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**Parameters of Quality in School Education:
A Study on the Present Indian Scenario in This Perspective**

Dr. Shnaoli Chakraborty

*Associate Professor (B. Ed.), Directorate of Distance Education, University of Burdwan,
West Bengal, India*

Abstract

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) was formed to provide elementary education to children aged within 6- 14 years, with equitable quality. During the initial years of SSA, the focus was on ensuring physical access, building school infrastructure, along with the recruitment of teachers. Having reached nearly to achieve universal access at the primary level, the focus is now on quality improvement and enhancing student learning. A series of programmes have been initiated by the Central and State Governments to foster quality education and improve student learning outcomes. These programmes seek to bring about a broad shift in the outlook of pupils' and their parents' towards the schooling system.

A quality education demands child-friendly teaching- learning process , where teacher should be responsive to each child's learning needs and the methodology of teaching should be properly suited to the understanding of students. But these conditions are not enough quality assurances in school learning in comparison to the global scenario. Today, quality education includes healthy, protective and safe environment, gender- sensitive atmosphere, adequate resources and facilities and curriculum that includes provision for knowledge in such areas as sex, nutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention in schools. Coupled with that, a well-supported family and community has also become another important criteria for ensuring quality education in students during their school- age.

What could be the parameters of quality in school education ? This paper is a humble attempt to contribute to the definitions of quality education by examining the research related to these dimensions. In the concluding part , the researcher have tried to provide suggestions from her own viewpoint.

Key words: *Quality education, child-centric, learning community, present scenario*

Introduction: John Dewey, in his renowned book 'My Pedagogic Creed', Article II, stated

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“I believe that the school is primarily a social institution. Education being a social
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process, the school is simply that form of community life in which all those agencies are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of the race, and to use his own powers for social ends..... the school must represent the present life – life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighbourhood, or on the playground”.

This view of Dewey is equally important in our 21st century regarding school education. Today, school education is meant not only to provide suitable teaching-learning environment, rather providing a suitable education community for better survival, protection, development and participation of the child is also at the centre. This means that the focus is on learning which strengthens the capacities of the child to act progressively on their own through the acquisition of relevant knowledge, useful skills and appropriate attitudes.

The advent of 21st century saw the education system heavily inclined to a powerful movement of mass education. The main challenge to meet the fulfillment towards a mass education system that took place swiftly within the changing economy and national environment, is the issue of quality. During the initial years of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the focus was ensuring physical access and equity, and building school infrastructure along with the recruitment of teachers. Having achieved the goal nearly at universal access at the primary level, the focus is now on quality improvement and enhancing student learning. A series of programmes have been initiated by the Central and State governments to foster quality education and improve student learning outcomes. These programmes seek to bring about a broad shift towards schools and systems that are child-friendly and responsive to each child’s learning needs. It is expected that the outcomes would encompass knowledge, skills and attitudes, and would be linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society.

What could be the parameters to measure quality in school education?

The issue of quality schooling is basic to national development. The researcher attempts to focus on four main points accompanied with various sub-points, as the parameters to measure quality in school education, such as, Quality learners, Quality learning environments, Quality content and Teacher’s competency. They are discussed as follows.

I. Quality Learners: Many elements go into making a quality learner, including health, early childhood experiences and home support.

- i) **Good health and nutrition.** Physically healthy children learn well. Healthy development in early childhood, especially during the first three years of life, plays an important role in providing the basis for a healthy life and a successful formal school experience. Prevention of infection, disease and injury prior to school enrolment are also vital to the early development of a quality learner.
- ii) **Early childhood psychosocial development experiences.** Positive early experiences and interactions are also vital to preparing a quality learner. Evidence from Philippines, Sri Lanka and Turkey, and has shown that children who participate in early intervention

programmes do better in primary school than those who do not benefit from formal early child programmes, and studies from India, Morocco and Latin America demonstrate that disadvantaged children benefit the most from such programmes (UNICEF, 1998). A high level of quality in early childhood development programmes can be achieved when health and nutrition components are combined with structured psychosocial development in the pre-school years.

- iii) **Regular attendance for learning.** When they reach school age to achieve academically, children must attend school consistently.
- iv) **Family support for learning.** Parents may not always have the background to support their children's cognitive and psychosocial development throughout their school years. Parents' level of education, has a multifaceted impact on children's ability to learn in school. The home curriculum seems to play a vital role in preparing quality learners for school. Healthy children with positive early learning experiences and supportive, involved parents are thus most likely to succeed in school. Quality teachers need similar support for their tasks in schools. Another essential ingredient for a successful educational system is a quality learning environment.

II. Quality Learning Environments: Learning can occur anywhere, but the positive learning outcomes generally sought by educational systems happen in quality learning environments. Learning environments are made up of physical, psychosocial and service delivery elements.

i) **Physical elements:** Physical learning environments or the places in which formal learning occurs, range from relatively modern and well-equipped buildings to open-air gathering places. The quality of school facilities seems to have an indirect effect on learning. A study in India, however, sampled 59 schools and found that of these only 49 had buildings and of these, 25 had a toilet, 20 had electricity, 10 had a school library and four had a television. In this case, the quality of the learning environment was strongly correlated with pupils' achievement in Hindi and mathematics (Carron & Chau, 1996).

- **School infrastructure and other quality dimensions.** The quality of school buildings may be related to other school quality issues, such as the presence of adequate instructional materials and textbooks, working conditions for students and teachers, and the ability of teachers to undertake certain instructional approaches. Such factors as on-site availability of lavatories and a clean water supply, classroom maintenance, space and furniture availability all have an impact on the critical learning factor of time on task. Also, when pupils have to leave school and walk significant distances for clean drinking water, for example, they may not always return to class

ii) **Psychosocial elements**

- **Peaceful, safe environments, especially for girls:** Within schools and classrooms, a welcoming and non-discriminatory climate is needed in creating a quality learning environment. The journey to school may be unsafe, since many girls experience

harassment and physical attacks either on public transportation in cities or remote paths in rural areas.

- **Teachers' behaviours that affect safety:** Teacher behaviours affect the quality of the learning environment since learning cannot take place when the basic needs of survival and self-protection are threatened by them.
- **Effective school discipline policies:** Well-managed schools and classrooms contribute to educational quality. Students, teachers and administrators should agree upon school and classroom rules and policies, and these should be clear and understandable.

iii) Service at school :

- **Provision of health services.** The school service environment can also contribute to learning in important ways. Provision of health services and education can contribute to learning first by reducing absenteeism and inattention. Guidance and counselling services, the provision of extra-curricular activities and the provision of school snacks are other examples of service provision contribute to quality school environments. This learning begins with quality content.

III. Quality Content: Quality content refers to the intended and taught curriculum of schools. National goals for education, and outcome statements that translate those goals into measurable objectives should provide the starting point for the development and implementation of curriculum (UNICEF, 2000).

- **Student-centred, non-discriminatory, standards-based curriculum structures :** In general, curriculum should emphasize deep rather than broad coverage of important areas of knowledge, authentic and contextualized problems of study, and problem-solving that stresses skills development as well as knowledge acquisition. Curriculum should also provide for individual differences.
- **Life skills:** The term 'life skills' can be broadly interpreted, and is often assumed to include such topics as health, hygiene, etiquette, and vocational skills. In UNICEF, however, life skills are defined as "psycho-social and interpersonal skills used in every day interactions...not specific to getting a job or earning an income". The definition also explains that "a wide range of examples exist under the UNICEF working definition of Life Skills, such as assertion and refusal skills, goal setting, decision making and coping skills" (UNICEF, 2000). As with literacy, age-appropriate life skills can be incorporated into other areas of study.
- **Peace education:** Peace education seeks to help students gain the ability to prevent conflict, and to resolve conflict peacefully when it does arise, whether on the intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, national or international level. Peace education addresses cognitive, affective and behavioural learning and can occur both within schools, through curriculum development and teacher education, and outside of schools, through camps, sports and recreation programmes.

IV. Teachers' Competency:

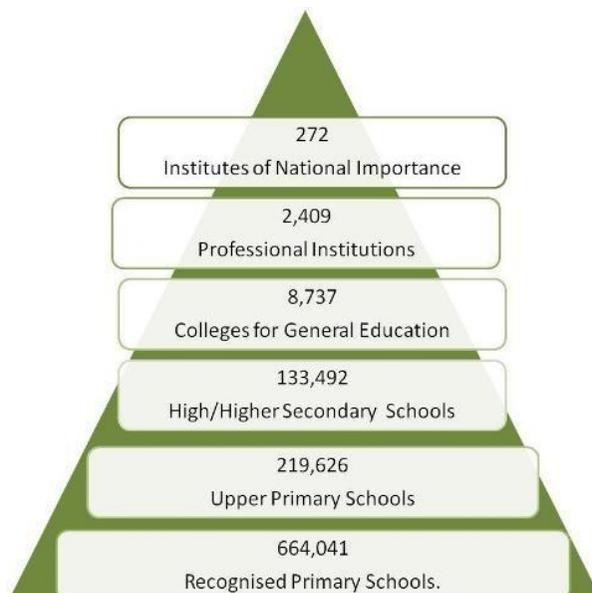
- **Professional learning for teachers.**
- **Teacher competence**
- **Ongoing professional development.**
- **Continuing support for student-centred learning :** Teacher education, both pre-service and in-service, should help teachers develop teaching methods and skills that take new understandings of how children learn into account. Just as curriculum should be child-centred and relevant, so should instructional methods.

The Present Scenario: Broadly, education is supposed to prepare the students for the world ahead. But, the present scenario regarding the quality of education that Indian schools are imparting today is strikingly different. The researcher found these broad issues affecting the quality of school education. They are – 1. Access, 2. Attendance and 3. Attainment. They are discussed below separately but they are all interlinked.

1. Access: A large number of school-going children are not able to access schools because of –

- Poor infrastructure – specially in rural and remote tribal areas, the schools have poor classrooms. There are also instances of taking classes beneath a tree. Many schools have no compounds, toilets and drinking water facilities.
- Parents concern – Parents are not certain about the safety of the girl child if she had to travel more than half kilometres for school from home. Apparently simple issues like the need to cross a highway or stream on the way to school also keeps kids away.

A pyramidal structure can be drawn as how students go from primary schooling to higher education. The system is designed to squeeze out students at each stage, i.e., upper primary, secondary, higher secondary, under graduation and post-graduation level, due to limited number of seats. The diagram below shows statistics from Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2004.



In the name of Right to Education, Government has opened a few satellite schools in remote areas. These schools are often a single classroom with multi-grade affairs. Also, ill-trained teachers are appointed there, with less experience to handle teaching technologies. These substandard schools lead to poorly educated kids which in turn leads to poverty and illiteracy trap.

2. Attendance: Enrollment of children in schools does not guarantee their continuous attendance in school. There are a number of factors that keep the child away. Teachers are held accountable for enrollment, seldom for attendance. Further, the poor, rural children need to work at home or in the family enterprise, that is, farming, trading, etc. or in another way to bring in money to help feed the family. Also, a handful few teachers have the tendency to skip the classes. These kind of circumstances fuel the students to skip the classes too.

3. Attainment: This third factor could be considered as the most serious one. Historically, the Indian education system was designed by the British rulers to create clerks to help the few thousand British administrators to run a country of 40 million people. It was not designed to promote thought and encourage a culture of curiosity. Our present school curriculum is following the same tradition. In Indian schooling system, children do not attain knowledge in reality and skills commensurate with their age. There are various reasons for this :

- The syllabi is often outdated coupled with a boring pedagogy. The students are given a 'syllabus', they are trained to follow a 'syllabus' which may not interest the students, and everything else is 'out of syllabus'. They are never encouraged to go and explore out of syllabus. The curriculum is designed to leave the kid with no skills or

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perspectives to be able to build a working life.

- In rural areas, most of the kids are coming from poorly educated households who do not have the atmosphere at home to aid learning. They do not have the capability to buy books or other related accessories. They can not pay money for extra coaching, even if a child is a slow learner and needs that support. And parents are not capable of evaluating whether the kid is learning anything or not.
- The evaluations are focussed on a child being able to vomit out what he / she has learnt by heart. Study of History is reduced to dates only and study of language to recite poems. The only thing children about Gandhi in school are his birth date, death anniversary and the dates when he launched major agitations. To understand what his philosophy was, they have to wait till they reach college, that is, when they could access some good books. Some students excel and score good marks, which sends a positive feedback about the way of learning and then they turn into memorizing machine, without much care about the meaning and underlying principles and concepts.

Barring a few, the teachers are also not ready to work at their own pace according to the students' understandings. They also have to report to the higher authorities about their progress with the syllabus, so either they add pressure upon the children or leave rest of the syllabus on the student to study.

Suggestions to revive the situation: Some suggestions are provided below which could be helpful to revive the sorrowful situation :

1. In such a situation it is important that our teacher education programmes be restructured. It is important to include at least two vital components discussed above i.e. managing diversity and managing multi-grade situations. These problems are rarely covered in the training programmes, either in pre-service or in-service. The present day teachers lack the skills to manage the increasing diversity and the resultant complex classroom situations. Most of the in-service programmes focus on generic skills and do not provide any value addition to the would – be teacher. Further if we have to match the requirements of the schools and the teachers who work in them, the training programmes should be designed in consultation and participation of the teachers and not just by the teacher educators and administrators.
2. India has another peculiar situation which impacts the performance of our teachers. Here the school teacher has multiple roles to perform. The idiocentric orders of the governments result in teachers to be a social worker, an advocacy agent for various government policy initiatives, a field worker and implementer, a polling agent, a health worker, a flood relief worker distributing aid, and so goes on the list. In addition to the above listed works not related to the school , the teachers also perform the duty of the dispatch clerk, accountant, record keeper, the ration distributor for the mid day meal scheme and teach the students – many a times in a multi grade system. This is the environment in which 90% of rural teachers work in such a situation, what is the quality

of teaching-learning that we expect from a teacher ? How do we come out of the situation ? A situation where there is no aspiration for professional growth on the part of the teacher, inadequate infrastructure and human resources, inadequate time and of all poor human resource management strategies. We require a real re-searching of our selves, a retrospection of our actions and a revisioning of the systems and the profession.

3. Teachers are the core of any school and thus their role in quality improvement becomes paramount. There are three issues which are relevant in the context of teachers contribution to quality schooling: 1. Self-evaluation 2. Ethics and values 3. Continuous learning and professional development. The ability of the teachers to critically examine their teaching-learning practices, a retrospection on their activities, adaptation to new technologies and pedagogies looking for new methods and modes of teaching will help teachers to improve their teaching methodology and skills crucial for quality education. As of today we can say there is hardly any teacher who take up action research. It is the duty of every teacher to reset their goals, their values and firmly anchor their professionalism. We should prepare our younger generation of teachers who would emerge with accountability, better access, better scholarship, with better human relation, with clear vision, and strategic planning and show the world the strength of their scientific and reflective thinking.
4. School quality is a function of inputs and the efficient management of these inputs in relation to desired goals. The main indicator of quality of secondary education can be visualized in terms of input, process and output. For desired output in terms of student's achievement both in curricular and co-curricular areas, necessary inputs and processes need to be provided. For this we should orient the head teacher and the leadership for effective management. This means –
 - a) Capacity building of educational administrators for meeting the challenges of qualitative improvement and quantitative expansion.
 - b) Involve staff and create conditions for more stimulating professional and intellectual involvement in academic and administrative planning - collaborative management.
 - c) Governments and managements should invite more flagship programme similar to those of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyana.
 - d) Fix responsibility and accountability in terms of school effectiveness.

Conclusion : Quality of school education is a dynamic variable. It depends on innumerable tangible and non-tangible variables, all of which can be considered as factors that influence this variable. Though listing all of them is likely to be Herculean task, they can be classified into three main categories, they are input-related, process-related and output related. However, people are becoming more and more aware of their 'rights', including the right to get quality education. They have started questioning the efficacy of the existing educational system. Consumer awareness with respect to education is on the rise. We are nearing such future, where people are supposed to plan, implement all endeavors for their own welfare, and education being one of them.

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