secondary stage student is given to handle several social science textbooks. With his/ her limited resources even a teacher has great difficulty to fully understand such terms himself / herself, let alone explaining it to children with ease. In

this event, all that children could do is rote memorisation of the text without proper understanding, with the same result (in Tagore's words) "as that of swallowing food without chewing it."

In any case, complex notions and phrases are not explained enough in class, thus making it trickier for students. Many do not bring the relevant textbooks in social science class; the reason cited being the heavy weight of all the textbooks required for a day in school. Some students do not even have the textbook. Instead they keep the help-book for a social science subject. In fact, some children did not seem to have any sense of difference between textbook and guide-book. To the command 'open your textbook' in the class some children innocently open their guide-book. These ground realities need to be taken into account while discussing different approaches in education.

The respect for NCERT textbooks in social sciences seems to have lost ground. Though traditional admiration for the NCERT textbooks is still intact, yet they are not always used in social science class. I have seen a teacher consulting an ordinary guide book, not the NCERT textbook, when a question came up about what the 'April thesis' was (another abstruse term!). He did it as a matter of course, not as some provisional recourse. Obviously he too considered textbooks as any other books not different from helpbooks published by sundry publishers.

From informal talks it seemed that repeated controversies and frequent changing of textbooks, replacing whole topics in social science textbooks have not gone well with teachers and parents. Teachers call and compare social science textbooks by the label of 'Congress made' and 'BJP made', lowering the esteem of the contents. It shows that our textbooks, for whatever reasons, are losing respect accorded to precise texts one turns to for authentic knowledge.

A teacher recalling some old books of political science published by NCERT said that he could never figure out why they were discarded. Nor he found any explanation about it. A parent directly accused some passage in a social science textbook of 'blatant prejudice' that is certain to 'provoke quarrel between communities'. Some teachers and parents have the feeling that there is politicisation behind changes in social science textbooks. It reminds one to be careful about the casual, political or bureaucratic approach in making and unmaking educational documents and textbooks. It affects general regard towards our textbooks. Linguistic and printing errors are also a frequent complain to which no explanation would do. Quality is at stake here, and complacency would not help our publications anymore.

Another point against social science textbooks is made about its language. Teachers as well as parents find the language not suitable for

students. Sometimes the meaning of a given passage eludes a common reader. New terms and technical phrases are used in the textbook in a way as if they are commonly understood by all. That is also why even some teachers take the easy route to keep question-answer help books to cover the course to prepare students for exams.

No Detention Policy

The practice of 'no detention up to class VIII' is also an issue for quality concerns. From East India to South India similar complaints are made by teachers. That it increases the number of slackers among students. According to a teacher, it helps in turning "good students into average, average into poor and poor into totally careless ones". They have no fear of failing in exams and whether they study or not, they know that they will pass and be promoted to next class. Strange as it is, it also makes little sense for conducting exams. What is the point if all will pass and move to the next class? It cannot be just to ascertain the progress of students because generally teachers and parents have an idea about their charges. Secondly, this practice produces bizarre spectacle as some students in class IX are found with no ability to write even a single sentence correctly in any language. What kind of education they received after spending eight valuable years in a school? Whose fault is this? These questions demand urgent and

thorough consideration. It is time our policy makers and educationists come out of populist/cosmetic measures just to show off progress in education.

Some teachers and students also complained that unscrupulous teachers use CCE as a handle to coerce students to take private tuitions. Some others complained of CCE as another load as it compels them to fill long charts for hundreds of students regularly for which they have hardly any time. Along with completing the course in different classes, checking copybooks and assignments of hundreds of students regularly, conducting extra curricular activities and other duties given by the administration from time to time teachers are hard pressed for time, if they try imparting quality education. On the other hand, some teachers do not even take attendance themselves, and pass it on to monitors or other students. Such teachers would hardly do the additional work for the CCE.

TUITION AND COACHING CENTRES

Burgeoning tuition/coaching centres for high school education in all towns of our country is another point to mull over. Comparative study of these centres vis-à-vis the formal high schools is required to understand the scenario. Also, there are no social science tuition/ coaching at high school level anywhere. Why are the subjects unimportant or everything about it is self-understood? The proliferating tuition centres show

an apparent change in educational development. The tuition/ coaching centres are becoming the new centres of what is now called 'education'. It is no use just denouncing them. Obviously they are providing something for which even most ordinary parents are willing to pay for their children. What is it, and why it is not available in formal schools? Perhaps, the term education itself has undergone some change in the process. To understand these issues systematic studies are required.

LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Education of language and language of education is the most important aspect of quality concerns. In fact, it is the most important aspect. Almost all educational activities are transacted not only through language, but also because language is the medium through which a person find his own self. Therefore, a sound learning of language should be the very core of school education.

However, it is not so in practice. My recent experience in the school was a painful one. According to a teacher, many students in secondary level are not able to write their own names correctly in Hindi. That does not mean that they are better in English, neither had it meant that the students are all stupid. It simply means that we are not adequately careful about the importance of language education. It reflects in the fact that even some printed question papers, in school tests, had spelling, grammatical and

conceptual errors. Such incidents are taken so lightly that teachers and administrators do not always bother to come into the examination room and make corrections for the benefit of examinees. It is natural then that during examining copybooks also a number of linguistic errors committed by an examinee remain unattended. A copybook is checked and marking duly done, but without underlining or correcting all the linguistic mistakes made by the examinee. Resulting in the situation students would never know the difference between correct and incorrect words and sentences. Sometimes students make different errors while writing the same word on the same page. He has little idea of linguistic correctness. This kind of perceptual poverty is not only or always a student's fault. Liability for such a situation also lies with the education planners at large, since they seem not careful enough to ensure best efforts for language education.

English being the medium of school education even in mufasil and small towns it is affecting children's education, neglecting the first language. Close observation reveals painful realities on this score. More and more schools are now being affiliated with the CBSE. It requires them to adopt English as the language of education, even for those schools situated in remote areas. Not only is it a cruel denial of children's fundamental right to receive education in their own language, it also means that children never get

to hear even a sentence in English outside classrooms other than for the little time in their classrooms. That is not sufficient because for 'practical' purposes the classroom transaction is done in mixed language. English language is not spoken or heard in the area although it is recognised as the standard language for instruction in school. What a pitiable situation it is for young learners that many educationists, teachers and parents have no idea about it! For one, it means that even otherwise intelligent children are made cripples in the defining ability of a human being, the linguistic ability, for no fault of theirs. I have seen several such students just in one school. They are great in sense, observation and even oral expression. But no sooner they start writing their linguistic deficiency become agonisingly apparent. Worse, they have no idea of their own cripple state. Neither the teachers can do much to alleviate the situation. Because many of them are not able themselves on neither this score nor it is in the priority list they have been handed over by the higher ups.

On this issue, English being the language of instruction even in remote areas the followings are some of the facts which also demand consideration: (i) in local bookshops neither elementary English storybooks are available nor are there any periodical for the young learners. It is difficult to find even good dictionaries; (ii) finding good teachers, capable of teaching in good

English, are difficult in such schools; (iii) curriculum and study design is not conducive particularly for literature studies, which is another barrier in learning good language, because literary interest is essential for knowing good language – any language. Thus from the beginning most children are likely to be affected by language problem which is the very basis of all education. Their personality development and thinking capacity also will be adversely affected for lack of writing and expressive abilities. However, the people are unable to do anything about all of it, as people in general do not even recognise the dire situation. Besides, how can they help about a language that they do not understand?

Policy makers, educationists and government leaders do not seem to be aware of these realities. Their interactions remain largely confined to a narrow circle with metro-centric middle class experiences about the problems of schools. For all practical purposes the rural situations are not taken into account. If at all, it is just imagined to be so and such imaginations hardly match up with the realities. Such conclusion is evident when one compares academic concerns noted in documents and papers with the actual situation, as mentioned above.

Few educationists seem concerned about the language issue, especially if English is helping or hindering the general education of rural and even non-middle class

urban children. However, it is evident from the language and illustrations used in textbooks and other reading materials for children. They are almost exclusively metro-centric lingo, illustrated with examples and incidents taken from western scenario also. It betrays a naïve mindset, unconcerned if those examples, illustrations and phrases would be understood by millions of Indian students and even by teachers. If an English Reader for children contains a story about a large ball party or a quarrel that Charlie and Katie had when they were snowballing. These narrations recount incidents familiar to British/American children, interesting and enjoyable to them. Such stories rouse no memories in the minds of our children; unfold no pictures before their eyes. Our children, even those living in Delhi or Bangalore, simply grope about in the dark when reading such books.

Not only in literature but in social science books for children obscure foreign contents are numerous. I have seen teachers baffled by illustrations in textbooks. Why are the examples, illustrations, pictures etc. used in textbooks not taken from common Indian scenario? All kinds of examples, from social to geographical to political, are available in Indian events as well. If school textbook writers seem indifferent in choosing a native or foreign scenario, it shows they are insensitive to its effect on ordinary children. In most cases, such writers cater to the metro-centric

middle class populace, insensitive to the situation of the largest section of students and teachers in semi-urban, rural areas, and their need to learn the basics of social science and humanities. Teachers and students living in a corner of any district in the country can hardly consult anyone to understand a foreign cartoon or an old news item from a Latin American country. They must feel stupid or helpless. How it affects children's education and self-image is a point few elite care to mull over.

There is yet another indicator to perceive the situation on language issue. Many textbooks, help-books and other reading materials meant for children at the same time contain a number of linguistic mistakes, botched expressions and convoluted sentences. This also means that the materials are made and supervised by those who little understand the importance of good, correct and meaningful language for reading material meant for children. The reason is not due to lack of money, but those in charge preparing reading materials are unaware of the fundamental significance of language learning.

Thus, for many known and unknown reasons, even the sensible children are deprived of learning good language itself by so elaborate arrangements of education in English. Luckily a small percentage of children still escape the inadvertently designed fate, thanks to private efforts, family situation and other fortuitous

circumstances. If the general damage is not even acknowledged, the reason is that our country being so big, even (say) 5% school children escaping the ill-designed fate ultimately produces a large technical work force for our country and the world. This absolute number of good students, coming out year after year from urban schools and supplied to scientific and business institutions, result in producing hundreds of thousands technical hands regularly. It conceals the poor fate of a huge number of equally or more bright children whose progress suffer from an unfriendly language barrier. They fall behind and remain poorly educated for no fault of theirs. Their immediate society is powerless in helping them precisely because it can do anything in its own language. English thus makes the otherwise concerned society utterly helpless to assist its children. In fact it effectively cuts them off from taking regular care of what the children are learning or not learning in schools. Such issues are hardly ever noticed by our educationists, even though they are very real.

THREE CONCLUSIONS

In all, from my experiences in the school I have come to three tentative conclusions. Conclusions I could not reach but for the direct experiences I had in a remote school. They are also relevant for the quality concerns in education:

1. One can help in education meaningfully only by directly

engaging in teaching and educational work. No outside effort, howsoever useful, can be a substitute for this.

2. Ground realities at small and far away places are very different from what we imagine at academic places in the metros and high places. Sometimes those realities are not even noticed by higher ups.
3. Language of education is one serious issue we have not adequately addressed so far. It is affecting adversely so many aspects of children's education, sometimes permanently. The power of thought and the power of imagination, indispensable for discharging the duties of life, are dependent on good learning of language and literature. "We cannot do without those two powers if want to live like real men. And unless we cultivate them in childhood we cannot have them when we are grown up." (Tagore)

Therefore, to help quality education a sensible and constant effort is required. Such effort cannot be made only by educational bureaucrats, assorted university professors and highly placed intellectuals. Many of them have never been to a school classroom after leaving their own high schools. It is no big secret that many directives and decisions about school education are formulated and taken by those who are neither a teacher nor a serious educationist. There seem to be a total separation of

school teaching community from the actual decision makers. This seems to be a miscalculation going on for a long time. School timings, textbooks contents, syllabi size, examination design, mid-day meal business, engaging teachers for sundry non-educational works, etc. could be examples of such decisions. These issues are decided without taking into account the views of the teachers, and without considering every related aspect of an impending decision.

It is time we stop being self-congratulatory about our own declarations and paper-achievements, without actually taking the trouble of assessing whether it has changed something in practice. Or has it changed for positive or negative results? Educational planners and academics usually devote much time to their pet theoretico-ideological concerns, collecting all kinds of issues and slogans in a document, while some fundamental questions do not get adequate hearing in deliberations. Going through such documents gives an uneasy feeling. Sentences, paragraphs, descriptions, data and box declarations seem quite without harmony, unrelated to one another. The successive sentences, pages and chapters seem like accumulating building materials without building anything. Mere inclusion of phrases, notions and issues seem sufficient, as if just mention of them in a document is like an achievement. Our documents have a long tradition of a self-satisfied attitude.

Phrases like 'neighbourhood school', 'evening school', 'socialistic pattern', 'inclusiveness', 'constructivism' etc. come and go without affecting anything in practice as far as the whole country is concerned. At no time those ideas or jargon-ridden papers chemically fuse with our surroundings or lives.

It appears, social participation in framing educational goals, in finding ways to achieve them, and in curriculum making exercise should be vastly increased. Teachers' involvement in textbook making should also be increased

substantially. Before publishing the final version of a reading material for children, comments should be invited from a large number of readers including teachers, students and parents, and discussed honestly.

In any case the making of educational materials should not be a hasty exercise. Social science textbooks should be thoroughly revised in view of our knowledge needs, and not after the political fashion of the time. Finally, there should be serious and multiple studies about the effects of English medium education with all its facets.