



Seeking Common Ground – Some Debates Related to Education Policy in India

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Certain areas in education policy are subject to debate more than others. This article attempts to present a broad overview of the debates around investment in education, use of technology in teaching-learning, vocational education, teacher accountability and the no detention policy. It is proposed that these and other areas be examined in light of Constitutional values and concerns of equity, access and quality. Finally, policy formulation must be informed by both research based evidence and fundamental principles of education.

Context

All citizens have a stake in the education system and it would not be an exaggeration to say that all citizens have strong views related to education. The recent efforts at evolving a national education policy from the grassroots upwards reflected this belief, whatever be the views on the value of the exercise.

Some of the discussions reported are interesting. For instance, during the panchayat level discussions in some States, parents recommended that all government schools be English medium, something that is not aligned with current policy. Research evidence also indicates clearly that the medium of instruction during the early years must be the home language/mother tongue. However, English is viewed as a means of social mobility; one of the reasons for the movement away from government schools is that private schools, of whatever quality, offer an English medium of instruction.

This does not in any manner imply that disagreement around policy is between policy makers and lay persons. Often, policy appears to ignore evidence both from the ground as well as that of rigorous research studies – for example, there is over a century's evidence that merely holding back a child in a lower class will not ensure that he/she attains the expectations related to that class – other measures, both systemic and classroom-based are needed. Assigning teacher accountability through learning outcomes in isolation of enablers for the teacher to function effectively is another case in point.

And, of course, the frequently asked question – when our educational policies have similar refrains, why is implementation so hard? And when they are translated into programmes and schemes, why are these generally interpreted as transient and have so little impact on ground?

The reasons for these differences could be many – ranging from pragmatic considerations like economics and existing priorities, the search for short term solutions to long standing deep rooted problems, the fact that often the evidence from research does not reach practitioners and laypersons, to deep seated beliefs and vested interests driving the discourse. What is indisputable is that multiple views exist around certain areas in education more than others, and are often bitterly contested.

These debates raise certain basic questions, for example: how democratic is policy making in our country, can consensus be achieved from all quarters related to policy, should policy making be driven by academic concerns or cater to populism, how informed is policy by practice, how can we get practitioners to participate in policy formulation, how do we advocate the relevance of policy to stakeholders – the list is long and the questions complex. But before answers to these questions can be attempted, it may be useful to examine certain areas in education around which policy has been controversial.

Some of the areas in the space of educational policy subject to debate are investment in education, medium of instruction in schools, use of technology in teaching-learning, early childhood education, vocational/skill development in education, teacher accountability, the use of standardised assessments to assess quality of learning, no detention policy, research and evidence based policy development, privatisation, education of children with special needs, and so on. In the sections below, an attempt is made to briefly present the debates around some of these.

Investment in education

The demand for 6% of the GDP as investment in education dates back almost half a century to the

National Policy on Education, 1968, which stated that 'The aim should be to gradually increase the investment in education so as to reach a level of expenditure of 6% of the national income as early as possible'. Referring to this recommendation, the National Policy on Education 1992 stated that 'Since the actual investment in education has remained far short of that target, it is important that greater determination is shown now to find the funds for the programmes laid down in this Policy'. The policy recommended that outlay on education be stepped up to ensure that it will uniformly exceed 6% of national income by the 8th 5-year Plan onwards.

However, investment in education has averaged less than 3.5% of GDP over the past three decades. If we look at the patterns in countries that have been able to achieve universalisation of education, the minimum investment they have made has been 6% of GDP. Interestingly, in today's India, even an investment of 6% of GDP is inadequate. The Committee on National Common Minimum Programme's Commitment of 6% of GDP to education (popularly known as the Majumdar Committee), which submitted its report in 2005 cited reports and analyses to recommend that 8-10% of GDP was needed to meet the requirements (exclusive of contribution by private sector, community, parents and students).

Thus, while policy recommendations have evolved to enhanced expectations from teachers, leaders and institutions, investment in developing structures and processes—infrastructure, resources, recruitment, support personnel and institutions – to enable fulfilment of these expectations remain sub-optimal.

Use of technology in teaching-learning

Programmes and schemes to integrate technology in school education date back to the mid-1970s. With increasing ease of use and access, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are seen more and more as contributors to improving access and quality. The National Curriculum Framework, 2005 views ICT as 'an important tool for bridging social divides' and recommends its use 'in such a way that it becomes an opportunity equaliser by providing information, communication and computing resources in remote areas'. The National Policy on

Information and Communication Technology in School Education, 2012 looks at ICT as a means for achieving the goals of quality improvement under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan and the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyaan.

Using technology requires first access and back up support (electricity, repair and maintenance) – without these, technology integration is meaningless. For example, let us consider the state of rural electrification. Rural electricity supply suffers both in terms of availability for measured number of hours and penetration level. Under such circumstances, technology use would be meaningless without electricity connections and connectivity, even if infrastructure exists.

At the same time, research evidence shows that to integrate technology in education, mere infrastructure is not enough. Technology in the school classroom works only when core issues of the teachers - subject and pedagogical competence along with personal theories they have developed about ICT through observation, interaction, instruction or inferences, along with confidence and motivation - are addressed. In addition, student competence in ICT use and continuing support for the teacher – both technical and pedagogical – also influence the relevance of ICT use. While technology is useful to connect teachers and provide access to new research and knowledge, even this works only when the aforementioned core issues have been addressed.

Vocational education

In India, the discourse around vocationalisation dates back to the colonial period – ostensibly to curb 'educational over-production' which was caused by the 'tendency of individuals from rural areas to continue in school past the capacity of labour markets to absorb them'. (Tilak, 1998) Post-independence, the Mudaliar Commission recommended diversification of courses at the secondary stage while the Kothari Commission suggested vocationalisation of two years of higher secondary education, after ten years of general education.

Vocational education was proposed as the solution to many educational problems: the unbridled demand for higher education could be controlled,

the financial crisis in education would be eased by reducing higher education budgets, and unemployment among college and secondary school graduates would be reduced. The National Policy on Education 1968 recommended that facilities for vocational education be increased and diversified to 'conform broadly to requirements of the developing economy and real employment opportunities'. The National Policy on Education 1986 (modified in 1992) devoted an entire section to vocationalisation and recommended vocational education be offered as a distinct stream after class VIII.

However, vocational education has always being accorded a low status, with liberal education being perceived as the route to higher education and desirable professions. Vocational education is considered the option of last choice, one which a person opts for if he or she performs poorly in the general education stream and exhausts other options. It is also linked to economic compulsions to enter the work place at an early age, overwhelmingly leading to children from disadvantaged backgrounds to take up this option. This results in vocational education and training leading to low end jobs mostly and a low esteem among vocational education pass outs. On the other hand, education cannot be purely theoretical - the instrumental reason of earning a livelihood is important and developing the capability to earn a living must start early. All children must have an understanding of the workplace while developing certain fundamental capacities such as the capacity to critique and question, to solve problems and take informed decisions, etc.

Currently, the broad policy recommendation is that vocational education be aspirational and develop employability skills as well as entrepreneurship, with 25% of all schools in the country offering the option of vocational education from class IX onwards. However, the situation on ground does not give credence to the fulfilment of this recommendation

Teacher accountability

Teachers are viewed as being primarily responsible for children's learning. They are also viewed as being critical in bringing about any kind of improvement

in learning through the implementation of programmes and interventions aimed at improving the quality of teaching-learning. The National Curriculum Framework 2005 states that 'No system of education can rise above the quality of its teachers, and the quality of teachers greatly depends on the means deployed for selection, procedures used for training, and the strategies adopted for ensuring accountability'. However, at the same time the autonomy of teachers has been systematically denuded through a top - down approach, teacher preparation programmes which virtually enforce ritualistic processes as opposed to developing reflective practitioners and a teacher support system which has mutated into data gathering and information dissemination.

In some countries, teachers are evaluated, rewarded or even removed on the basis of students' scores on standardised tests. However, there is no strong evidence to indicate whether teachers whose students perform poorly are indeed the 'weakest', or that they can be replaced by more 'effective' teachers. While some anecdotal evidence and small studies exist, their findings cannot be extrapolated into generalisations. There is also no substantive evidence that teacher motivation will improve if they are incentivised for improving student scores. On the other hand, evidence is emerging that 'test-based accountability' actually increases teacher attrition, denudes morale and reduces the curriculum to what will be tested. What gets assessed is delimited by the nature of the test – this is largely driven by the need for reliability and validity, and ease and consistency of scoring. As a result, the majority of large scale assessments constitute multiple choice items. Enquiry, reflection, questioning, problem solving and how students organise knowledge, contribute to group work, etc remain unassessed

There is also substantial evidence that policies pertaining to teacher education, licensing, hiring, and professional development are related to improvements in student performance. Supportive environments within schools with time for collaboration and reflection are also factors which improve teacher effectiveness. Instances where teachers have been clearly informed of expectations from them and the rationale for

these expectations, making them partners and not receivers in educational processes, have resulted in higher accountability.

However, the most critical questions to be asked remains whether it is appropriate to take the simplistic view, firstly, of holding teachers accountable for learning without examining the conditions and environment within which teachers work and secondly without giving teachers access to processes for their in-service development and support.

No detention policy

The concept of no detention is not new in India. Twenty-eight States and Union Territories have had a no detention policy in place before the enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RtE). Prior to RtE, NDP was in place till class V in 36% of states and till classes II, III, IV, V, V and VII, respectively, in comparable proportion; two States had NDP for over four decades.

RtE made the no detention policy compulsory till class VIII across all States, with a provision for comprehensive and continuous evaluation (CCE), from 01 April 2010. The underlying belief is that every child can learn, that acquiring mastery is within the reach of the child, only individual pace may vary. Hence, defining comprehensive indicators of learning, encompassing both cognitive and the other areas referred to as co-scholastic/co-curricular areas, helps track each child's learning and development. Continuously assessing the child's progress against these indicators helps scaffold potential areas in which the child may be 'left behind', so to speak. Thus, if a child does not learn, it is a failure of either structures which bind learning into water-tight compartments or stages or of school and classroom processes.

However, the no detention policy (NDP) has come under a striking amount of criticism, the most predominant arguments against it being that it causes teachers and learners to lose seriousness about learning, that it has reduced teacher accountability, holding the child back will act as remediation and eventually benefit the child, children are not able to cope once they emerge from the elementary stage, and so on. While there is no

evidence from over a century of studies across the world to support any of the foregoing arguments, there is substantial evidence that detention is a robust indicator of drop out, associated with a lower rate of enrolment in higher education, poor earning capacity and maladjustment in adult life. Children who repeat a class have poorer learning outcomes than comparable peers who are promoted; they have poor self-esteem and remain on the periphery of class activities. Being older than their classmates is especially challenging for children entering puberty. Children at risk of detention are overwhelmingly from disadvantaged groups and homes which cannot support their learning.

While there may some immediate gains, they fade away within a few years, and are associated with interventions which provide individualized support and involve parents. These interventions are: high quality curriculum and instruction; professional development of teachers; reducing class size in primary classes; keeping students and teachers together for more than one year; using effective student grouping practices; early intervention as opposed to letting learning difficulties accumulate; direct instruction; individualized programmes; formative assessments; summer schools; parents' attitude towards their child's education and involvement with schools; and early childhood programmes. Thus, detention by itself cannot be an intervention – it has to be supported with practices which are aligned with effective pedagogy and assessment.

Is a resolution possible?

While it is obvious that complete consensus on any of these and other debates is not possible, the question still arises on how the multiple arguments for or against any single position can be examined and a resolution sought which satisfies certain basic principles. The values which can guide any discussion are Constitutional values. Therefore, the broad concerns which inform any examination of these debates must be equity, access and quality: equity in terms of reducing differences and not adding to any form of stratification or differentiation, access in terms of both physical environment and learning experiences and quality in all aspects which leads to improved educational processes and therefore improved learning outcomes.

The question then arises – how can we determine that a policy is equitable and ensures both access and quality? One approach could be to examine the situation on the ground in the context of a well thought out framework, while another could be to look at evidence from studies across the world. This raises another question – what evidence is reliable and relevant in our context? Once this question has been satisfactorily answered, research findings should be considered in consonance with the fundamental principles of education and the priorities to inform policy formulation.

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