



PRIMARY STAGE OF EDUCATION AND QUALITY CONCERNS: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Education has been recognized as a universal entitlement with every child's right to education reaffirmed by the UN Convention on the Right of the Child, UNCRC (United Nations, 1989). This principle was translated into the World Declaration on education for All (UNESCO 1990) and in the targets set out in the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000). These targets include ensuring that by 2015 all children have access to good quality primary education, with particular attention to girls, ethnic minorities and children in difficult circumstances. The UNCRC asserts the right of every child to education compulsory and available free to all (Article 28). The Dakar EFA goals are wide-ranging. Some of the goals relating to primary education are that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and are able to complete primary education that is free, compulsory and of good quality. Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills. Expansion of primary education has been witnessed across the nation, however, there are still continuing concerns about the conditions of many government primary schools and the quality of education provided to them. It has been observed that there is a significant rural – urban divide, with rural schools tending to have poorer resources such as school infrastructure and teaching materials, fewer teachers per school, and higher dropout rates. Of the total primary schools in India without a building, almost 92% are located in rural areas (DISE, 2006:41). The vast majority of small schools in the Indian context are much more found in impoverished rural communities, particularly areas populated by scheduled Tribe (ST), Scheduled Caste (SC), or Other Backward Class (OBC) groups.

Key Words: *UNCRC, Primary Education, Quality Concern, Rural Communities*



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Introduction: Education has been recognized as a universal entitlement with every child's right to education reaffirmed by the UN Convention on the Right of the Child, UNCRC (United

Nations, 1989). This principle was translated into the World Declaration on education for All (UNESCO 1990) and in the targets set out in the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000). These targets include ensuring that by 2015 all children have access to good quality primary education, with particular attention to girls, ethnic minorities and children in difficult circumstances. The UNCRC asserts the right of every child to education compulsory and available free to all (Article 28). It is observed that there are primary schools with 50 or fewer students in 29 Indian states. In eight states more than half of all schools have enrolments of 50 or fewer pupils. These include the mountainous Northern states of Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, and Uttaranchal; North Eastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Sikkim; and Uttaranchal; and the Southern and Western states of Karnataka and Maharashtra. The vast majority of small schools in the Indian context are much more found in impoverished rural communities, particularly areas populated by scheduled Tribe (ST), Scheduled Caste (SC), or Other Backward Class (OBC) groups. There are significantly higher percentages of single teacher primary schools in Rajasthan (40%) and Himachal Pradesh (38%) than in any other states (DISE). Significant numbers of primary schools in Himachal Pradesh are with one teacher where the lone teacher has to perform both the academic and non-academic activities.

Rationale of the Study

Several efforts have been initiated to address the problem within the national system of elementary education. Some noteworthy large-scale government programmes are Operation Blackboard (1987-88), the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP, begun in 1994) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA, begun in 2001). SSA is currently operating as an umbrella structure which oversees all aspects of elementary education provision in the country and is responsible for all quality improvements. Individual states have also often taken the lead in providing progressive initiatives for primary education within their own boundaries. However, multi-grade schooling is a worldwide phenomenon in most of the rural areas. Multi-grade classes are commonly found in sparsely populated areas in rural settings. The practice of one teacher having to teach several grade levels at the same time is quite common in low population settlements such as remote areas and small villages in India. The reality is that one teacher has to deal with mixed classes. This is due to shortage of teacher especially in rural, hard-to-reach areas with small school enrolments and viewed as a cost effective measure to expand access to basic education. This is the case in Himachal Pradesh too.

There are 12 districts all together in the state of Himachal Pradesh and Chamba district is one of them. The present study is confined to Mehla (I) Educational Administrative Block of Chamba district of Himachal Pradesh. The literacy rate of the district is found lowest when compared with the other districts of the state. There are 1149 primary schools in the district (Statistical Abstract of Himachal Pradesh 2011). District Plan 2011–2012 indicated the percentage of trained and untrained teachers as 11.56% and 88.4% respectively. The percentage of single teacher primary school is found to be 82.51% as per the Statistical Abstract of Himachal Pradesh, 2011. The district is divided into 13(Thirteen) Educational Administrative Blocks and Mehla (I) Block has the highest number of Single Teacher School as per the data obtained from DDSE, Chamba in 2011. Thus the study area is selected keeping in view of all these factors. Several research literatures are available on multi-grade teaching, but no in-depth research has been conducted on single teacher primary schools of Himachal Pradesh. In view of the nature of the problem, the researchers intended to study the status of single teacher primary school in Mehla (I) Educational Administrative Block in relation to location of schools, enrolment of students, qualification of teachers, physical and educational infrastructural facilities, teaching strategies, personal quality of teacher and other activities carried out in the school.

Methodology

Descriptive cum case study method was employed in the present study. The population of the present study consisted of all the single teacher primary schools and teachers attached to these schools in Mehla (I) Educational Administrative Block, Chamba District of Himachal Pradesh. There are 28 single teacher primary school in Mehla (I) Educational Administrative Block of Chamba District, Himachal Pradesh Random sampling technique was employed in order to draw the sample of the present study. Out of 28 single teacher primary schools, 9 schools were drawn randomly which formed 32 percentage of the population. Thus, the final sample consisted of 9 single teacher primary school and all its teachers. The researchers employed Questionnaire and Interview cum observation schedule for collecting information from the selected sample. All the responses were scored and percentage was calculated for each response. Analyses and interpretations were made by keeping in view the objectives outlined for the present study.

Results, Findings and Discussion

To explore the status of single teacher primary schools in Mehla (I) Educational Administrative Block the results have been presented in relation to location of schools, enrolment of students, qualification of teachers, physical and educational infrastructural facilities, teaching strategies, personal quality of teachers and other activities carried out in the schools.

Location of Sample Schools: All the sample schools are located far away from the district headquarter, Chamba. The data reveals that the distance ranges from 14 kms to 72 kms from the district headquarter. This implies that the sample single teacher primary schools are located in rural areas. Information about the villages where the schools are located revealed that there is no electricity connection and no proper road connecting the villages with another village. No private schools have been established in the study area. Considering this background the problem of primary education is associated with many factors and the state government need to adopt integrated approach to solve the problem of the people and primary education.

Enrolment of Students: With regards to students' enrolment it is found that all the sample schools have a small enrolment which ranges from 16 to 43 students. This shows that all the schools are very small schools. The teacher – student ratio is found to be 1:26.

Qualification of teachers: With respect to qualification of teachers teaching in single teacher primary schools it is revealed that majority of them completed higher secondary education stage (Class –XII passed) and two of them are graduates. All of them are in the age group below 30 years. They were mostly appointed after 2006 on contractual basis under SSA and PAT scheme. None of them have undergone any professional training except some short training programme organized at Block level or by DIET. The teachers working in the sample schools are found to be male and female both

Physical and Infrastructural Facilities: All the sample schools were found with building having two to three numbers of rooms. However, the rooms were also used for office and store too. Very few classrooms were found to be adequate in size even for mono-grade teaching. With respect to availability and use of rooms for teaching learning purposes, classrooms were, however, found to have been used for combined class teaching. During the observation, it was found that all of the observed schools did not have adequate physical and instructional materials in the school.

Teaching Strategies Employed in Single Teacher School: Instructional environment plays an important role in making classroom teaching more effective and conducive to learning. The same

teacher teaches different subjects for all classes in the same room, and sometimes in separate rooms. All the teachers employed traditional methods of teaching based on explanation, textbook dependent teaching and rituals of giving homework and class work.

Personal Quality of Teacher: Teachers were also asked to describe themselves. Majority of them have positive opinion about themselves saying that they are well-organized, creative and flexible, willing to work hard, resource full, self directed, willing to work closely with the community, Strong belief in the importance of cooperation and personal responsibility. This speaks about the life ability of the teachers. Attempt has also been made to get the opinion of teachers relating to the importance of teacher guide books, self-made teaching aids by using local materials, modification of timetable, textbooks and materials, additional materials and exercises in different subjects, minimum learning competencies and modification of curriculum and teaching/learning material for teaching in single teacher primary school. It is found that all of them felt the necessity of all mentioned material. Responses to the question on specification of minimum learning competencies for each class revealed that all the teachers agreed to the idea of modifying the curriculum and teaching/learning material for teaching in multi grade setting.

Other activities: Several activities are involved for the practical organization of single teacher school like maintenance of students attendance record, teacher – student ratio, regular evaluation of the children's progress, involvement of parents in the school management. Responses revealed that all the sample schools maintained the attendance record. Evaluation of students is mostly done twice in a year, that is, half yearly examination and annual/final examination. Involvement of parents is indicated in relation to maintaining discipline. It is also found that teachers were taking an active part in the village social activities besides managing the classes alone. The lone teacher of the school manages all the activities both teaching and organizing games and sports. The mostly played games reported are Kabaddi and Kho-Kho.

All the primary schools covered in the study are running in a multi-grade situation, where only one teacher is responsible to teach primary classes. None of these teachers had undergone training to teach in a multi-grade setting. The irony is that these teachers were neither trained for teaching in mono grade situation. The syllabus followed in all these schools has been prepared for mono grade teaching without considering the real condition of the school.

Educational Implications

Based on the findings of the study, the authors of the paper identified the following areas of concern at primary stage of education:

1. As single teacher primary schools are highly prevailing in Mehla (I) area, the practice of multi-grade teaching is of great concern.
2. As the existence of single teacher primary school is considered more as a temporary adjustment for solving the problem of the shortage of teachers, defining the number of teachers for a school irrespective of its location and follow strictly by the government is a concern for its practical implementation.
3. Single teacher primary school has been considered by a majority of the teachers as an unwanted reality, on one hand and they are stop-gap teachers mostly appointed on contractual basis, on the other hand. To address the problem of single teacher primary education immediately and adopting multi-grade teaching as a long-term vision to make it more pedagogic in its nature will involve long process and this may be great challenge for the government to carry out the task.
Since multi-class teaching is the existing reality in single teacher primary school of the state, improvement in instructional strategy directed towards fulfilling the need of single teacher schools that were compelled to use multi grade teaching is a concern.
4. As teaching – learning materials were not available in almost all the schools, there is great concern of providing materials to all the single teacher schools and appropriate training on the use of such materials to the teachers.
5. Teacher support materials such as Teacher Guide were not available in all the sample schools. It is, therefore, essential that teacher support materials such as Teacher Guide should be developed adequately, they should be made available in all the schools in the required number and how to properly use them should be taught to the teachers.
6. The importance of demand-driven and need-based curriculum contents and instructional strategy for single teacher school located mostly in the rural remote areas of the state.
7. A strong monitoring, evaluation and feedback mechanism should be established in the district and school level in order to help and support the teacher for effective use of multi-grade teaching techniques in their classrooms.
8. As existing primary level curriculum is more subjects centered and grade oriented, provision should be made for curricular adjustment in order to allow the teachers to organize and adjust

instruction in multi-grade settings which is essential for single teacher schools. Curricular adjustment to be supported by Teacher Guide and other support materials provided to the teachers.

9. The teachers who are working in single teacher primary schools to be provided more incentives, material support and training inputs in order to help them develop a positive attitude toward teaching in multi-grade situations.

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