How the systemic problems kept our schooling ineffective

⋮ 3/2/2022

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4 min read . Updated: 03 Mar 2022, 01:33 AM IST**Anurag Behar**

We must address a wide range of factors that prevent kids from learning what they should in school

In my last two columns, I asked, ‘Why are children not learning what they should in school?’ and explored the very basics: reasons relating to children and then to teachers. This week, let us similarly explore the range of causes that are systemic. Let’s note at the outset that many of these causes are intertwined in complex ways.

The first set of issues arise from the ‘design’ of our schooling system. We made a choice a few decades ago that each habitation must have a primary school within 1km to ensure access for little children. This has worked really well and has been a key reason why most children in that age-group are now in primary schools. But it has created a few intractable problems.

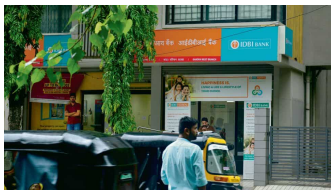
Each primary school, since it serves one habitation, has a small number of children across classes 1 to 5. Because of the small student group, there is often only one teacher, or perhaps two. They teach five classes simultaneously, and also all three subjects. Teaching is complex and challenging as it is. But multi-class teaching of many subjects increases difficulties manifold. Also, with so many single- or two-teacher schools, teachers are isolated and hard to support.

The second set of issues arise from inadequate investment in public education, resulting in either inadequate or poor-quality resources. With roughly 3% of gross domestic product (GDP) as our public expenditure on education, we have been well short of our commitment of 6% for decades. This underlies many of the other problems. An inadequate number of teachers and (in some states) a large number of

teachers with short- term contracts and low remuneration. Inadequate staffing for other needs, such as community outreach. A lack of basic facilities in schools such as toilets, running water and electricity, alongside poor maintenance. Deteriorating nutritional standards of the mid-day meal across years. Poor quality and inadequate teaching-learning-material. All of this and more affects the motivation and efficacy of teachers, as also the school atmosphere and children's engagement.

The third is our dysfunctional teacher education system. We have one of the world's worst and most corrupt teacher education systems. The National Education Policy 2020 confronts this problem head-on. But the current reality is that most of our 9 million teachers have undergone a B.Ed or D.Ed programme of very poor quality, if they've done one at all. There are also many 'colleges' that just sell degrees, without students even attending classes. Most teachers who are effective are so because of their own hard work and initiative. We cannot overestimate the deeply corrosive influence of a dysfunctional and corrupt teacher education system on overall education, not only on basic learning.

The fourth is the design and culture of our education system which makes it rigid and centralizing rather than flexible and empowering—which is what's needed for effective schooling and learning. Uniform norms or diktats across the state, cookie-cutter training for teachers irrespective of their actual needs, an 'inspectorial' regime rather than a problem-solving one. The list goes on. All exacerbated by a culture which treats teachers as scapegoats and is bereft of genuine social-human engagement, which is essential to education. Resultantly, teachers are largely unsupported, demotivated and disempowered.



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Fifth is the administrative leadership and management of the system. Whatever the design of the system, leadership makes a difference. In many states, under good leaders, the difference they make is visible. But too often, the leadership is shoddy. Or just incompetent and indifferent. But even more often, it is a lack of understanding that all administrative actions have educational consequences, which must be assessed by the appropriate educational principles, and not by what is administratively expedient. For example, continuous non-educational demands on the time of teachers are made, ranging from election duty to anti-malaria campaigns; their priorities are continually and rapidly changed, disorienting them and distracting them from their main role. Further, flawed notions of how to develop good textbooks inform decisions, and ineffective implementation of sound policies has become the unfortunate norm.

Sixth is the weak capacity of key institutions in school education. We have had the foresight to imagine institutions that will lead and support some of the most important educational matters, such as curriculum and textbook development, design of assessment systems, professional development support for educators and more. These institutions range from ones right there on-the-ground to those which are for districts, states, or for the entire country. Too many, if not most, are ineffective, lacking in capacity and embroiled in internal politicking, while equally enmeshed with external politics. Instead of leading our educational thinking and practice, they are dragging us down. Honourable exceptions prove that this need not be the case. Those who should lead the response to India's crisis of learning have neither the capacity nor the intent. Our teachers and children are left to fend for themselves.

There are other systemic factors, and equally there are societal factors behind the lack of learning in our classes. In my next column, I will take up those.

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