

PARENTAL AWARENESS AND INVOLVEMENT IN PRIMARY EDUCATION: AN OPEN/DISTANCE LEARNING STRATEGY FOR INDIA.

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Introduction

The achievement of Universal Elementary Education (UEE) still remains a rather distant dream for many developing countries including India. The earliest demand for UEE in India were voiced by educated Indians in the wake of the introduction of free and compulsory education in Britain. The demands were re-iterated by nationalist leaders like Gopalakrishna Gokhale and Mahatma Gandhi who realised the potential of mass education as a political weapon to uproot colonial rule. Gandhi's vision of 'Basic Education' aimed not merely at the creation of political awareness, but also at making education relevant for the village community to attain self-reliance. The colonial education policy had no relevance for the majority, as it was intended to create an elitist group to support and sustain colonial rule. The colonial, elitist educational practice prevailed in post-Independence India despite the efforts of educational thinkers like Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo, and Mahatma Gandhi who favoured a radical restructuring of the system so as to create a new system which would be holistic and have a truly national character. The Directive Principles enshrined in the Constitution of India which was adopted in 1950, directed the Indian states to provide "free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years" within a period of ten years. The Government of India Commission appointed in 1964 to evolve a national system of education, suggested that education should be related to life and to the needs and aspirations of the people. It recommended necessary qualitative and quantitative improvements on the basis of manpower needs and provision of equal educational opportunities to all. The first National Policy on Education (1968) emphasised education of girls and women, adult education and literacy campaigns as additional activities which it was hoped would in turn have a positive impact on the drive for UEE. Still many states found these policies difficult to implement due to their inability to tackle gender, caste, and community based disparities in access and problems created by excessively centralised planning and administration. The National Policy on Education (1986, revised in 1992) which realistically tried to solve some of these problems through people's involvement gave highest priority to UEE. For the first time, Village Education Committees (VEC) were set up to solve issues of quantity, quality and equity in primary education through a decentralised approach.

In the nineties, the policies of international agencies such as World Bank and UNO began to influence India's policy on Education. This is obvious in the launching of the Education For All (EFA) programme in 1993 and the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in 1964 where the new emphasis of the government was on Universal Primary Education (UPE)- for those in the age group of 6-14 years -rather than on UEE -for those under 6 years of age. This invited criticism from academics and educationists that "the shift of focus from 'Elementary' to 'Primary' Education is one of the hall-marks of the post-Jomtien phase of Indian education", a criticism which has to be noted seriously considering that 'free and compulsory education for every child up to the age of 14 years' has been made a fundamental right in India. Having briefly touched upon the various efforts to realise the goal of UEE in India, the author would like to clarify the connotations of the terms 'primary education' and 'parents' as used in this paper. Here, 'primary education' means the free and compulsory education for children up to the age of 14 years including elementary education. The word 'parent' encompasses father, mother, stepfather or stepmother, grandparents, elder brothers or sisters or any 'caretaker' whoever is interested in the education of the child until he/she attains the age of 14 years.

Primary Education - Problems & Issues

Despite numerous efforts to improve primary school education, the scenario in India continues to be rather dismal. Several attempts have been made to improve the three basic strands of primary education viz. quality, quantity and equity but have not completely succeeded due to various reasons. A high proportion of out of school and working children in rural areas, low enrolment, and low retention rates are the most common issues affecting the quantitative aspects of primary education whereas low achievement levels and lack of proper infrastructure are the main issues affecting quality. If equity is to be attained, issues such as high drop-out rates

among girls and among children of socially and economically disadvantaged groups, problems based on gender differences etc. are to be sorted out. The fact that 30 million children in the age group of 6-10 years and 33 million in the age-group of 11-14 years are still out of school and the fact that even among those enrolled, 36.3 per cent of primary school children and 52.7 per cent of upper primary school children drop out, indicates the gravity of the problem which is to be effectively addressed. According to the Government of India statistics, total enrolment of girls at the primary level is 43.2 per cent and that at the upper primary level is 39 per cent, while their drop-out rate is much higher than that of boys. The trend is similar among children of socially and economically disadvantaged groups.

A recent research study on primary education in India puts forth the argument that "additional investments to expand access may benefit only a few whereas investments to improve quality may benefit all those who are enrolled in the system" (Varghese,1998:28) and hence the current emphasis on quality improvement in primary education. While it is unjustifiable to pay less attention to the problem of access to the disadvantaged groups (the 'few' mentioned in the above study) in order to satisfy the quality needs of the majority, it is equally unjustifiable to deny quality-improvement to the majority in order to improve access for a few. Both factors are equally important as far as UEE is concerned and any one cannot be ignored at the cost of other.

Argument and Assumptions

The author would like to argue further that through parental awareness and involvement programmes both 'access' and 'quality' factors in primary education can be achieved simultaneously. While most programmes to improve primary education give utmost importance to the role of teachers, the equally significant role of parents seems often neglected. Preventative interventions designed to benefit young children benefit the whole community through enabling children to reach their full physical, mental, emotional maturity and therefore higher levels of parental involvement in primary schooling must be ensured.

It would be convenient to divide the entire span of primary education into three sections ie; (1)Elementary Level (children up to the age of 5), (2) Lower Primary Level (children in the age group of 6-10years), (3) Upper Primary Level (children in the age group of 11-14years)in order to discuss how in each stage issues relating to quality, quantity and equity can be addressed in terms of parental involvement.

1. Elementary Level : It is a widely accepted fact that education is an integrated process of individual development and that utmost care should be given to children below 6years which is one of the most crucial developmental stages of life. Parents should be provided with information about the kind of care to be given to children of this age group and also be made aware of support services such as Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services and similar services such as Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Anganwadis,, Community Health Centres, Social Welfare Services etc, which are readily available in the community. Such awareness may help parents to provide a favourable environment for the child's development with respect to health, hygiene and nutrition. Parents can also be made aware of play-way, activity based, child-centered methods of learning at the pre-school level to bring about necessary school-readiness as an initial step to future schooling. Such awareness creation would go a long way in bringing about quantitative and qualitative improvements in primary education because a physically and mentally healthy child with necessary school-readiness will rarely drop out from school.

2. Lower Primary Level : As has been frequently observed, the main problem at this stage is that "nearly half the children who join class I, drop out before reaching class V. In 1993-94, the enrolment in class V as per cent of class I enrolment stood at 54.59 per cent - 49.10 per cent for rural and 74.66 per cent for urban schools" (Chanana, 1998 : 8). It is also noted that "children drop out fast from grade III onwards and among those who complete grade V, the generality reaches the literacy level of grade II leading to their relapse into illiteracy soon after" (Naik, 1994 : 33). What is the reason for this unfortunate phenomenon which affects the quantity and quality of education at a very early stage and how can we solve these problems through parental involvement ? The main reason is an unattractive school environment and curriculum. Children from different home environments especially those without any pre-school experience may find it difficult to adjust to the new atmosphere. Parents and teachers should together take care to provide a feeling of an 'extended home' in the school, both emotionally and environmentally. This will make it easier for the child to socialise, interact with peer group and with teachers. A good rapport between parents and teachers is necessary to create such a child-friendly atmosphere in schools. This can be made possible through the formation of Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA) and Mother Teacher Associations (MTA) in schools, by celebrating national and local festivals of all communities, by introducing cultural activities etc. which will inculcate a sense of community participation in children at a very early age.

As pointed out by the educationist John Shotton, 'contextualisation' is a major factor in children's learning which is directly related to the quality of education. "As children develop, they continue to construct their own being and education as an experience can affect and contribute to this process" (Shotton, 1998 : 27). 'Learners come to school with knowledge from their home, friends, environments and radio' that have some significance for them. To help children learn new concepts and processes, the teacher has to connect to the knowledge that they already have. Contextualisation can achieve the difficult task of linking 'school knowledge' and 'home knowledge' thereby making children aware that learning is in fact a common currency to all learning environments (Shotton, 1998 : 27). This underlines the fact that parents' and teachers' involvement in primary education should be such that children see school as an 'extended home' and home as an 'extended school'. For this, parents and teachers should sit together to discuss matters regarding the learning behaviour of children, their emotional, mental, and physical needs which can be suitably taken care of in school and home. Thus, a child of this age group who is well settled in his/her school and home learning atmosphere will rarely drop out by himself /herself unless subjected to any other unavoidable external pressure. These external pressures such as child labour and poverty could also be sorted out by the joint effort of parents, teachers and community workers.

3. Upper Primary Level : Child labour, gender inequality and lack of perception among teachers about the parents' expectations regarding their children's education are some of the major factors affecting the quantity, quality and equity concerns of primary education at this stage. Among these child labour is the main issue which is inter-linked to gender differences. Child labour can be both direct and indirect. Children who work to earn for their livelihood or family, belong to the first category whereas children who take up household work to release their parents for paid jobs belong to the second category. Though the law enjoins that a child below the age of 14 years should not be employed for any kind of remuneration, the indirect labour mentioned above has not been recognised widely as a facet of child labour. Though both boys and girls in poor families are victims of such direct and indirect child labour, the situation of girls is much worse than that of boys due to gender discrimination.

"The girls were so busy with household chores that they had no time to come to school. They had to look after siblings, collect fire-wood, organise food for domestic animals, fetch water etc. Then they also had to help in the fields, and at home they lend a hand with the parboiling of rice and cutting of bidi leaves. Most feel that daughters must stay home and help with 'women's work' and so don't ask their daughters to go to school. There is far greater parental pressure on boys to attend school" (Das 1988 : 33).

"Five year old Mangla comes to school with her nine-month old brother in her arms. None of our male students have ever brought their younger siblings to school with them while most of our female students do so" (Das, 1988 : 32).

"Households generally spend less on girl students in government as well as in private schools than on boys" (Chanana,1998:9)

"Principals of private unaided schools tend to confirm this trend when they mention that in their expensive co-educational schools it is not surprising to find that while the son is enrolled, the sister is being sent to a cheaper school" (Chanana, 1998 : 9).

"Even though Indian girls are denied access to education, yet once they enter school they do better than the boys" (Chanana, 1998 : 10).

It is evident from the above observations that awareness programmes are necessary for both poor as well as elite parents and that their involvement is necessary to improve the quality, quantity and equity concerns of primary education in India. The M.V. Foundation, Hyderabad has been successful in its attempt to make illiterate and poor parents aware of the significance of education.

"There have been numerous instances in which family members redistributed the work amongst themselves to send one child to school, or sold a piece of property or some possessions to buy books & clothes for the child. Many a parent sold of their goats which the child used to graze because the child is now not available for this work. The families have continued to survive. No family ever collapsed because the child was no longer there to work" (Krishnan,1998:35).

The M.V.Foundation introduced the novel idea of involving 'education activists' to bring about qualitative and quantitative improvements -educated local youths were appointed by PTA to assist the teachers and to act as some kind of intermediaries between the teachers and the community. He/she would stay in active touch with the parents and the community to encourage more children to join school and to prevent further dropping-out. The MVF experiment successfully proves that coordinated efforts of the teacher-parent-community can be effective in improving general conditions in primary education.

It is also important for teachers and policy makers to have better understanding of the parent's expectation about their children's education. This is quite evident from the following observation of the Committee on the Status of Women in India(1974:262).

"Mothers of young girls told us that except for reading and writing, which the girls could pick up in two or three years, schools taught very little that was useful. One peasant woman in Punjab village felt that one way of making school education more meaningful would be to train girls to handle and repair tractors. Some women in Kulu valley wanted training in methods of fruit preservation, so that they could fully utilise the products of their orchards"

Such local needs and expectations of parents should be addressed in the school curriculum.

An Open/Distance Learning Strategy

How can we impart awareness to parents to ensure their involvement in primary education? This task is rather difficult as the educational, social and economic background of parents vary considerably and hence an uniform approach will not be suitable or effective. As Jowett (1990: 46) has pointed out "parental involvement should not be concerned simply with getting parents into school. It demands an approach to learning that recognises and draws on the contribution of the home and sees contact with parents on a variety of matters as fundamental". Hence a localised approach would be more effective.

Methodology

In such a programme, it would be best to make the school the centre of activity. A teacher or a parent can initiate the activity through PTA or MTA or through any such set-up which will serve as a basic unit in each school. The target group would be the members of this basic unit such as teachers, parents and community workers. A unit may have 10-20 members and in case there are more members, more units can be created. To coordinate awareness programmes in a locality (within 5 to 10 kilometers radius) five to ten schools can be clubbed together to form a cluster. Having created such a institutional set-up, a strategy for parental awareness/involvement can be designed in the following manner.

1. Need Assessment : The grey areas of parental awareness can be identified through active interaction with unit members in a school and then, with others in a cluster. The tool may be interactive group discussions, structured/unstructured interviews, observations etc. This would ultimately result in identifying needs regarding parental awareness and involvement in a locality.

Extensive researches have been done in developed countries especially in Britain, United States of America and Australia regarding the involvement of parents for school effectiveness which have put forward somewhat similar typologies of parental involvement in home-school relation (Epstein, 1990; David, 1993). One such typology which can be suitably adopted to Indian context is that of Epstein with the following five-fold spectrum of parental involvement.

- (1) The basic obligations of parents to create 'positive home conditions' for their children's learning (their responsibilities for children's health and safety and necessary child-rearing skills to prepare them for school).
- (2) The basic obligations of schools to communicate with families about children's progress and performance.
- (3) Parental involvement at school as volunteers who assist teachers, children in class rooms, watch events etc.
- (4) Parental involvement at home in learning and
- (5) Parental involvement in governance and advocacy or decision-making for schools such as in PTA/PTO; Advisory Councils etc. (Epstein, 1990 : 113).

It is interesting to compare this typology with the above-mentioned three levels of primary education and examine the relevance of this typology in the Indian context. Suitable modifications can be made in this typology based on the need-assessment.

2. Developing materials : Self-Instructional materials, activity-based materials, group interaction packages to generate discussion among parents, teachers and community workers, video films, posters, printed leaflets and brochures which can be used independently and as mediating tools to engage dialogue with target groups are the materials to be developed. Since these materials are meant for a target group who are adults, the author with his research experience in adult learning (Nair, 1995) thinks that Malcolm Knowles' 'Theory of Andragogy' can be adopted as the theoretical basis for developing materials and programmes. Knowles' theory of andragogy is based on four basic assumptions: (a) changes in self-concept; (b) the role of experience; (c) readiness to learning and (d) problem-centred orientation to learning. According to him, applying pedagogical approaches to adult learning without considering the physical and cognitive development of the adults will only lead to resentment and resistance; and this should be kept in mind while developing programmes. Knowles accepts the experience of the adult learner as an asset to be valued and utilised for further learning. His third assumption underlines the concept of knowledge perceived by the adults as something which can be used or created to solve their problems in social life, which is directly related to the fourth assumption that adults tend to have a problem-centred orientation to learning (Knowles, 1973). These principles should be kept in mind while developing materials for awareness programmes. Parents' experience regarding their children's learning should also be suitably incorporated in the material so that teachers could also be able to know about parents' perception regarding child-learning.

The author would also like to suggest Morten Flate Paulsen's (1992) 'Theory of Cooperative Freedom' which combines Knowles' theory of andragogy and open-distance learning aspects to ensure maximum flexibility for the awareness programme. The theory suggests that six facets of freedom in distance education are freedom of time, space, pace, medium, access and curriculum which should be considered by programme planners when they develop distance education programmes. Here, the word 'cooperative' indicates voluntary interaction among individuals (or group interaction) during learning and 'freedom' implies individual autonomy. Thus the term 'cooperative freedom' combines freedom for the individual with group cooperation (Paulsen, 1992 : 59). This perspective will also provide insights into the flexible delivery modes which will cater to the different learning styles and prevent exclusion of those lacking access to or knowledge of high-technology media.

3. Delivery of materials : Distance learning materials such as print, audio cassettes, video cassettes, posters and leaflets can be delivered through school units and clusters in a locality. For illiterate and semi-literate rural parents, visual materials such as posters, picture brochures, video films etc. would be more effective. PTS and MTS can be considered as focal points for distributing the distance learning materials. Wherever convenient IGNOU Study Centres can also be considered. The portable low-powered FM Radio Broadcast Station contained in one large 'briefcase' with a transmitter, small mixer, a microphone and pairs of CD and cassette player can be effectively used to transmit group discussion sessions of parents and teachers in a school to other schools within a range of 10 kilometer radius. This would be a very cost effective method to bring a local cluster area under radio network to enhance parental awareness especially, in rural areas. Since it is a portable broadcast station, the coordinator can use it even at home during night time to broadcast useful audio programmes so that the target group members can receive it in a single transistor radio.

Conclusion

Every child is a precious asset of the nation and therefore, utmost care should be taken to bring up the child as a potential citizen of the future. Proper parental care and primary education is necessary for a child to develop his potentials. Parents have responsibilities at home to complement or supplement the efforts of teachers at school in providing an appropriate stimulating environment to children. The basic assumption is that parental awareness and involvement ultimately lead to quantitative and qualitative improvements ensuring equity in primary education.

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