

RTE and the activity trap

 livemint.com/Opinion/ZPQBmmK9gO8W9DvpW3sUI/RTE-and-the-activity-trap.html

April 3, 2013



As I travel across the country, usually I drop in to schools unannounced or my colleagues informally coordinate a visit. Very few school visits are “officially” scheduled. Let me narrate the typical script of one such “official” visit.

The school is in a village 15km from the district headquarters. The block education officer (BEO) plans the visit and accompanies us. The school has a neat, almost pretty, building with 140 students across five grades, and with five teachers.

We look around the classrooms, kitchen, library, toilets, office and the playground. We chat with the children for a while, eat lunch with them. Then there is a discussion with the teachers, and the members of the school management committee (from the local community) join in. We see projects carried out by the students, the “teaching-learning-material” they use and so on. There are reaffirmations about how the school is functioning well, and that everyone is happy.

None of this is a sham: it is not a put-up show for us. My colleagues, who live around there, know the school reasonably well. On the way back, the BEO talks about how the school has a 10-year history of being good, and how it is difficult to replicate this in most other schools. He is very happy with this “Right to Education (RTE) compliant” school, and candidly estimates that 80% schools won’t be like this.

Learning levels are, however, another matter altogether even in this school which meets RTE norms and has been that way for years. On the basic measures of reading with comprehension and math, the school is in the same range as most other schools. Let us not even look at deeper curricular goals such as critical thinking, conceptual understating and social and ethical development.

Would this surprise anyone who is involved with education? I don’t think so. Every one of us knows that a school meeting RTE requirements is not really going to improve learning levels.

The deadline has passed and RTE has not been implemented, aside from a minority of schools. There has been a fair bit of public discussion and media attention on this issue. My estimate is that it will take a decade to implement the RTE across the country, if it is done at all. At the end of this decade we will rediscover that it has not helped with learning levels, and has not changed real education.

The problem does not lie with RTE's intentions. Most norms and standards that it sets for the schools are good and relevant and some are even necessary. The issues exist elsewhere.

There is a huge gap between our policies and their implementation on the ground. Even if our policies were implemented with a quarter of the intended spirit we will witness a dramatic improvement in educational outcomes. RTE merely gives legislative sanctity to some of these policies, and adds a few more, increasing the policy implementation gap.

In itself, RTE is about "inputs" much more than "outcomes". It lays out the minimum criterion that schools must meet on some inputs of education, and does not focus on educational goals. Even within this "input" focus, RTE emphasizes "simply measurable" physical inputs (number of classroom, toilets, etc.) and not necessarily the educationally important ones.

It barely touches some of the more important aspects of our education system in dire need of change. The morass in teacher education is referred to peripherally; desperately needed institutional improvements are hardly alluded to.

Much of this is because a legislative approach to education is in itself limited. Education is a complex enterprise that is enmeshed in human relationships, social dynamics, individual capacities, situational detail and multiple purposes. It is not possible to distil what is required for good education to any deterministic formula or even an approach, which can then be legislated. This is like saying let us legislate to improve happiness. Efficacy of rights and legislation-based approaches to deliver complex social services, welfare outcomes and positive liberties is severely limited.

Still, aren't we better off, having RTE? Since, in general, it seems to promise good things, though not adequately. It also does not suggest other things that don't need to be done.

RTE is important and is a good law to have. But for our system it will become an activity trap. Its implementation will be prioritized because of its legislative sanctity. Engaged with these activities, we will think that we are doing lots in education. Though there will be little progress on many of the core issues. And education will remain stuck where it is.

If we are continually conscious of this trap, deliberately move beyond RTE, and systematically deal with the fundamental issues on the ground, we may avoid losing a decade.

Anurag Behar is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation and also leads sustainability initiatives for Wipro Ltd. He writes every fortnight on issues of ecology and education. Comments are welcome at othersphere@livemint.com. To read Anurag Behar's previous columns, go to www.livemint.com/othersphere-

Catch all the [Business News](#), [Market News](#), [Breaking News](#) Events and [Latest News](#) Updates on Live Mint. Download The [Mint News App](#) to get Daily Market Updates. [More](#)

Subscribe to **Mint Newsletters**

Topics



Let us bring the summary of the day's most important news directly to you with our newsletters!

[Subscribe for free](#)

[Post your comment](#)