

No one ever forgets a good teacher

The future of our children is at stake. They are attending schools, government and private, but not learning enough. For a country known as a software power, it's a shock to learn that large numbers of children in India don't know the basics. Is it possible that they are just average learners? Or should we squarely blame the quality of teaching?

It's a cumulative set of issues but I think the lack of accountability of teachers is the real problem, says Vimala Ramachandran, managing director of ERU Consultants, a research and consulting group that works on education and child development. They are not accountable whether children are learning or not. Some of my studies have shown that most government primary school children study less than half-an-hour at school. Many government teachers come to school, mark attendance, do some administrative work and leave. Where there are three teachers in one school, only one would be present; they take turns in coming to school.

There's no job insecurity in government schools; the starting salary is Rs 20,000 after the Sixth Pay Commission, and even the work is reportedly much less than in private schools. Then what prevents teachers from teaching? In West Bengal, 89% of the children go for tuition. That's because teachers don't take responsibility, says Ramachandran.

Some of the crores that have been poured into Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the government's flagship programme for meeting the target of universal elementary education, have gone into teacher training. But no one asks the teachers what training they want. Somebody else plans and the teachers are forced to go. I have interviewed some 1000 teachers and most said the training was irrelevant, says Ramachandran.

However, no training programme can fix a bigger problem: a basic lack of knowledge. Gujarat's education department recently conducted teacher aptitude tests for primary, secondary and higher secondary teachers. Only 33% of primary teachers and 48.68% of secondary and higher secondary teachers qualified by securing a minimum 50% marks. And yet, the HRD ministry's Statistics of School Education 2009-10 claims the state has 100% trained teachers at all levels in its schools!

The Right to Education Act 2009 has made it mandatory that every primary and upper primary teacher has to clear the teacher eligibility test and should be trained. Private schools are unhappy with this because they have to get all their teachers trained, says Vinod Raina, educationist and a member of the RTE drafting committee. Parents see a difference in quality between government and private schools. But there's no difference at all private teachers are like lowpaid slave labour, he says.

Parents complain of teachers rushing to finish syllabus, not checking classwork, giving excessive homework. But teachers say they just don't have time anymore, thanks to CCE (continuous and comprehensive evaluation), introduced two years ago. Our written work has increased. The maximum time is spent in keeping records. Earlier, I used to call weak students after school for extra guidance. Now I just don't have the stamina, says a maths teacher in a South Delhi private school.

Where's the time for correcting copies, then Or even to do some oral reading in class One period lasts 40 minutes and there are 40 children on average per class, says Delhi-based retired teacher Usha Surendran. How do you do justice to each child Only the serious ones learn. The average child suffers. Also, children now know that till Class VIII they cannot be denied promotion however low they score. Many of them are very casual about studies. In a class of 40, only 10 are interested in learning about geometry, says the maths teacher.

The primary focus of the government has been to enrol children in schools. That challenge is over even though it doesn't mean the children are present in schools. But the government neglected the learning part. Now we know the hard way why the focus should be always on learning (TOI 22-1-12).