Sustainable Equity In Learning And Education

Just as human beings cannot survive without water and food, so too do they need to develop the ability to communicate their desires to access the basic needs of life. Thus, language serves as an essential tool not only to get meaning across, but also to learn and acquire knowledge and skills. Formal education in various subject areas has made it possible for human being to acquire such knowledge to ensure survival and hence personal and social development.

Education was a luxury afforded only by the 'haves' of the world, but now, it has become a fundamental right of every citizen and for every child. The general belief is that poverty and inequality would disappear if everyone receives the same formal education from pre-primary school level, but to what extent this fundamental right is being achieved is yet to be discerned. Hence, several discourses on 'quality education for all' began with the long term goal of ensuring sustainable development of the human race. With the advent of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030, this paper tries to understand how far equity in learning has been achieved or if there is none at all.

As per the EFA Global Monitoring Report (2013/2014), around 120 million children are still out of school or have dropped-out of schools. "In the school year ending in 2014, nearly 61 million children of primary school age and 202 million adolescents of secondary school age were out of school" (UNESCO, 2016, p.73). Substantial efforts have been made in the past few years to ensure children's access to schools, to the point that it is no longer a major cause for educational functionaries to fight for. However, the consequences of ensuring only 'access' to schools have resulted in unworkable school conditions, dearth of trained teachers, inappropriate teaching learning materials and so on and so forth. Many of these schools that have been developed are still functioning with minimal facilities.

How does learning take place in such schools? Is there any justice in whatever we are doing so far? In this context, 'equity' becomes a major concern. This paper's arguments are based on observations made from a research study which focuses on 'Classroom Interaction' in the state of Meghalaya and observations based on a survey conducted at Namsai district in Arunachal Pradesh.

Introduction

At the centre of the world's efforts to ensure sustainable development for all, is the concept of 'Equity'. It is a term that strives to include everyone and anyone within its purview, regardless of any kind of difference, towards a much greater social progress (UNESCO, 2018). Formal education has uplifted our country and brought social and economic development to all states and many societies, but not all of India's citizens have been included in its progress. True development can only be achieved when it is sustainable and everyone is included in it. Thus, within the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030, this paper tries to look at the extent to which 'equity' in learning has been achieved and identifies the problems of equity based on observations made from a research study on 'Classroom Interaction' in the semi-urban and rural areas in the state of Meghalaya and also on a survey conducted at Namsai district of Arunachal Pradesh.

Brief Background

Arunachal Pradesh

Field visit was conducted in 3 blocks of Namsai District, and in each block 10 schools were visited making it a total of 30 schools out of 137 schools. At the Namsai district of Arunachal Pradesh, the population of students in the different schools is variegated into various ethnic cultures, languages, religions and socioeconomic backgrounds. The students comprise of tribals, Adivasis, children of tea planters, labourers, etc. and thus, a Hindi variant is the medium of instruction in all schools. Children display poor skills in the English language where basic questions are difficult to comprehend, and consequently, English teachers have to make use of Hindi to attain any kind of cognitive development and progress in their lesson. Generally, input in English is minimal in schools as well as in their homes and it seems rather improbable that the children receive any other input in English from any other source.

Resources available in the Schools

Schools: The main source of drinking water available is the hand pump in all schools and majority of such schools do not have a filtration device to ensure water safety. Toilets in most schools are available but majority of the toilets are not functional. This is largely due to the problems of maintenance, as no supporting staff is available in government schools except for a few higher secondary schools. In the main urban block such as Namsai, there are schools with good facilities such as science labs, computer labs, and smart classrooms with a student population of more than 900, and a teacher population of 30 up to 37. In such schools, the classroom strength is 80 to100 students particularly in secondary level. Yet within 2 km, there are schools, particularly at the primary level, with no electricity, toilets and water supply. Smart classrooms are available in a few schools. Teachers have been mostly trained on the technical aspects of handling the gadgets, but not on content transaction. This was seen when teachers were teaching action songs to children by simply displaying the content rather than getting the students involved in the action song.

Meghalaya (Semi-Urban and Rural Areas)

In Meghalaya, a total number of 12 schools (classes 5 to 8) were examined for data collection, located in three districts in Meghalaya i.e. East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills and Ri- Bhoi district. Students comprising of 241 and 46 teachers, that is, 16 from the semi-urban and 30 from the rural areas, were the subjects of the study. Subjects are categorised according to gender and educational level students in both semi-urban and rural areas. 122 number of students represents the Semi-urban and 119 students are from the rural areas.

Resources available in the Schools

Schools within the urban area of the East Khasi hills have more facilities as compared to schools located in the rural areas within the same districts. Similar is the case with other districts such as the Ri-Bhoi and West Khasi hills districts. There are schools with no proper toilets, classrooms, teaching resources, etc. and they lack proper ventilation, a roof, proper seating benches for students, etc. Furthermore, there are schools located in interior areas such as the school in Diengsong and Wahtyngai which is located in a challenging terrain. In Diengsong,

teachers have to walk down the small steps towards the deep valleys of Cherrapunjee to reach the schools. The teachers there informed that frequent support to such schools can rarely be seen. The SSA School in Wahtyngai does not have proper classrooms— when it rains, children have to move to the corner of the classroom to sit as there is no proper roofing. Most BRCs/CRCs also point out that the travelling allowance to visit such schools is limited and at times, they are incurred from their own salary.

One important finding (based on observations made in Namsai) which needs to be highlighted is the evidence of an urban and rural disparity in terms of reading materials, classroom strategies, teacher's proficiency, etc. Based on the reading test conducted (in Meghalaya) with the students, it was seen that children were unable to read and write on their own in English. However, they could perform the same tasks in their own language. English Language classrooms in both semi-urban and rural mono-cultural schools are predominated by teacher-centered methods. The only input received in English other than teaching the subject is evident from the kinds of English phrases and sentences they often hear teachers used while teaching or outside the classrooms. This exercise was conducted to find out the frequency of English in their daily school life and how much of exposure students are receiving from the schools besides the classroom teaching. Despite the teachers being trained in other learner-centered methods, teaching becomes only a series of knowledge transactions in preparation for the final written examination for example, dictation, rote learning, drilling, etc. Teachers claim to use language activities in the classroom but data reveals that there are hardly any interactional activities happening in the classroom. A cross-tab analysis (using SPSS 16.0) shows that whether in the rural or urban context, the majority of learners do not experience language classrooms to be full of activities. In the selected districts in Meghalaya, the materials and textbooks developed by the state do not cover themes related to what students are learning and difficult to relate to by students in the rural interior areas. Concepts of a morning walk, historical events and places in the urban areas are alien to most of the students in the rural areas.

Measuring Equity

To measure progress and equity in learning, it is expected that educational variables from the perspective of 'Equity' must be formed to measure the desirable characteristics. From a theoretical standpoint, 'Equity' includes certain major concepts such as Meritocracy, Minimum Standards, Impartiality, Equality of Condition, and Redistribution. Impartiality and Equality of Condition are usually the two concepts that reveal the main education indicators of a study; however, it is important to make the distinction between them clear. Impartiality refers to 'equality' in terms of a particular input, characteristic or outcome of any educational project. Equality of condition refers to the wider social and economic context, as well as issues of fairness. "While perfect equality may not be possible, greater equity would distribute education outcomes independently of the socioeconomic or other characteristics of students or their schools" (UNESCO, 2018).

"In school education, an 'equitable' system could be defined as one in which all students are treated equally – for example, a system in which all students are given the same opportunities, exposed to the same school curriculum, taught by teachers with equivalent expertise, held to the same learning expectations and provided with equivalent levels of resourcing and support. Educational policies and discussions of equity sometimes reflect this view of equity as equality" (Masters, et.al, 2018: p.2). However, as in other areas of life, equity in school education is likely

to be associated with equal treatment in some situations (where there is no obvious basis for differential treatment), and unequal treatment in others.

The general belief is that poverty and inequality would disappear if everyone receives the same formal education from pre-primary school level, but to what extent this fundamental right is being achieved is yet to be discerned. Hence, several discourses on 'quality education for all' began with the long term goal of ensuring sustainable development of the human race. With the advent of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030, this paper tries to understand how far equity in learning has been achieved or if there is none at all. Equal treatment requires a teacher to pay extra special attention in delivery and designing of appropriate materials to accommodate those children who need help despite the differences in socio-economic background.

Equity in Teaching Learning Materials

Based on group discussions, considering the background of the learners in Namsai and Meghalaya (selected districts), teachers pointed out that children lack exposure to English usage at home and even within the school campus. Students rarely ask questions or initiate discussions in English and they are more comfortable in their MT. Further, the materials used are inappropriate and difficult for children to understand; even while teaching, they have to resort to the local language or the children's mother tongue to help them understand. This paper tries to highlight the bias in the English language teaching materials that are used in classrooms. The content in the English textbooks at secondary level designed by the board (using private publishers) of school education in Meghalaya comprises of themes that are unrelated to the learners' familiar environment and they are largely urban and colonial centric.

On the one hand, to ensure equal opportunity, the same input, that is the materials, is provided to every child; on the other hand, it is unequal when learners cannot relate to the text they are expected to learn. As pointed out by Masters, et.al (2018) materials should address unequal students' background. For instance, NCERT textbooks are adopted in the entire state of Arunachal Pradesh. On questioning a few teachers, it was found that the constructivist approach to teaching and learning which is highlighted in the NCF- 2005 is still needed. Most of the content in the text are unfamiliar to the children in the district, for example, the poem from Marigold 'My First Day of School', the concept of 'Gran' which appears in the text could not be understood by the children since such a culturally distinct style of calling one's grandmother is unfamiliar to them. When questions are raised regarding the content of the poem, most children fail to understand the English vocabulary. However, if such content is translated into Hindi, children would understand and find that it is quite a common incident even in the interior areas of the block. With the community being dominated by an agrarian culture, teachers pointed out that during plantation and harvest time, it is difficult to ensure that students attend school despite the efforts of the literacy campaign being conducted at village level. Their interest in learning texts needs to be sustained and this can be achieved only when they read content that has relevance to their real-life situation. What they learn in school has to correlate with their daily lives, particularly the level of language used.

As it stands, their daily activities and their school activities are worlds apart and hence, children become disengaged from school life. A gap exists between the world they live in and what they learn in school. English may not be a language used at home or in their immediate social

surroundings, but it needs to have a place in their lives where they can use and learn its functions regardless of the social differences. 'Equitable approaches aim to address or compensate for the obstacles that would otherwise hold disadvantaged children back, so they can attain the same levels of learning enjoyed by other children who are more fortunate (Cameroon, Daga and Outhred, 2018)'.

The question that arises in the context of 'equal opportunity' and 'Impartiality' is the fairness of textbooks in providing same input, particularly when learners cannot relate to it. Hence, simply providing the same textbooks may not meet the objectives of equal opportunity; instead we may be hindering learners from learning when textbooks are not benefiting the learners. How can we ensure that learners enjoy learning and find value and meaning in what they learn? Contextualisation of textbook materials is one probable answer to connect textbooks to learners and this requires effective teaching techniques and well trained teachers. Further, we often find that children in the rural areas leave school due to reasons such as poverty, the need to work and help out at home, and so and so forth. What methods and strategies will alleviate such problems in order to ensure they stay in school and find it meaningful enough to be in school despite these circumstances?

There are studies that "Ethnic, racial and linguistic groupings frequently provide a further source of inequity. Children whose household language is different from their language of instruction learn less in a range of countries, including Benin, Cameroon, Guatemala, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey" (Altinok, 2009; Fehrler and Michaelowa, 2009 qtd. in UNESCO, 2018). The indicators on measuring equity as laid down by UNESCO (2018) largely deal with tracking the progress of learners, that is, whether all children have access to education despite their gender, age, disability, affiliation to marginalised groups, linguistic minorities and so on. This paper however tries to highlight the inequity arising out of the disparity between the students' diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and the textbooks they use in school. English, being the language adopted in all textbooks, inevitably becomes a major barrier in ensuring equity in learning, particularly when learners are expected to reach a set of learning outcomes that have been outlined at the end of each level of education.

How is English a barrier? 'Learning' is a bigger concept and the English language dominates the process of learning and in both the context of Namsai and the districts in Meghalaya. Other than language, learning also take places through experiences, either through visual medium, through reading in their MT and through other various activities. The narrow view of learning, however, is assessed in terms of how much one can read and write –- in this case, how much one can read and write in English. When we talk of equity it should be able to appeal to different aspects of learning and not dominated by merely testing students in written examinations which confine their learning process to the area of reading and writing. Hence equity of condition should be emphasised by ensuring that learning engages all the learners in the classroom in different ways. Sadly, given the current linguistic conditions, the children in these schools are denied even the necessary exposure to the English language that would enable them to use it meaningfully. They are eventually forced to memorise their answers without understanding and reproduce them adequately enough to cross the pass mark. In such a situation, the concept of 'impartiality' in the context of equity in learning seems rather unjust and overpowering for these children as they are inevitably left behind in the long run, leading to increasing dropout rates in the country. It is here that the concept of 'equality of condition' may guide the policymakers in the academic assessment of such children so that they may be included in the social progress of our nation.

It is understood that it is always more convenient and less expensive to focus on the 'normal' population of students who come from better socio-economic backgrounds. But, if we truly want an inclusive education system that tries to bring equity in learning, our policy makers have to tackle the root causes of the disadvantaged conditions of children, their low household income, the inequalities that arise as a result of their gender, location, ethnicity or disability. At the very least, we can start with the infrastructure of the schools, the dearth of trained teachers and teaching-learning materials.

"Is there equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, texbooks, teachers and curriculum? For students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education' (Nichols 1974 qtd in Jenelle Reeves, 2004). Educational institutions must take appropriate actions to overcome language barriers. Language barriers in this paper, means the difficulties in communication or difficulties in acquiring the language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing in a language which is not of one's own. Particularly, such barriers are experienced when textbooks or other learning materials used in schools are not in one's own language.

Conclusions

With the advent of listing out learner's outcome, an indicator of equity in learning is defined by educational outcomes which in turn have been measured primarily through marks obtained during test and examinations. Learning outcomes have surreptitiously replaced the term 'learning objectives' of a particular lesson design despite the teacher's proficiency and resources used. This was seen in the textbooks of Meghalaya (Health Education). Further, it was seen that children at class 8 cannot phrase sentences on their own even with simple familiar concepts such as words like 'holiday', 'market', etc. despite being aware of their meanings. However, the student's linguistic environment in English is limited in both states. Daily conversations are mostly conducted in Hindi and Khasi (for Meghalaya) at home, neighborhood, etc., and even in school campuses, interaction is mostly in their mother tongue. Based on group discussions conducted with teachers in rural areas, opportunities to speak in English at home and in their immediate surroundings are limited. A monolingual and mono-cultural community cannot provide a platform conducive to English use and thus, it is a drawback. In the context of Namsai, learners are exposed to several other languages and the most dominant languages that children are comfortable with are Assamese and Hindi.

While focusing on achieving the objectives of the National Curriculum, we have failed to realise the need of the learners in terms of ensuring equity in learning for learners with such backgrounds as discussed from these two states. There is a need to create or contextualise a more meaningful and creative curriculum for such learners. We need to understand the barriers and the difficulties faced by such learners who are trying to balance against the pressures of school life and their family's needs. The need of the hour, therefore, is to contextualise the textbooks. Contextualisation here refers to the process of trying to bring the learners closer to the textbook materials by establishing connections and drawing exemplars from their daily experiences in their locality, their state or things, events of what they would normally be exposed to. This would entail designing lessons and activities that will provide learners with ample chances to use English in their daily situations. The aim of contextualisation is basically about bringing simplicity to the text enabling connections between the text and the learners.

While ensuring Equity in learning one needs to relook into how the mechanisms of delivering the educational objectives are met. The manner in which we attain the outcomes expected of our children reflects how we actually invest our time, ability and money for them, regardless of the rural or urban context. Expecting the learners to be able to use English is only fair if adequate input in the language is provided by the teachers and the school environment. A creative and enabling learning environment is needed to accommodate the learner's social and linguistic condition while ensuring classroom activities that are designed for learning grammar in the textbooks. Materials must be authentic and familiar to children and not simply in the form of imported examples from national newspapers or audio-visual materials which could alienate the learner out of his/her social conditions.

Even if changes can be brought in terms of TLMs, there is still a need to provide equity in terms of resources and infrastructure which would be conducive for learning. It is not fair that government schools existing within a distance of 2 kms would have so much disparity in the facilities like electricity, drinking water, classrooms, roofs, and toilets, etc.