

Education And Literacy

Children who are able to read and write are a blessing to themselves, their parents, and to the community but, for many, this is still an unfulfilled dream. Although there are now 13.5 million children enrolled in primary schools, the statistics surrounding the success rate are poor enough to be of concern. Many children do not stay in school long enough to acquire the skills for further learning.

With many destined to drop out by the second or third year, some to help the family and others because parents think the kind of schooling on offer is useless, the whole gamut of formal education should be under review. The question which hangs in our minds is, if the present state of affairs continues, the end result will be an extraordinary waste in education the country can ill afford. Therefore, before embarking on a nationwide scheme to bring all children within the scheme, measures must be taken to ensure that children are not simply enrolled in schools, but continue to remain there—at least until learning has become meaningful.

In rich countries, at least 95% of school-age children enrol from the first stage and, of greater importance, they stay in school at least until they reach the official school leaving age. In poor states, however, especially where there is no law preventing them leaving prematurely, barely more than 65-80% of children enrol at all, and that level declines until, at university level, the number is negligible. For example, in 1980 only a quarter of those who enrolled in class one got past class four and barely 14% made it as far as class eight—and most had to repeat one or more years, in order to do it. On the other hand there were children who proved themselves to be able students but were unable to continue because there was no secondary school within the area or, if there were, it had no vacancies.

The question we must now ask ourselves is, have things improved, and if so, to what extent and have the changes made in the syllabus, had the effect desired? As a guide to the answers, taking the figures of 1991, it can be seen that the literacy rate for people over seven has changed little which indicates that today's adolescents are not much better off than adults educated one or two decades earlier. In the poorer rural parts, the change is even less noticeable—which brings us to the conclusion that, if advances have been made they are too slow to have a marked effect.

The gap between the best and the worst students in the system, remains vast but quoting averages tends to conceal the wide variations. This distinction becomes even clearer when dealing with urban-rural statistics for such variances are too visible indicating that no-one has yet been able to close the urban-rural gap in education. Nor does anyone know how this is to be done. And when teachers remain underpaid and in short supply there is simply no way that we know to finally break the camel's back to achieve our ends.

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