

QUALITY BEFORE QUANTITY: THE CHALLENGES AND SHORTCOMINGS OF
PRIMARY EDUCATION IN INDIA

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis investigates the issues within the national education policies implemented in India following global frameworks such as Education for All and the Millennium Development Goal II-Universal Primary Education. India is currently at an interesting crossroad in primary education. The push to achieve Universal Primary Education has resulted in the launch of various policies and campaigns, thereby increasing the enrolment rates in primary schools. However, the increase in enrolment does not guarantee good quality education. While schools are undergoing a complete infrastructural makeover in an attempt to provide better education, the quality of classroom learning is still unsatisfactory. I argue that the loopholes in national policies such as *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* by the Central Government are affecting the quality of education adversely. I have examined education policies in light of the social, economic and political context of India to understand the challenges in the quality of primary education.

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Dedicated to all the children who are the future of India

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Education is fundamental to the development of a society. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which were adopted by the United Nations on December 10, 1948, for example, states that “everyone has the right to education” going further to argue that “education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages” and that “elementary education shall be compulsory” (“UN”, n.d.). This chapter looks at the global evolution of education as a major component of international development. It highlights the historical movements that have marked a shift in a global paradigm of education.

Education and International Development

The link between education and development can be traced back to the latter half of the twentieth century when international development was emerging as a sector. The change in the perception of the purpose of education has been simultaneous with the evolving understanding of development. For a long time, education was purely associated with economic returns. Shields (2013) summarize early theories like Rostow’s Modernization theory, that viewed health, governance, finance and education as inputs to achieve development. Education in particular, was considered a means to accomplish better health, finances, and governance that in turn would yield economic gains, and hence a developed society. Following Rostow’s theory (Rostow, 1960), newly formed aid agencies like USAID and the World Bank emphasized heavily on investments in education in order for countries to gain economic success (Shields, 2013).

However, development experienced a groundbreaking change with Amartya Sen's 'capabilities approach' introduced in the eighties. Sen (1999) argued that development is not only about economic returns; rather it comprises the rights of individuals, their freedom and availability of opportunities. He proposed to measure development in terms of quality of life, which included access to amenities like education and healthcare. The focus of development now shifted from economic yield to rights, equity and poverty (Shields, 2013). This newfound understanding of development also gave a new meaning to education. Institutions like the United Nations and World Bank now saw education as a tool to alleviate poverty. The right to education gained weightage. It was this shift in the world of development that paved way for breakthrough movements in the field of international education.

The World Conference on Education for All, held in Jomtein, Thailand in 1990 was one such major movement that served proof of education being a global development agenda. The key organizers of the conference were United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank. Delegates from 155 countries agreed upon universalization of basic education ("UNESCO", n.d.). A framework for action was also established in order to meet basic learning needs by the year 2000. The Education For All (EFA) was seen as a promising global step towards providing education to children, youth and adults all over the world.

The twenty first century witnessed yet another commitment towards the goal of education for all in the form of the Dakar Framework for Action adopted in 2000. The

Dakar conference was held to renew the pledge of achieving the goal of Education for All along with setting up of six goals that outlined the aims of the programme. Governments from 164 countries participated in the conference with the promise to achieve universal quality education for all by 2015 (“Development”, un.org).

As such, achieving Universal Primary Education was also included among the Millennium Development goals (MDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2000, which 189 UN member states have endorsed. The MDG leaders acknowledged the interconnectedness of the world and the power of globalization, which could be used to eradicate poverty from the world in a time- bound manner. They resolved to address and end the dimensions of poverty which manifest in the form of hunger, lack of education, gender inequality, child mortality, and maternal health issues, diseases like HIV and malaria, and environmental concerns. The deadline for achieving all the MDGs was set for 2015.

Hence, it is clear from the various landmark movements that, across the globe, state leaders and members of international organizations have long recognized that an educated society is not only intrinsically valuable, but also instrumentally so, affecting their ability to address other global ills, such as poverty, hunger, and gender inequality. It can be said that this so-called global norm of education, serving as a powerful instrument in development has been a major push for governments all over the world to establish national policies and frameworks geared towards achieving education for all.

It is both interesting and important to understand the transition of these global norms into national policies and their implementation on the ground in order to fully grasp the complexities involved in the process. Verger (2012) raises an important fundamental

issue with transformation of global norms into national policies. He points out the homogeneous and abstract structure of the global policies. He describes them as ‘outside/exogenous’, while national policies are made at a much local level and thus are ‘inside/endogenous’ (p. 33). These tend to be influenced by diverse political structures, economic factors and other notions that are unique to every country. Hence, the policy transformation is not an easy task.

In this thesis, I attempt to study the transforming primary school system in India while taking a deeper look at the changing national educational policies, which are formulated with a practical vision but have failed to do so in reality when implemented on the ground. In fact, these policies are influencing the quality aspect of primary education negatively. Even though progress has been made, the gap between formulation of educational policies and their implementation at the ground level is widening continuously. I will study this gap in order to understand the reasons behind the failure of education policies.

Historical Background of Primary Education in India

According to a post-independence census in 1951, only 9 per cent of women and 27 per cent of men were literate (Kingdon, 2007). The urgent need to formulate policies to transform the education system in India was felt by the makers of the constitution. It was recognized that the purpose of education was to empower the masses in order to prepare them for a bright and successful future. The constitution makers realized the importance and urgency of achieving universal elementary education (6-14 years). Since education was classified under the ‘State-list’ by the constitution of India, it was considered the responsibility of each state to provide free, compulsory and quality

education for all. However, not much action was taken in this regard except for establishing more schools.

Overview of Policies

The 1964 report of the Education Commission on the status of education in India was an attempt by the Government of India to highlight the educational challenges of the country. The report stressed on increasing state efforts to achieve the target of universal elementary education within the next twenty years. It recognized areas in education that required immediate attention. The commission recommended not just the establishment of more schools, but also a new focus on curriculum framework, the role of teachers, and a more tailored approach to fulfill the educational needs of the country. It was declared that 1985 would be the year when India would achieve universal elementary education (Govinda, 2002).

A major shift occurred with the 1976 constitutional amendment that moved education from 'State' to 'Concurrent list'. Education now became a shared responsibility of the Center and state governments. This new addition to the list of responsibilities of the central government combined with the delay in the achievement of universal elementary education pushed the Center to take concrete action in the matter. Therefore, it carried out an individualized state-wise assessment of education across the country and, ultimately, devised a ten-year education plan for each state to attain the goal of universal elementary education (Govinda, 2002). The implementation of a ten-year plan for each state revealed the interstate disparities in educational patterns. It was discovered that some states were scoring far better than others when it came to elementary education. This revelation led to the identification of 'educationally backward states' and

implementation of programs aiming to achieve quality results in elementary education in these states.

The 1986 National Policy of Education (NPE) was another big milestone in the field of education for India. Firstly, the NPE documented the challenges of education in India and also set two separate deadlines for achieving universal elementary education- 1) 1990 for primary education (ages 6-11) and 2) 1995 for elementary education (ages 6-14). This was the first time that primary education was treated separately. Secondly, the 1990's witnessed a huge shift in education at a global level with frameworks such as Education For All, World Conference on Education in Jomtein and later the Dakar Global Conference on Education in 2000. As India became a part of these global movements towards increasing educational awareness, it opened itself up to international aid for projects targeted at universal elementary education. Literacy campaigns were organized within the country. An influx of internationally funded projects gave way to topics like the fundamental right to education, decentralization and participatory models of development that have never been focused on within the education system. In the midst of external forces in the form of internationally funded projects, the target of achieving primary and elementary education by 1995 -as adopted in the National Policy of Education (1986)- was completely forgotten. However, it is important to note that the NPE was still a landmark in Indian education because all steps taken towards universal elementary education in the 90's were reviewed under the recommendations made in NPE. Hence, even though the goals to be achieved under the NPE itself might have been forgotten, it served as the backdrop for its succeeding policies (Govinda, 2002).

Socio-Cultural Background of India

Education and society are mutually inclusive in all communities around the world. The education system of a country is shaped by its people, their social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The education system is part of the society and it is affected directly by any changes in the social dynamics. The Indian state is a prime example of 'unity in diversity'. People from different religious, social, and cultural backgrounds coexist in the Indian society. While a rich cultural heritage is an outstanding characteristic of the country, social hierarchies, due to the caste system, the widening gap between the rich and poor, and the gap between the educated 'elite' and the uneducated are also an integral part of the society. It cannot be ignored that British colonial rule in India was a huge factor in the weakening of the social, cultural, political and economic features of the country. These challenges are a threat to the social and national integration of India. The Education Commission in 1964 recognized this problem as a huge challenge for development of education in the country. Since the country did not have one common public school system, the schooling was divided between government and private schools. Government schools had the reputation of being inefficient in terms of teaching as well as the state of their infrastructural facilities. Private schools on the other hand, were considered much more efficient, but were unaffordable for the masses due to their enormously high fee structure. While education was thought of as a means of bridging the divide between the rich and poor and between different social classes, in reality it was doing the exact opposite. Only a handful of privileged people were able to receive good education through private schooling whereas the majority of the population

went to government schools. This divide between schooling was a major cause of concern as it was an issue concerning the overall democracy of the nation.

A second issue that India has struggled with is its language diversity. The diversity is not only true for the number of languages spoken in the country, but also the fact that these languages coexist despite being from five different language families- namely, Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman and Andamanese (National Curriculum Framework 2005, Pg. 36). Each language family has its own written and oral structure. For centuries, all Indian languages have shared linguistic features and have been influenced by each other, which is proof enough of the rich sociolinguistic heritage of India. While this unique feature is beneficial to its population, language diversity has been an issue in implementing a common medium of instruction within the education system. Each state in the country has a regional language, which is also the mother tongue of its native people. Although Hindi was declared as the national language after independence, it is not spoken in many parts of India. Given this state, no one language was binding the country. This was a problem for education since there was no one medium of instruction in all schools. The need to have one common language of instruction throughout all schools across the country had been expressed in the national policies time and again. Consequently, it was recommended that Hindi be promoted as the language of teaching in all schools including the non-Hindi areas. It was, however, necessary that the greater population accept Hindi as the language of instruction while not ignoring the importance of regional languages (especially one's mother tongue) or English. However, it could also not be ignored that the assimilation of knowledge was greatest when subject matter is taught to students in their mother tongue. This was also

important from the point of view of quality education. It was argued that education in a medium in which the student was not comfortable expressing himself would result in cramming of subject matter. On the other hand, the policy makers realized the importance of English as a necessary means for international communication. Therefore, teaching in English could not be completely shut down either.

Hence, it was important to resolve the language debate in India for the sake of not only building a stable education system, but also for national integration. The remnants of British rule left the diverse country of India in a state of social and cultural confusion. The socio-cultural context of India, thus, poses many challenges in the development of policies and their successful implementation.

Types of Schools: Government vs. Private

The socio-economic diversity in India resulted in the heterogeneity in schooling options for the masses. Since the early days of independence, India has seen the development of both private and government schools. At the time, private schools were the only option for education in the English medium. Since English was considered the language of the 'civilized' and 'elite', there was a prevalent notion of better schooling in private schools. However, only the economically well-off could afford private education. The majority of the country's population in rural as well as urban areas opted for government schooling, as it was cheaper. The Education Commission repeatedly highlighted its intentions to make education available to all and not just a privilege enjoyed exclusively by the elite (Education Commission Report, 1964).

The later decades saw a rapid increase in the number of private schools in the country and a reinstatement of the notion of government schooling as inferior to private

schooling. By the 1990s, it was well established that government services of all kinds ranging from health, electricity to education are poor and unreliable (Govinda, 2002). The 1990s also witnessed the mushrooming of different types of private school – private unaided, private aided, religious and linguistic schools. Private unaided schools are owned, funded and managed by a private organization. They are most prevalent in urban areas as only a small part of the population can afford private education due to its sky-high cost. Education is considered better in these schools because of the availability of good infrastructure, teaching staff, and a small teacher-student ratio. The medium of instruction in these schools is English.

Private aided schools were established to make education available to more people at an affordable cost. These schools are a joint venture of the government and a private organization, very often philanthropists. The government funds these schools, but their management is private. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the sponsors to provide infrastructural facilities, but the government pays the staff. The medium of instruction in private aided schools is also English.

A third type, primarily established immediately after independence are schools associated with religious leadership. These are private aided or unaided schools linked with Hindu, Muslim or Christian missionaries (Govinda, 2002). The idea of propagation of religious values and culture led to their development. The quality of education linked with religious group schools is generally very high. For example, there is a certain pride and value associated with women educated in convent schools in India. They are automatically seen as more cultured and ladylike with good moral values.

The debate between government and private schools in India is undoubtedly a huge piece of the struggle to achieve quality education. To make matters more complex, the rising socio-economic inequality has resulted in the emergence of another kind of schools, mainly in the economically weaker localities of urban India. These are categorized as ‘unrecognized’ schools. These are unlicensed schools operating mostly in houses with only a handful of teachers and no real management. They often claim to be of ‘English medium’, giving an illusion of private schools and, hence, better than government schools. In reality, they are not even registered with the education department. Such schools attract the rural population living in urban parts of the country and who thrive on very little income. They charge a higher fee but cost less than actual private schools. Hence, they attract the economically weak under the illusion of providing quality education in an English medium that would guarantee a successful future. In reality, these schools often hire unqualified teachers and by no means provide quality education. Since they operate without a license, their diplomas are invalid.

Current Status of Education

India has come a long way in the field of education since its independence in 1947. The current rate of educated men and women has now risen to 88 percent and 74 percent, respectively (“UNICEF”, 2011). The rates of primary school attendance have increased steadily over the past four years. Between 2000 and 2005, the overall primary school enrolment rate in India increased by 13.7 percent. Today, 96% of primary-school aged children are enrolled in school (“UNICEF”, 2011). India’s educational improvements have been attributed in part to the active role of the government in formulating education policies and funding primary education (36% of the annual

education budget is targeted toward primary education) (UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2010).

However, even after 65 years of independence and educational reforms, the vision of education expressed in the National Policy of Education (1986) is yet to be achieved. This is not to say that no improvement has been made on the education front in India. On the contrary, international reports on the status of education in India have highlighted positive changes such as the increase in literacy rate, but problems concerning gender gaps in education, lack of infrastructure and high drop out rates still persist. One in four children leave school before reaching Grade 5 and half leave before reaching Grade 8 (“UNICEF”, 2011). Policies have been formulated and revised every few years, but it is interesting to note that while striving to bring about positive reforms in the education system of the country, the country has been continuously facing a flurry of challenges in the ‘quality’ aspect of education in the formal schooling system. According to PROBE (2011), when it comes to formal classroom learning about 40 percent students are unable to do simple subtraction. Nearly 62 percent students in Grades 4 and 5 cannot read a simple story. More than half of all children in Grade 5 are at least three grades behind where they should be (“ASER”, 2012).

Statement of the Problem

In order to understand the issues and challenges in education faced by primary schools in India, it is important to define the term ‘quality’. Due to the constant attempts at the evolution of education system in India, the term can be interpreted in various ways depending on the context in which it is being discussed. For the purpose of this research, I view ‘quality’ in terms of the basic scholastic outcome expected of a child receiving

primary education in a government school. This includes a student's ability to understand, read, and write materials prescribed in the curriculum by the Board of education.

In the attempt to achieve universal primary education and improve the quality of education in primary schools, the government of India launched the flagship program in 2000 called *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* ("Ministry of Human Resource Development", 2007), or the 'Campaign for Universal Education.' It was a central government initiative, geared towards universalizing elementary education (grades 1-8) by 2010. States were provided extra funds for better infrastructural facilities, enroll out-of-school children and efforts were made to improve the quality of education in government schools. Several schemes were launched under SSA, which included building more schools and classrooms, better water and sanitation facilities in schools, providing training for teachers, distributing free text-books to female students (which was later extended to free text-books for all students), establishing block and cluster level resource centers, funding options for providing teaching aids to teachers, technological support and so on (Kingdon, 2007). In order to provide an enjoyable learning experience to students, SSA resolves that,

"SSA will make efforts to take a holistic and comprehensive approach to the issue of quality. Efforts to decentralize the whole process of curriculum development down (grassroots level) to the district level will be made. Reducing the load of non-comprehension by facilitating child-centered and activity-based learning will be attempted. Learning by doing, learning by observation, work experience, art, music, sports and value education shall be made fully integral to the learning

process. Appropriate changes will be made in the evaluation system to make it more continuous and less threatening. Performance of children will be constantly monitored in consultation with parents but shall not be restricted only to cognitive areas. Teacher's roles in preparation of textbooks and secondary learning materials will be enhanced. School timings will be made contextual. Based on broad curriculum framework, districts will be free to define their content areas in their local contexts..." ("Ministry of Human Resource Development", 2007).

SSA was followed by the Mid-day Meal programme launched by the central government in 2001. The motive behind Mid-day Meal was to increase and retain enrolment, and to also improve nutritional levels among children. Each child in every government and government-assisted primary school was provided with a prepared meal with a minimum content of 300 calories and 8-12 grams of protein each day of school for a minimum of 200 days ("Mid Day Meal Scheme", n.d.). The program was later revised and the quantity of meal provided was increased.

In 2002, the Constitution Act inserted Article 21-A into the constitution of India to provide free and compulsory education for all children in the age groups of six to fourteen years as a fundamental right. The Right to Education (RTE) Act came into effect in 2010. It provides for the free and compulsory full-time education of a child in a neighborhood school, gives responsibility to the appropriate state government to ensure compulsory admission, makes provisions for a non-admitted child to be enrolled in age appropriate grade, and prohibits failing a child or administering physical punishment and mental harassment of a child ("Elementary Education", 2011).

Policies such as SSA, Mid-day Meal and Right to Education (RTE) have been considered as major steps towards improvement of the primary education system in India. Despite these initiatives and increased enrollment, the situation in India is still complex. In spite of the implementation of education policies, the goal of achieving universal primary education by 2015 seems bleak for India. The number of students dropping out before completion of primary education is alarmingly high. This rate is even worse for female students. India faces a huge challenge in keeping students enrolled in school. Even among currently enrolled students, they are often behind in learning how to read and write the basic alphabet.

The available literature sheds light on some of the challenges faced by local schools with regard to the operationalizing of these education policies. One of the most important aims of SSA was improving in the quality of education in government schools. However, frequent absenteeism of teachers and students, lenient school certification requirements and lack of infrastructure affect the quality of education provided to students (Desai 2007). A large number of schools also lack many basic essentials such as drinking water, toilets, furniture and books (Kingdon, 2007).

Under the implementation of RTE, children have the right to have at least one qualified teacher for every 30 pupils- but this is not the case. In some rural areas, one teacher could be responsible for up to 60 students (“UNICEF India”, n.d.). A shortage of teaching staff combined with inadequate infrastructural facilities has slowed down classroom education (Mehrotra, 2006). The quality of education is bound to suffer in such circumstances.

Another serious problem that has been addressed in the literature is gender stratification. Chandrakala (2013) points to the fact that India is a patriarchal society, denoting that greater importance is given to male children. This preference for male children has also been seen in male versus female enrolment in primary schools. Although primary education is mandatory for all children according to RTE, girls' participation in education still remains much lower than boys. Education policies implemented to encourage female enrolment seem to have not been fully efficient in this regard. Even though the issue of gender stratification is an important one, it is not the focus of this research.

In reality the task of conceptualizing education policies at a global level, implementing them at a national level and finally operationalizing them in local school settings is a complicated process. In this project, I attempt to study the transforming primary school system in India, while taking a deeper look at the educational policies namely- the Mid day Meal programme, RTE Act, and the change in curriculum and exam pattern under the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005. In reality, these policies were formulated with a practical vision, but have failed to do so. In fact, they are influencing the quality aspect of primary education negatively. Even though progress has been made, it seems like the gap between formulation of educational policies and their implementation at the ground level is widening continuously. I intend to explore the role of education policies in this time of change in the education system of government primary schools in India.

Research Questions and Purpose

The research questions that I attempt to answer in this thesis are:

1. What are the impacts of national education policies stemming from global frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals, on the quality of education at local level?
2. What is the perception of education policies by local actors involved in policy implementation (teaching staff, ground level officials)?

My field-work tackled a series of questions framed around educational policies implemented in government primary schools in India: What are India's greatest challenges in achieving primary education for all? What are some of the policies implemented in primary schools and how are students benefitting from them? How are these policies implemented at the local level? What are the gaps in the operationalization of these policies on the ground? Do teachers come across any challenges while implementing the newer policies? How do they affect the in-class teaching time? The focus on education in primary schools ties in with the global framework of Millennium Development Goals. This research will contribute to the understanding of the positive and negative consequences of education policies in local school settings. In addition, it will shed light on some of the challenges faced by those who are the actual "doers" of policies on the grassroots level.

My personal interest in this topic stems from my experience of growing up in India. Being Indian, I was educated in the Indian education system and have been directly affected by some of the above-mentioned education policies. This led to my curiosity to explore the theme. Furthermore, my internship at the United Nations (UN) in the Summer of 2013 gave me a deeper insight on the MDGs and how they are perceived by some of the decision-making authorities at the UN. This heightened my curiosity to combine my

various interests to explore the multiple layers of education policies that are based on global framework of MDGs and implemented in the primary education system.

Methodology

“Your answers to questions about which people to sample should therefore be driven by an interpretive logic which questions and evaluates different ways of classifying people in the light of the particular concerns of your study. Underlying all of this must be a concern to identify who it is that has, does or is the experiences, perspectives, behaviors, practices, identities, personalities, and so on, that your research questions will require you to investigate.” - Mason, 2004 p.129

As previously mentioned, this project aims to investigate the underlying reasons for the degrading quality of education in primary schools. The research questions that drive this project compelled it to operate on a qualitative research design. This approach allowed me to interpret the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the primary schooling system in India. Moreover, qualitative research design appropriately captured the attitudes and perceptions of the participants involved in the study, all the while providing me a deeper understanding of the Indian school system. The data collected was then coded by identifying themes and similar patterns in order to derive conclusions.

The data for this project was collected in December 2013 over a period of four weeks of semi-structured interviews on site in New Delhi, India. This interview methodology provided me enough flexibility to ask questions with my interviewees without being restricted to a certain structure or pattern of asking those questions. Moreover, posing open-ended questions allowed for responses in the form of opinions, which was the goal of this project. The interview questions were designed in easily understandable language meant to put interviewees at ease and also to make the interview

‘conversation-like’. The interview questions revolved around the education policies implemented as part of the Education For All (EFA) Campaign and how they are implemented on the ground, that is in schools-i.e. challenges faced by teachers and their thoughts on the recent change in curriculum under NCF 2005.

Two sets of semi-structured interviews were conducted for this project. The first set comprised of one principal and two teachers in five government schools in New Delhi. Government schools in New Delhi are divided into four zones: north, south, east and west respectively. The sampling zone for this study was the west zone. The sample schools were chosen keeping in mind the economic conditions of the area the school was situated in. My background and preliminary research revealed that the locality in which a school is situated has an impact on the participants’ (teachers in this case) views on the school system. In addition, choosing schools from different localities allowed me to cover a wider range, hence minimizing sample bias. The subjects interviewed consisted of staff members of schools who had been there for a period of at least five to seven years. I used this criterion of participant selection to make sure that the participants would be well versed with the functioning of their school.

The second set of semi-structured interviews consisted of officials in the Department of Education and at the National Council of Education Research and Training. For this set of interviews, I used the snowball sampling method. This type of sampling allowed for the maximum amount data to be generated by extracting information pertinent to this project from a reasonably large number of subjects. It also allowed me to engage more with my subjects, which was necessary in order to study the effects of education policies from as many angles as possible. Any other type of sampling

would perhaps have limited the amount of unbiased information and also would not have covered the whole range of topics relevant to my project.

I recognize that several factors might have affected the quality and scope of my research, including the small sample of participants, the multi faceted, open-ended nature of my questions, and the tendency of participants to downplay the challenges faced in the nature of their work as education practitioners. However, I was prepared to garner a wide range of opinions. Furthermore, the quality and implementation of education policies vary even within districts in each state in India. Since my data collection was limited to a small number of schools in one Indian state, the results of this study are not be applicable to the whole of India.

Plan of the Thesis

This chapter introduces my thesis topic by giving a brief historical background of the education system in India. I then discuss the objectives of education laid down by its leaders soon after independence. The aim of education was to empower the masses in order to build a successful and secure future for the nation and its people. Furthermore, I discuss the relevant education policies implemented to achieve this goal of empowering the masses. The chapter also situates the issue of quality of education in the evolving primary education system of India and clearly states the research questions I aim to answer through this project. Chapter II begins with the key definition of quality in education and then I move on to discuss the literature regarding the transforming primary school system, the role of the teacher, and classroom-learning outcomes. Chapter III comprises the methods used and findings. The first part is a detailed discussion of the methodologies used in this project. The second part of this chapter discusses the results of

my data collection. Chapter IV is the discussion of my findings in relation to the research question highlighted in the introduction. The discussion is in light of some of the existing key literature surrounding the issue of quality of education in primary schools. I conclude with Chapter V with recommendation for further improvement in education policies to achieve the dream of universal primary education both in terms of enrolment and quality.

CHAPTER II

WHAT CONSTITUTES QUALITY PRIMARY EDUCATION?

The previous chapter touched upon the transformation of global policies in national settings. Verger et al. (2012) calls this transformation ‘re-contextualization’. He describes re-contextualization as a problematic task especially for developing countries. He argues that in spite of the common challenges associated with education policies around the world, a nation’s history, politics, and other factors influence its policy implementation. He classifies these challenges into broad categories of material, political, cultural and scalar (p. 23).

Material challenges refer to the lack of resources, finances, infrastructure and other material requirements that policy implementation demand for a strong educational system. Lewin (2007) criticizes the imposition of educational models from well-developed countries on countries with minimum resources. He points out how local human resources are not taken into consideration while developing policies. Sayed (2012) discusses the role of politics in influencing national education policies. He does so by examining ‘decentralization’, which is considered as a reform mechanism to strengthen the education system. International organizations and NGOs stress the importance of decentralization. Most of them have included it in their frameworks. According to international actors like the UN and the World Bank, decentralization of education system redistributes power and increases transparency and accountability at every level. Also, it promotes the participatory model of development where the

community gets the decision making power. This would result in improved and better quality education. The idea was pointed in The Dakar framework of Action in 2000: “The need for better governance of education systems in terms of efficiency, accountability, transparency and flexibility so that they can respond more effectively to the diverse and continuously changing needs of learners. Reform of educational management is urgently needed, to move from highly centralized, standardized and community-driven forms of management to more decentralized and participatory decision-making, implementation and monitoring at lower levels of accountability (Framework of Action, para. 55).”

However, it must be noted that the role of important political figures and the political environment of a country are factors that can also influence the re-contextualization process to a great degree. In fact, political power can sometimes be seen in the decentralization process itself.

Culture is described as yet another challenge that can play out in different forms and affect education policies at a country or a local level. Policies can be welcomed or met with resistance by the public of a country depending upon the cultural setting. Santos and Soeterik (2012) give the example of Brazil where ‘racial democracy’ is strongly rooted, making the implementation of racial affirmative policies a challenging task. The scalar challenges in education policies might involve actors who are the actual ground level carriers of policies. School principals, teachers and community members fall in this category. It can be noted that these actors are not always in agreement of global policies. This is especially true when they are forced to implement models of education that are completely alien to them- notably when there is a huge gap between the previous

policies and the new ones. The widening gap in old and new policies is considered burdensome by most teaching staff perhaps due to a whole other set of challenges they might have to face at the ground level (Rizvi et al., 2009).

The challenges involved in education policy-making and its implementation have been classified broadly at the global level, but it is possible that they play out differently in each country's context. It can be seen that the adoption of global norms, their transformation to national policies and their implementation at local level is a multilayered process involving multiple actors. These actors are a diverse group of individuals who are most often geographically scattered, belonging to different government systems and are all committed to serving different communities (Robertson, 2012).

The following sections examine the literature around the above-mentioned challenges, but in the specific context of India. The understanding of political, material, cultural and scalar challenges would re-contextualize the global frameworks like EFA and MDGs in the national setting of India. This would in turn unpack how some of these factors influence the implementation of India's national education policies at the ground level.

I begin by a short discussion on the purpose of education as understood by the leaders of independent India and its evolution over the years. I use 'independence' as a reference point in the history of India because it was only after gaining independence that the country was able to fully envision its own development. Education was considered to play a key role in it. This will be followed by a clarification of the meaning of 'quality' in the context of education. I then branch out into discussions surrounding the

infrastructural problems of the schooling system, role of the teacher and the community, and challenges of decentralization in local settings.

Purpose of Education

Gandhi: *“Real education has to draw out the best from the boys and girls to be educated. This can never be done by packing ill-assorted and unwanted information into the heads of the students. It becomes a dead weight crushing all originality in them and turning them into mere automata”*

Mahatma Gandhi (Harijan 1 December, 1933)

When India achieved independence in 1947, the urgent need to formulate policies to transform the education system in India was felt by the makers of the constitution. It was recognized that the purpose of education was to empower the masses in order to prepare them for a bright and successful future. This vision was clearly highlighted in the Report of Education Commission (1964-66) and subsequently national policies were formulated to carry out this vision. Bangay and Latham (2013) argue that the main purpose of education is to provide meaningful tools that will enable students with the foundation for productive and fulfilling lives. However, even after 65 years of independence and educational reforms, the vision of education expressed in the National Policy of Education (1986) is yet to be achieved. This is not to say that no improvement has been made in the education scene in India. Policies have been formulated and revised every few years, but it is interesting to note that while striving to bring about positive reforms in the education system of the country, there has been a continuous degradation in the quality aspect of education in the formal schooling system of India. According to PROBE (2011), when it comes to formal classroom learning, about 40 percent students

are unable to do simple subtraction. Nearly 62 percent students in Grades 4 and 5 cannot read a simple story (De, Khera, Samson, & Kumar, 2011).

Understanding Quality Education

Sarangapani (2004) define ‘quality’ as the ‘essential character’ of education. It is the attribute of quality that makes education valuable and purposeful. Dreze and Kingdon (2001) further describe the variables on which quality education depends. According to them, quality education is dependent on teaching standards, education policies, programs and classroom activity. The Education for All Campaign in India visualizes the quality aspect of primary education in terms of its product – the learners’ achievement both in scholastic and co-scholastic areas (i.e. their academic performance and habits, attitudes, values and life skills necessary for becoming a good citizen) (SSA, 2007). Success in these scholastic and non-scholastic areas depend on the student’s learning environment which consists of infrastructure and support services, opportunity time, teacher characteristics and teacher motivation, pre-service and in-service education of teachers, curriculum and teaching-learning materials, classroom processes, pupil evaluation, monitoring and supervision etc. These factors are the ‘quality inputs’ for ensuring quality achievement in primary education (SSA, 2007). Hence, the following sections discuss the literature based on the issues of parameters of quality education under the themes of infrastructure in schools, the role of teachers and the impetus on decentralization.

Parameters of Quality Education

Infrastructure

Studies show that students with strong literacy and numeracy skills ensure higher economic gains for themselves and their countries (Hanushek, 2005). School plays a major role in building these skills and ensuring the learning achievements of its students. In the case of India, when the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (Campaign for Education for All) was launched in 2001, one of the campaign's major goals was to provide a comfortable and safe environment to students for learning to happen. The emphasis on infrastructural facilities, frequent absenteeism of teachers and students, lenient school certification requirements and lack of infrastructure are the primary culprits affecting the quality of education provided to Indian students (Desai, 2007)- also on this list are the earth of basic essentials such as drinking water, toilets, furniture, and books (Kingdon, 2007).

While all these issues are important, the issue of student drop out rates stands out the most in the reviewed literature. Dreze and Kingdon (2001) argue that the most common 'single explanation' given to justify the challenge of student dropout is lack of parental motivation. Dreze and Sen (2002) explain that it is an absolute myth that the lack of parental motivation causes students to drop out. PROBE (1999) surveys serve as evidence that even parents in the most rural parts of India are mostly in favor of sending their boys and girls to school. Govinda (2008) goes beyond the most common social-economic reasons/exclusions due to which students drop out of school. According to him, the case of students who finish primary school without any basic reading, writing and numeracy skills is the same as pertaining to students who dropped out of school earlier. Hence, education needs to be viewed beyond infrastructural facilities and student

enrolment rates. Much attention has been paid to strengthening logistical matters concerning the goal of universal primary education but little attention has been paid to ensuring the delivery of providing good quality education, which would result in fulfilling the long-term vision of a literate India. The quality of education provided presents itself as a challenge that has been largely ignored.

Role of the Teacher

As described in the National Policy of Education 1986, teachers are the most important link in the chain of education. Their professional competence, educational qualifications, capabilities and qualities play a huge role in transferring knowledge to students. Mooij (2008) defines an ideal teacher as one who is affectionate towards his pupils and serves as a role model for them. He/She should also share a healthy relationship with the community. An ideal teacher should have an excellent grasp of the subject matter and should be flexible in learning and applying new and better teaching methodologies with support from their colleagues and the headmaster. In view of these definitions and with the aim of providing quality education for all, the 1990's witnessed significant changes in the position of primary school teachers all over India. As pointed by Mooij (2008) one of the biggest ways this was carried out was by providing more incentives to teachers by increasing their salaries with the introduction of the Sixth Pay Commission in 1998.

Since the recognition of teachers as one of the most important links in the chain of education, their role has also been under greater scrutiny. Especially within the context of imparting quality education to students, the teacher is often blamed for being inefficient in their duties hence failing the whole education system. Upon exploring the literature

from the viewpoint of the teachers, Mehrotra (2006) effectively describes the challenges faced by teachers in government primary schools. There are many aspects of the teacher's work environment that need effective action by the government. These are as followed: the pupil-teacher ratio, the large number of single-teacher schools and teacher training (Mehrotra, 2006). In addition, teachers have to deal with non-academic workload like election duties, participation in census operations, pulse polio campaigns, economic surveys and other activities that have nothing to do with education per se (Mooij, 2008). Under the 'Reflective Teacher' guidelines devised by the National Council of Education Research and Training, teachers are not meant to be 'transmitters' of knowledge. Rather, they are 'facilitators' who are meant to guide their students to construct knowledge from day to day experiences and activities. Students are not mere passive receivers of knowledge. As students became the central focus of education, the National Policy of Education (1992) laid down learning outcomes that all children completing different stages of education should achieve. This approach was defined as the Minimum Levels of Learning (MLL). The goal behind MLL was to emphasize on the quality aspect of primary education. Moreover, activity-based learning methods were introduced in primary education in India under the National Curriculum Framework of 2005. In order to facilitate and familiarize teachers with activity based learning methodologies, several teacher-training programs were also introduced. It is interesting to note that PROBE (2011) identifies some of the classroom issues revolving around low levels of achievements in primary schools (De, Khera, Samson, & Kumar, 2011). Despite initiatives like MLL and activity based learning, one of the major challenges in primary schools is learning without direction and understanding. Dreze and Sen (2002) blame this

on school accountability failure. However, bringing the discussion back to implementing new teaching methodologies, Mooij (2008) tends to capture the teacher's side of the debate, highlights some of the challenges faced by them. He argues that teachers find it to be very difficult to use such methods in over-crowded classrooms. Also, activity-based methods make it difficult to complete the syllabus. Educational bureaucracy leaves them with little or no power to make decisions. As a result, they can almost make no decisions individually or collectively at school level. Even headmasters of primary schools have very little decision-making power (Mooij, 2008). Besides, Majumdar and Mooij (2011) describe these programs as 'non teacher oriented'. Due to the variation in understanding the meaning of quality education and the above-mentioned reasons, teacher training is ineffective. Rajput (2005) holds a similar opinion of the teacher's training program. She illustrates the importance of proper understanding of training programs through the student evaluation process. She considers evaluation as one of the processes to improve the qualitative aspect of schooling. According to her, successful implementation of the new Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation Pattern (CCEP) of evaluation (implemented as part of NCF 2005) in primary schools requires a sound school environment. This constitutes effort from the community members, school authorities, and especially teachers. Only if there is a proper understanding of the assessment methods by all can it be operated successfully (Rajput, Tewari, & Kumar, 2005). If it does not coincide with the teacher's belief system, they prefer to go on with what Mooij describes as the 'chalk, talk and memorize approach'.

Decentralization

Decentralization of education both in terms of administrative management and curriculum development has been a topic of debate in India since the past decade. Decentralization of the system is a result of efforts to improve quality of the schooling system. However, Majumdar and Mooij (2011) note the simultaneous trends of decentralization and centralization in the Indian education system. To illustrate, textbooks for schools are produced at the State level, but the syllabus is prescribed from above leaving schools with very little power to alter it according to the needs of their students. In the end, they are bound to comply with the State's orders. The paradox of power can also be seen between the State and the central government. While the State is responsible for the management of schools, curriculum management and other local-level education affairs, it is the central government that decides on the policy designs, implementation of education acts and the financial aspects of education policies. In short, the division of power between the center and the State is already a complex one. The addition of local-level power as an attempt to decentralize leads to further confusion and no real authority at the local level.

The idea behind decentralization is to enable a bottom-up approach of management, thereby enhancing the quality of education by improving the system as a whole (Govinda, 2002). However, due to the constant clashing of powers between the various levels, the motive behind decentralization is lost.

Another example of this paradox of power are the School Management Committees (SMC). SMCs were introduced under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, to involve the community/parents in the management of primary education. The idea behind SMCs is that the community, especially parents, is more

likely to focus on the quality of education their children receive than just the number of children enrolled. Hence, parents tend to keep the accountability aspect of schools in check (Banarjee et al., 2008). SMCs are now statutory bodies due to the above-mentioned legislation. They are responsible for school management, development plans and the utilization of school funds (Majumdar and Mooij, 2011). Dreze and Sen (2002) although in favor of decentralization, consider it very context-dependent. They say that the success of decentralization depends on the local democratic environment. It is possible that decentralization may undermine the existing local democracy by disrupting it. Or in case of sharp local inequalities, decentralization could reduce the concentration of power to a selected few.

Most of the policy initiatives implemented under EFA have been concerned with strengthening education management and infrastructure (World Bank Group, 2006). This is not, however, to say that quality was never a concern. Quality issue in education has been a long-term debate. It is this need for change to improve the quality of education that has resulted in launching several other debates surrounding teachers, questioning the real role of schools, the role of community and parents and so on. However, the focus was always more on increasing enrolment rates and providing better infrastructure facilities as they have been considered inputs for better educational outcomes. This is to say that educational outputs have, until recently, been viewed in terms of investments, where better management and infrastructure would result in higher literacy rates and better quality education.

As evident from the above discussion, much of the literature on primary education in India also views quality education in terms of management and infrastructure. I attempt

to broaden this research by studying the social, economic and political push and pull factors that have resulted in backfiring the policy initiatives of government of India initially aimed towards the betterment of the quality of education in primary schools. These factors have largely been ignored and I intend to fill this gap through my research. The following chapter discusses the targeted policy initiatives in detail.

CHAPTER III

RE-CONTEXTUALIZATION OF EDUCATION POLICIES: A CHALLENGING TASK?

In my four weeks of interviewing principals, teachers and officials who play a significant role in shaping and imparting education in primary schools in New Delhi, India, I was able to gather some very insightful data. This chapter of the thesis presents some of the recurring themes that emerged during the interview process.

An overall observation of the system reveals that the challenges highlighted in the 1964 report on education by the Education Commission- and thereafter in the National Policy of Education- are still present in the system. The issue of national integration and education is a huge challenge affecting policy- making and implementation at every level of the system.

A Word on the Location of Schools: As previously mentioned, the location of sample schools is a critical factor in determining the background and social conditions of the children enrolled in these school, which is very important for this research (Table 1).

Table 1

School Demographics Table

S. No.	School	Total no. of Students	No. of Boys	No. of Girls	Locality
1	A	615	332	283	Primarily inhabited by low income groups
2	B	757	392	365	Shanty town

3	C	400	215	185	Village in an urban area
4	D (All girls)	551	0	551	Rural locality in dominantly urban area
5	E	649	338	311	Rural locality in dominantly urban area

Privilege Attached to Private Schools

Only one out of the five schools I visited had excellent infrastructural facilities such as clean toilets, drinking water coolers, desks, chairs, library and a music room. In addition, the school works in collaboration with a non-profit organization, *Katha*, which provides English language lessons for students. The school has been deemed as one of the best government schools in the zone due to its outstanding academic performance. However, I noticed the teaching staff drawing constant comparisons between their school and private schools.

“I want my school to be like a private school with all the modern facilities. We have a library, a music room and we even teach English now. Children get to partake in extracurricular activities too. All these facilities are just like private schools and sometimes when parents come to talk to me, they even comment how my school does not look like a government school.”

Without a doubt, the school corroborates with the age-old assumption of private schools being better in terms of facilities and teaching. They set the bar for excellence in the schooling system of India. Even with the improvement of infrastructural facilities in government schools, most teachers share the opinion that private schools are better organized. They believe private school teachers are under less pressure from higher

authorities and are able to spend quality time teaching in the classroom. Therefore, efforts to improve government schools are modeled around the functioning of private schools. It is interesting to observe that government schools, themselves, believe and perpetuate the idea of private schooling to be better. It is also important to note that private schools in India are associated with class and privilege. It is ironic that even well-intentioned actions of government schools to provide better education reinforce notions of privilege and class in the minds of students.

Discussions on government and private schools hit upon another major concern for government primary schools across the country: student dropout rates. According to my findings, in primary schools, dropout rates are not very high in the age groups of 6-9, but rather among the 9-11 year olds. Contrary to popular notions around drop out rates that have been discussed in the earlier chapter, my data reveals that a frequent cause for children dropping out of primary school is the mushrooming of unrecognized schools. Due to the widespread assumption that private schools provide better quality education, parents tend to lean towards unrecognized schools. Most parents are caught between wanting a good education for their child and being bound by their economic circumstances that do not allow them to afford private education. Therefore, oftentimes parents are unable to fathom that unrecognized schools are a fake trap with the intention of making profits in the name of providing good education. Teachers have noticed the rising trend of unrecognized schools as well as their ill effects.

“These unrecognized schools are in every little corner of poor localities. Parents think government school education is free so teachers are not teaching and their children are not learning anything. They think these unrecognized ones are better just because they

have a fancy board saying ‘Private school’ in English. They don’t realize these schools are unregistered and their diploma is invalid!”

The situation gets even more complicated when children leave government schools to enroll in unrecognized schools. As these schools are not registered, there is always a possibility of a government raid, which leads to the school’s forceful shutdown. Under such circumstances, children return back to their old government schools. They certainly suffer a loss of time, money and education due to the back-and-forth transitions between different schools. The challenge is even greater for government schools because they cannot deny admission to any child. Under the RTE Act of 2009, no child can be denied admission at any time of the year in a government school. Hence, they are obligated to admit any child no matter the circumstance or how it would affect the future of the child and the school.

Another interesting finding revealed by parents who switched their children from government schools to unrecognized schools points to community awareness and motivation. In many conversations with teachers and professors at NCERT, they blamed the lack of community motivation as a challenge to quality education. However, the fact that parents are constantly trying to find the means to admit their children into unrecognized schools despite the cost proves a degree of concern for quality education. Therefore, it would be safe to assume that parents want to play a role in their child’s education. Whether the decisions made under pressures of caste, socio-economic status and other influences serve a purpose or not is another question.

Disengagement between Central, State and Local Authorities

Education was included in the concurrent list by the Indian constitution in 1976. Therefore, the center and state governments now share the responsibility of education throughout the country, which was previously the sole responsibility of the state governments. However, it is up to the discretion of each state to implement or disregard central government policies on education. It was revealed that states often disregard the policies recommended by the central government, as they tend to threaten the linguistic, cultural, and social diversity of the state. According to some NCERT officials, these policies slowly turn into political themes.

“Once they become political agendas, it is not about education anymore. Politicians argue and blame the party in opposition just to prove their point and also in the name of protecting their state’s unique culture and heritage. Educational policies get caught in the middle..It is not about the masses anymore then.”

The officers at the Department of Education emphasized on having little control over policies since a lot depends on the political environment at the state and center levels. Even though many references were made to the National Policy of Education (1986) as being the inspiration behind the current education policies, changes in the political values of the political parties in power has been highly influential in policy making.

They also justified the political environment to be responsible for the uneven success and failure of SSA across different states in the country. For instance, if the politicians in power at the state and the center levels belong to the same political party, they tend to agree with each other on policy-related decisions. On the other hand, if one

power belongs to the opposition party, they tend to outrule each other's decisions in the hope of using it as part of an agenda for the next elections. Oftentimes, the disagreements with the opposition are justified in the name of preserving the state's culture and heritage. In the past, such instances concerning the loss of cultural identity over language and its transformation into huge political controversies have been noted in the states of Tamil Nadu and Jammu and Kashmir.

Another problem encountered very often between policymakers and implementers is the lack of coordination and communication between them. Discussions during my research exposed the challenges created due to the well-acknowledged gap between state and local authorities as well as within local authorities. The interviews with the school staff revealed the impractical aspects of policies such as Midday meals. Out of the five schools included in my research, four struggle with the distribution of Midday meals due to the large number of students enrolled in these schools.

“We have 757 students in our school. The lunch break lasts 20 minutes. We are required to distribute food and students have to finish eating and get back to class within 20 minutes. This program works in schools with fewer students but not here. We have to start distributing food at least an hour before the lunch break. Since teachers are responsible for food distribution, it takes up their teaching time everyday. The program is implemented with good intentions but is not very practical.” (Teacher, School B)

Schools do not get any outside help for managing the distribution of meals. Despite talking to their supervisors about this issue, I was told that the only answer they receive is that these are the rules and they need to be followed. An important point raised by one of the teacher's was that

“These officers are unable to understand the problems at grassroots because they have never faced such issues. Earlier, it was teachers who slowly got promoted and reached at levels like the district officer for schools. They were more prepared to deal with the day to day challenges faced by teachers because they themselves had been through it. Now the district officers or other high officials in the department of education are hired from outside. They try to enforce rules which do not work well in this system.”

Accountability Issues

The departments within the education system, even though decentralized, are still very top-down with a strong, hierarchal order. A problem that stems from a top-down system is lack of accountability. The literature reviewed discusses the problem of little accountability on the part of teachers who tend to be blamed the most for the degrading quality of education. In order to rectify the situation, the central government of India introduced School Management Committees (SMC). SMCs were introduced under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, to involve the community, notably the parents, in the management of primary education. The idea behind SMCs is that the communities, especially the parents, are more likely to focus on the quality of education that their children receive rather than just the number of children enrolled. Hence, parents tend to keep the accountability aspect of schools in check (Banarjee et al., 2008). They are responsible for school management, development plans and utilization of school funds. Although the idea behind SMCs is to promote bottom up approach of accountability, the committees are being seen as an added burden by most of the schools. During interviews, school staff revealed that parents are not very enthusiastic about participating in SMCs. This is because most of the community members belong to the economically weaker sections of the society. They are daily wagers and cannot afford

to miss a day's worth of pay by being part of a committee meeting. Principal from school B said that,

“We are required to hold monthly meeting with parents. This has to be done in school hours which ends up cutting down the teaching time. Parents are disinterested and sometimes we have to go to their homes to convince them to be a part of SMC.”

Accountability of school staff is not the only factor contributing to the overall degradation of primary education. It is also important to hold parents and students accountable for their actions. It was revealed during interviews with both school staff and education officers that community accountability is not in check. According to them, one of the biggest reasons is the ‘no detention policy’ in primary schools. According to the no-detention policy, implemented under the RTE Act of 2009, no child can be failed on the basis of poor performance in exams or due to low attendance. Both sets of interviews felt strongly against the no detention policy. Teaching staffs, as well as education officers, were of the opinion that this relieves any pressure of accountability on part of students and parents. They said that

“Most of these students come from very poor families and most often their parents are illiterate. Since they know they won't fail, they lack motivation to study.”

The school staff also added that

“Most of us are not in favor of the ‘no detention’ policy and the CCEP exam pattern but what can we do? We do not make these policies. We just follow orders.”

While on the topic of the RTE Act, teachers also expressed their dissatisfaction regarding other reforms made under the RTE Act. These were mainly around the no

detention policy, provision of free textbooks, stationary and uniforms from the Government.

“ Students and their parents do not care about studies anymore. They come here to eat and receive all the benefits. They know they will pass anyway since we are not allowed to fail them. They are not motivated to study. We have no control over anything. We follow orders from our department superiors.” (Principal, school A)

A teacher from the same school added

“ There is such a variation in the academic levels within each class because we cannot deny admission to any new student. This makes it is very difficult to teach. We cannot deny admission to a student even if they arrive in the middle of the academic term. Plus, oftentimes the child is not academically fit to be in that grade but we have to take them. Earlier we used to administer a qualifying exam to new students to check their level. We cannot do that anymore.”

Upon asking in detail about the new ‘activity-based curriculum’ in schools, teachers from all schools revealed that they were equally unhappy with this change. They said that the new textbooks do not have enough examples and exercises for students to practice. When asked whether any of them have ever been part of a textbook curriculum development team, the answer was no. It is interesting to note that the Principal from school D said that she knew that some teachers from private schools were on the textbook development team. The reason this is interesting is because, in India, there is a clear divide between public and private schools. Private schools are considered to have better facilities and quality education whereas public schools have the opposite image. The principal from school D also added that

“ Private schools are very different and they do not follow our curriculum. I don’t understand why teachers from private schools are on our textbook development committee. They don’t know the kind of challenges our students face.”

Officials at the Department of Education did not seem to have any idea of what teachers, who are the real implementers of the activity-based curriculum, go through. They also mentioned that the need to change the curriculum has been felt for a while now. Education needs to be more student-friendly. Before revising the curriculum, they conducted focus groups in all the states in India in effort to discuss this shift, for any action to be taken will be based upon the outcomes of said discussions. However, they also added that not all school teachers are part of the focus groups as that is practically impossible given the large number of schools and teaching staff.

The Department of Education also claimed to organize regular teacher training programs to equip teachers with the necessary skills to implement the new syllabus. However, there was a clear disagreement between the teaching staff and the administrative officials on the subject of teachers training. The teachers argued that, even when they are, there are times when the trainer himself does not show up. Also, oftentimes trainings are organized well after the implementation of new syllabus or exam pattern. For example, School E explained that

“ The Continuous and Comprehensive Exam pattern (CCEP) was a nightmare to understand. We just got orders to implement the new evaluation scheme toward the end of the academic year without any instructions on how to carry it out. We were clueless. Training for CCEP was organized after two years of its implementation.”

The education department said that they invite different zones for training regularly and that it is teachers who don’t show up or are disinterested. One official said

“ There is always resistance to change. I’m not surprised teachers don’t like the new exam pattern. It is definitely easier for students but more work for teachers. They don’t like that. They want to continue with their old way of teaching which is less effort and keeps their load light.”

There was a sense of disagreement even on the subject of involving teachers in textbook development. The Department of Education felt that teachers are not experienced enough to be on these committees. Their knowledge is not up to date and they don’t publish enough to make curriculum-related decisions. Although they added that teachers’ opinions matter and are taken into consideration through focus groups.

Attitude of Teachers

My general observation after interviewing teachers in various schools is that there is an overall sense of isolation of teachers from the rest of the education department. This is interesting since teachers are the primary ‘educators’ within the system. However, teachers seem to be oblivious of the vision of the primary school system that is claimed by the policy and curriculum makers. Teachers have very little knowledge regarding policies, their development and implementation, the motives behind global frameworks like the Millennium Development Goals, etc. More importantly, even policies and changes made under SSA are not well-explained to teachers. The sense of divide between the overall system and teachers is very strong. Teachers are as much isolated from matters of curriculum as from the overarching vision of the primary education system. Their only source of knowledge related to implementation of new curriculum, exam patterns or evaluation schemes are the official circulars that are received by the principals who then announce what is expected of the teachers.

What do you know about the activity-based curriculum?

The child should learn by observing. We should not teach them in the class but take them outside and let them absorb knowledge from their immediate environment.

What is your role as a teacher then?

(Laughs) We do what the children want. We don't scold them or teach them good values. We just follow instructions from our heads. Why do they need us anymore if we just have to follow around the children and let them do what they wish.

Who informs you about the changes in the curriculum/syllabus pattern?

We get a circular. Actually, our principal gets a circular from the department. She tells us about the changes in our meetings. If we have questions that she can answer then good. If not, she notes them down and clarifies them in her meetings with her superiors.

Hence, in view of teachers, these changes are not as friendly suggestions to improve and strengthen the education system, but rather they are burdensome orders that must be obeyed. None of the teachers I talked to have read the guidelines for improvement of quality of education under SSA.

My second observation is regarding the teachers training programs held to educate teachers on the changes and improvements made in primary education in order to ensure that they are fully prepared for ground-level implementation of strategies.

Training programs also facilitate teachers with advanced teaching methodologies that could be useful in the classroom. These trainings are a good meeting place for teachers from various schools to discuss daily classroom concerns and solutions to challenges common to the teaching community. According to the NCF guidelines for teacher

education based on the National Policy of Education, 1986, teachers must develop a bond of trust and understanding with their students. They should act as facilitators of knowledge rather than transmitters. The aim is to develop a deep understanding of ways to work around the natural curiosities of a child's mind and not burden them with a set curriculum that discourages their enthusiasm for learning (NCF, 2005). Keeping these purposes in mind, training sessions are held through block, cluster and district level institutions. NCERT and State Boards (SCERT) also actively participate in teachers' education. However, most teachers are dissatisfied with the organization of these sessions. They complain of trainings as unproductive as they are generally held by senior teachers and not qualified trainers who are capable of teaching them innovative methods of the inclusion of activity-based curriculum in the classroom. In addition, teachers often remain uninvited to these training sessions or are notified to attend them at the last minute. This leaves them with no time to prepare for back-up activities for their students while they are in training.

Therefore, it was noticed that there is a general lack of awareness among teachers regarding decisions that were made at the higher level. They are not always considered as part of the team when it comes to introducing teaching practices that would benefit the overall system in the long run. This has led to creation of a sort of distrust between the teaching staff and other officials in the system; Instead of viewing the other as a facilitator in overcoming the challenges of primary education, they each view the other as irresponsible actors.

CHAPTER IV

GRASSROOTS REALITIES AND STRUGGLES

Returning to my original research question, this chapter discusses the ground level problems faced by teaching staff in schools. It relies heavily upon the interviews I conducted in primary schools, the Department of Education and the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT). The discussed issues form the basis that supports my original argument of the degrading quality of education due to flaws in education policies. This chapter addresses the socio-economic, political and cultural challenges that render education policy ineffective.

Theory vs. Practice

When asked how Mid-day Meal program is carried out, teaching staff from all schools talked about the practical challenges they face on a daily basis in distributing food to students. The food, which is mostly rice and beans, lentils or oats, is pre-cooked but not pre-packaged. Mass quantities of food is then transported to schools. The Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) hires contractors especially for this purpose. They are in charge of cooking and transporting the food to schools in time for the lunch break, which lasts 20 minutes. Once transported to school, it is the teachers' responsibility to distribute these meals to students. All schools that I visited have large number of students, which makes it a struggle for teachers to manage the whole process within the allotted timeframe of 20 minutes. As described by teachers, they have to compromise on teaching time in order to carry out Mid-day meal duty. They start

distributing food about an hour before the actual lunch break starts, which cuts down their teaching time by at least 60-80 minutes every day. A teacher from school D discusses her issues around Mid-day Meal

“I’m in charge of Mid-day Meal all of this month. I’m required to be present in the playground every day at 9:45 when the food arrives. I then check it and do the required paperwork as we need to maintain records of what food comes and when, how many children were present that day and how many ate. By the time I get done with all this work and distribution, it is usually past lunch break, so for a month I won’t be able to teach my class for almost half the day.”

Four other schools shared similar responses. Only one school seemed okay with the management of meal distribution. But they added that the only reason they do not have any difficulty managing food distribution, but is because the school is small and the number of children enrolled is much lower than most schools. They admitted hearing mismanagement stories from teachers working in schools with high enrolments.

Examples like Mid-day Meal expose the ground reality of policies implemented towards improvement of the primary school system. The intentions behind the Mid-day meal program are noble. Most children enrolled in these schools come from economically weaker sections of society and are unlikely to receive proper nutrition at home. Provision of nutritious meals in school helps children concentrate better in studies. Consequently, it has become a huge incentive for parents to enroll their children in school.

However, making policies and highlighting their partial success is not enough. It is important to acknowledge and investigate the pros and cons of such policies. Mid-day Meal scheme is one example of operationalization of a policy without taking into consideration the challenges on the ground. The lack of provision concerning the carrying

out a policy at the ground level defeats the purpose for which it was implemented in the first place. Most teachers in my study view Mid-day meal as a burden that they have to deal with like all the other extra work (eg. election or census duty) that comes with the job of teaching in a government school. They are left with no choice but to follow orders since complaining appears to fall on deaf ears. It was interesting to note how everyone within the system seemed accustomed to the challenges and lack of coordination. Most of the interviewees repeatedly said, “This is how it is. We cannot change the system.”

Problems with Decentralization: The Case of SMCs

School Management Committees or SMCs are a key result of India’s struggle to develop a stronger, more accountable and transparent system of primary education. The underlying assumption is that management committees with involvement from the community create shared power or a participatory governance mechanism. This decentralization of power builds a more aware and bottom-up education system.

The SMC, as highlighted in the Right to Education Act, is a management committee comprising of parents/community members, school principal, teachers and social workers involved with that particular school (Table 2). Selection of the community members on the committee is done through a general body election. In addition, at least fifty percent of the representatives must be women. The committee is responsible for ensuring the smooth functioning of the school, recommending a school development plan, updating the community members of the functions of the school, monitoring the utilization of grants, holding monthly SMC meetings and meetings with other parents regarding school matters.

Table 2

Constitution of School Management Committee

S.No	Designation	Status in the SMC	Number
1	Principal/Head of school	Member/Ex-Officio Chairperson of SMC	One
2	Parents	Members	Twelve
3	Elected representative from the community	Member	One
4	Teacher (from the respective school)	Member	One
5	Member from an NGO involved with the school	Member	One

During interviews with school staff, the majority showed dissatisfaction and signs of struggle with regards to the management of SMCs. Even the most smoothly functioning school did not seem to be very approving of SMC. Their main complaints did not have anything to do with the SMC itself as an accountability mechanism, but the socio-economic context in which it was established. Government schools in India cater to the economically marginalized population of the country. My sample schools were no different. Almost the entire community consisted of daily-wagers who are construction workers, plumbers, housemaids, vendors or laborers. Most have had very little or no formal school education and are thus unable to read or write. Keeping these factors in mind, the work involved in the supervision of school management is even a challenging task for most parents. Even when they want to be part of their child's education, their

socio-economic push and pulls often do not allow them to commit to tasks such as SMC. Due to inability and lack of time commitment, the end result is for school staff to manage SMC themselves. The community members are elected and are officially part of the committee on paper, but in reality teachers have to burden this additional responsibility. Another cause of dissatisfaction for teachers regarding SMC is the fact that no specific days or timings are allotted to hold committee meetings. It is the school's responsibility to carve out time to hold SMC meetings during working days. This results in loss of more teaching time and additional paperwork. Principal from school E explained the community-related challenges teachers face,

“There are times when we have to go to the houses of the community members who are part of SMC. They do not show up and there is no way we can have a meeting without their participation, even if it is for namesake. We do all this in school time because we don't have a choice. Of course the students education suffers. We are unable to give them teaching time. But what to do. We only get a Sunday off, and no one would like to go to school meetings on a Sunday. Teachers are also humans. We need at least a day's rest when we can spend time with family and take care of our own children”

Another factor that makes committees like SMCs inefficient in India is based on the relationship between culture and social inequalities that stem from it. By this I refer to social evils like the 'caste-system', which on the surface appear to be non-prevalent, but in reality the Indian society still operates in a strongly rooted system of social hierarchy. This is especially true in villages and other rural parts of the country where the role of caste determines and affects a person's day-to-day life. One of the schools in my study was situated in a village in west Delhi. Upon a preliminary survey of the area and after talking with the community members, it was clear that caste determines most of the

functioning of the village. This could also be seen in the constitution of SMC. Even though there is a reserved quota for equal representation from the so-called ‘backward classes’, their actual participation in management committees operational in such social environments is highly questionable.

Issues such as the caste system affect the functioning of democratic institutions, such as education, negatively. Even though decentralization can have a positive influence by giving voice and equal power to local actors, it can backfire in societies that are highly unequal. As Stenvoll-Wells and Sayed (2012) put it, “the putative global benefits of decentralization cannot and should not be taken at face value without examining their impact on equity at the local level in diverse contexts” (Stenvoll-Wells and Sayed, 2012, p. 115).

Paradigm Shift in Primary Education

“Education system that is lifeless, devoid of joy and freshness, not even offering an iota of space to move and grow, is doomed to dead, dry rigidity. Can such a system ever nurture the child’s mind, expand her horizons, and elevate her soul and character? Will this child, once she grows up, ever be able to figure anything out on her own, overcome hurdles using her own resources, stand on her own two feet with head held high, banking on her own natural fire? Will she not be given to mindless copying (from others), cramming (without comprehension) and slavish servitude?”

(Tagore, 1907, Pg. 539)

The pattern of education in India was imported from abroad. There was an attitude to follow the ‘West’ because it was more developed and had a more successful model of education. The national report on education and development (1964) expressed concern over such attitude of the country and admitted that there has been reluctance and even fear in making drastic changes in the education system of the country. It was

recommended that India outgrow this attitude and develop its own educational pattern dependent on its own needs and future. The emphasis was on modernization of education. However, my study reveals that the mindset of wanting a Western model of education and considering it more reliable is still very much present, even in the so-called revised framework of India's national education system. Efforts to modernize education have resulted in the adoption of a Western model that does not cater to the demands of the diverse and unequal Indian society.

When asked about the revised National Curriculum Framework, NCERT officials talked about the expectations and demands of the Department of Education, which emphasizes on learning to create a joyous process and not a burden on children. In their opinion, this approach has been successful in developed countries. However, NCERT has been asked to design a curriculum to lighten the burden of classroom learning. According to NCERT, they do not have a say in what the ideal curriculum must be. During the interview, an official explained,

“We are only a recommending body. We develop curriculum according to what is demanded of us by the ministry. We do not impose curriculum on schools. States are free to follow the curriculum we develop or they can prepare their own.”

Upon asking how do they ensure a suitable curriculum across all schools, they said that national focus groups are set up with participation from various institutions, school teachers and non-governmental organizations. Regional seminars and consultations with the state secretaries, state education boards and examination boards are also organized. In order to include public opinion, advertisements are issued in national and regional newspapers. The revisions in the curriculum are based on this feedback.

When asked to give a brief overview of the new curriculum, they defined it as ‘activity-based’. Another NCERT official said,

“The focus is on teaching children life skills as opposed to repetition of bookish knowledge. Quality education comes from natural surroundings, by doing activities and not just sitting in a classroom repeating answers. In activity based learning, the child is learning through their immediate environment. It is ‘child focused’ rather than teacher being the authority. The teacher takes on the role of a facilitator”.

However, teachers seemed to have a completely different point of view about activity-based learning. They argue that activity-based learning is a misfit in the Indian school context, especially in government schools. They do not demean the idea of learning from natural surroundings, but are of the opinion that it needs to be backed up with some solid textbook knowledge too. One teacher said,

“We can take the children to parks and observe flowers and birds to learn about them. But at the end that is not enough. What will observation do when the child is unable to write about it because he cannot write basic alphabet. Children learn how to read and write in primary school because it is all about building their base. If they don’t practice reading and writing now, how will they move forward?”

The majority of teachers complained about the new books arguing that they do not have enough practice material, especially in mathematics and language books. One argument that stood out refers back to the social background of children, which concerns the education level of parents. Since it is rare for parents to be literate enough to be able to guide their children with homework, teachers believe that it is even more important to utilize school time in learning basic concepts. The only time children really focus is when they are in the classroom. Revisions in pedagogy do not allow teachers to assign much

homework. Some of them even said they are scared to assign any homework at all because the students might complain against them.

“Parents in richer countries are able to help their children with homework and motivate them to study. We haven’t reached that point in India.” (Teacher, School A)

Another point of concern for teachers, which also alludes to the westernization of education, is the examination reforms carried out in order to provide quality education to all school-going children. The Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation Program or CCEP was introduced with the objective of holding regular evaluations for students and to eliminate any pressure or fear related to exams. All students take only one common exam with multiple-choice questions from all subjects. The exams are held twice a year. In addition, teachers are required to carry out informal evaluations for each student throughout the year. They must maintain a daily record of the progress of each student in their class. Without any exceptions, teachers feel burdened with the amount of work expected of them. They argue that maintaining records of daily progress of each student is a challenge when there are up to 45 students in a class. However, the multiple-choice exam pattern does not allow them to fully evaluate students, as their written competence is not tested at all. It is also easy for them to copy on exams since they only have to circle the correct answers. It is especially difficult to evaluate mathematical skills because on multiple-choice exams they don’t have to explain the answers by actually doing it. It was at this point that raised the most issues with the implementation of the RTE Act and its negative effects on classroom learning. Under the implementation of the RTE Act of 2009, no student can be failed or punished by a teacher. All teachers and principals in my study were strongly against these provisions of RTE. They argue that such provisions

contribute towards lack of motivation and sincerity in children as well as parents. Since the community is not accountable towards quality education with the recent provisions of RTE, they have developed a careless attitude towards school.

“Children get free textbooks, stationery, uniforms, meals, no exams, no failing and no fee of any kind. Neither children nor parents are serious about school anymore. They are provided with everything in school and some of them even dare to tell us that we have no power as teachers.” (Teacher, School B)

“ Our earnings come from teaching these children. We sincerely try to teach them what we can. They are the country’s future and it is our job to make them into educated and responsible citizens. But with all these policies coming in, the future of these children does not look bright. They are very young to know what is good or bad for them, but the government should know better. These policies are clearly not working in our schools. Giving too much freedom to children is not good. They become irresponsible and don’t care about studies. Just because conducting no exams and giving no homework worked in developed countries does not mean it works here. They do not have our kind of problems. And then everyone blames us teachers saying we do not do our job. What can we do, we feel pressure from everywhere -the authorities, parents, media...” (Principal, School C)

Hence, one of the main observations from the above discussion is around the new curriculum policy and the RTE. It is interesting to note that the two, when implemented simultaneously, have produced unfavorable results. Clearly, schoolteachers are not in agreement with the new curriculum framework. Their definition of quality seems to be very different from what is prescribed in policies under SSA. There is much dissatisfaction around activity-based curriculum prescribed under the NCF due to local operationalization challenges of which higher authorities seem oblivious.

Secondly, an interesting theme that stems out of the observation on curriculum change is that of a paradigm shift in the values associated with the education system itself. Activity-based learning, No Detention policy, minimal homework and drastic revisions in the exam pattern do not fit in the Indian context of primary education given the nature of the challenges on the ground. The issues get even more complicated when policies such as the RTE come into effect. Most teachers feel pressured by the rapid shift towards implementing a model of education not suited to the needs of the country. They view this shift as the ‘westernization of education’. By making the education process too smooth with no accountability on the part of the students, the so-called decision-makers are not just stripping away quality education from children, but also denying them the opportunity of learning the values of hard work, commitment and sincerity.

Bureaucracy, Politics and Education

The four weeks of interactions spent with various government employees working in the education system of India gave me a good sense of the bureaucratic factors at play in different offices. Even as rules are made, policies implemented and resources made available in abundance, an alternate set of parallel structures also exist that seem to render ineffective the initiatives taken for building a strong education system. These structures can be traced both at the national and local levels of the system. Majumdar and Mooij (2011), for instance, point to NCF 2005 as an outcome of the 2004 elections in India when a Congress (I) (a leading political party) led coalition came to power at the center (Pg, 133). Hence, it cannot be ignored that political power can be a critical factor in shaping and governing a large part of a country’s education system.

Similarly, local politics can have an influence in controlling ground-level operations of education. The powerful effects of ‘who knows who’ were certainly visible to me during the course of this project. At the school level, this was mainly reflected in the availability of infrastructural facilities and the special recognition being enjoyed by some schools. Among the five schools I visited, only one had impeccable infrastructure facilities ranging from good furniture, water and sanitation facilities to well-maintained classrooms and a library. They also have tie-ups with a non-governmental organization (Ngo) in order to promote extra curricular activities for children and support students who require extra one-on-one time with teachers. None of the other schools had a library or support from ngos. It is evident that maintaining close links with superiors and influential local politicians can increase a school’s chances of meriting quality facilities, praise and recognition for the principal and teachers. This kind of favoritism creates an unfair environment where professional appreciation is not necessarily based on sincerity, hard work or merit.

On the other hand, it is also true that political support, when extended sincerely, can also create a positive environment for the betterment of education. For instance, Govinda (2002) presents a case study of primary schools in Himachal Pradesh, a small mountainous state in northern India. Himachal Pradesh has achieved high rates of success in education since independence, when it had the lowest literacy levels. Its success is mainly attributed to the dedication of the state government in promoting education. Education has always been a priority regardless of whichever political party came to power (Govinda, 2002, Pg. 299). The state government’s interest in education led it to make sound financial investments and expenditures. As education consistently remained

a priority, the political party in power handled its education policy decisions with utmost seriousness. Issues such as teacher-pupil ratios, gender bias, and infrastructure were diligently dealt with. In addition, good governance encouraged community efforts in participation in school matters. This not to say that Himachal Pradesh has successfully achieved the goal of quality education for all children, but it has been successful in perfecting some of the prerequisites to the path of a strong, beneficial education system. Undoubtedly, political power has responded appropriately to the needs of its people in this case (Govinda, 2002).

Elitism, Education and the Widening Rural -Urban Gap

One common theme that I identified in all my interactions, whether with teaching staff, NCERT officials or officials at the Department of Education, was their acknowledgement of the prevalent socio-economic inequality in the education system of India. Unfortunately, they are, perhaps unintentionally, even contributing to the promotion of this socio-economic inequality. While pointing out the pros and cons of the new curriculum, a couple of teachers referred to the new textbooks as being ‘more at the level of understanding’ of children enrolled in government schools. For instance, a teacher said,

“ Earlier textbook examples were about children and their parents traveling in an airplane or shopping at the mall. These children were unable to relate to that. The new books have examples of street vendors, cobblers and vegetable vendors. Since most of the children understand this terminology because their parents have those jobs, they are able to relate to it.”

On the one hand, such textbooks reflect the effort on part of the curriculum developers to make content more relevant and relatable to children, but at the same time

these textbooks clearly acknowledge, prove and promote the existing socio-economic class-divide within the Indian society. If this message is ingrained in the minds of young children from the very beginning of schooling, then they will grow up with an inferiority complex and will perhaps be even less equipped to deal with it, let alone fight it. It is ironic that education is considered as a tool for social mobility between class divisions when it is doing just the opposite. Majumdar and Mooij (2011) refer to this inclusion of social context in textbooks as the “candid acknowledgement of differences” (Majumdar and Mooij, 2011 Pg. 136). In their study of schools in West Bengal, India, they raise the point of variation in respect and recognition expressed for textbook characters, which depends on their profession and lifestyle. The example given is the difference between addressing a farmer or a blacksmith and a doctor or a lawyer. Farmers are addressed as ‘our younger brothers’, which subtly refers to their lower social status, whereas doctors are respectfully called ‘gentlemen’ or ‘sir’ (Pg. 137).

It can be noted that policy makers, books on educational reforms in India, and actors involved in constituting the education system of India all too often quote the constitution of India and its vision of India as “a secular, egalitarian and pluralistic society, founded on the values of social justice and equality”. However, in reality, the education policy developers tend to view challenges of inequality and social divisions as an integral part of the society. This view is reflected in the so-called revised textbook curriculum of primary school.

Lack of Community Efforts

On that note, teachers also discussed some of the issues related to distribution of free textbooks, uniforms and cash reimbursement to parents in the case of a medical emergency or death of a student. In addition to receiving free and compulsory education,

all children enrolled in government primary schools are also entitled to free textbooks, uniforms, shoes, jerseys, socks and stationary. Female children also receive a cash incentive of Rs. 200/-. While these measures encourage parents to enroll their children in school, they do not guarantee regular attendance. In fact, teachers experience an influx of children and parents on days when cash incentives are disbursed. Most teachers believe that parents send their children to school to receive benefits in the form of clothing, meal and money. For instance, a teacher from school B said,

“These children come from such poor families that a little money is a big thing for them. That is why parents send children to school-for money. Education is not a priority. It is for receiving benefits that they are enrolled. We understand their poverty but at the same time they should not lose sight of the real reason of schooling.”

In addition to the existing benefits, the government has recently added provisions of insurance coverage and medical reimbursement in the case of hospitalization or the accidental death of a child enrolled in a government primary school in India. For example, any child enrolled in a government primary school in India is entitled to receive Rs.25, 000/- in the case of loss of one limb or one eye. While provisions like medical insurance and treatment for medical emergencies are excellent for children, the economic conditions of the families often steer them towards fake medical conditions in order to recuperate monetary benefits. In terms of educational benefit, these benefits fulfill the promise of the government’s commitment to improve enrolment rates, but not the quality of education. Due to extremely weak economic conditions, parents tend to lose perspective of the benefits of quality education for their children. Instead, they view the government as an ultimate resource machine.

Revisiting the Role of Teachers

Chapter II discusses the literature available on the role of teachers in the primary education system of India. It launches an in-depth discussion of teachers as the prime actors in imparting education. Hence, their role is always under scrutiny. Much literature also labels teacher as inefficient government workers who have a laid-back attitudes. I now revisit the role of primary school teachers in light of the interviews conducted for this project, ground-level challenges and policy factors that govern the education system. I discover that even though teachers have a very important role within the system, they are, in fact, at the bottom of the educational bureaucratic chain. They are easy targets to blame because, in many ways, they represent the face of education to the community, allthe while at the same time, are seen as ‘doers’ of policies by their superiors. Teachers are answerable to parents for questions, concerns and criticisms regarding their children’s education. At the same time, teachers have to deal with internal pressures from within the education system (achieving targets, non-academic workload). As a result, they are caught up in a struggle to balance these outside and inside pressures when, in fact, they do not have much power and are a mere pawn of the system. Below, I discuss two examples from my research that illustrate the above-mentioned issues.

Teachers Training

SSA provides regular teachers trainings on topics of teaching methodologies for activity-based learning, using teaching aids in effective ways etc. Senior teachers who are often selected by state education boards conduct these trainings. NCERT, in collaboration with state education departments, also conducts trainings as and when required. Teachers, on the other hand, shared a different opinion about the trainings. Some of them

complained about not being invited to the trainings regularly. Even when they go to these sessions, sometimes there is no one to conduct the training. A number of teachers shared their experiences regarding trainings on CCEP examination pattern during its initial stages of implementation:

“We just got orders to follow the new exam pattern. They sent the exam material to school while we had no clue on how to carry it out. We had to ask other teachers from other schools, and with mixed efforts we finally somehow did it. The trainings were held almost a year after the actual implementation.” (Teacher, School D)

Upon taking up the issue with the officials at the department of education or NCERT, no one was willing to take responsibility for the matter. They justified this by saying that the teachers are competent enough to comprehend the CCEP exam pattern and are capable of adjusting to change.

“There is always resistance to change but that is normal. Sometimes things get delayed.” (NCERT official)

Once again, it can be observed that there is a huge gap between policy and practice. There is a lack of communication and trust between the various actors implementing education policies.

Teaching Learning Material (TLM)

Every teacher in government primary school is allocated Rs. 500/ per year to support quality improvement in classrooms. Under the very detailed guidelines issued by the Board of Education, teachers can spend Teaching Learning Material (TLM) funds on buying useful teaching aids to make learning fun and interesting for their students. However, due to the elaborate guidelines and complicated protocol that need to be followed in order to receive and spend TLM funds, teachers find little to no flexibility in

utilizing these funds. For instance, the grant money allocated to Social Sciences can be used on “ Printed Charts (preferably laminated), Maps (Delhi, India, World), Globes, Compasses, Atlases, Working and stationery models showing day and night eclipses, etc.”

Such guidelines are specified for each subject taught in school. The TLM grant is only one example of the rigid and complicated, official rules surrounding implementation of resources. Other financial allocations made to schools under SSA, such as repair and maintenance funds and annual school funds, all require going through detailed official sanctions and cannot be spent without consultation with SMC members.

Involvement in Curriculum Development

Another key argument that underestimates the value of teachers and consequently affects the quality of education is the lack of involvement of government school teachers in curriculum development. School curriculum is made with the needs and capabilities of students in mind. Teachers are the only actors within the education system who work directly with students. They are the most informed on the needs of students, the challenges and struggles of students when dealing with subject matter, on the student’s ability to grasp what is being taught, and on the methods that would make classroom learning both effective and joyful. It is perplexing to find out that teachers do not have a say in the curriculum framework. NCERT argues that teachers from every state are invited to take part in discussions around curriculum revision and that focus groups are also held in regional NCERT offices. The issue here brings into discussion who should decide which teachers take part in discussion or focus groups and who should not. My findings indicate that teaching staff from government schools have no clue how to deal

with the mechanism of curriculum development. None of the teachers I interviewed have been invited to any such focus groups or meetings to discuss the issue of curriculum revision. For them, such meetings happen at a very high-level, and there is no way to be included in any matters. In my understanding, these decisions are largely governed by state or local politics. The former mentioned political bureaucracy once again plays a huge role in such situations. However, it is interesting to note that principals from private schools ultimately serve on the board of government school curriculum revision committees. This is puzzling because of the huge divide that exists within the government and private school systems in India. As mentioned earlier, the government and private schools in India operate differently and follow completely different sets of curriculum. Hence, it would be fair to assume that teachers from private schools cannot relate to the challenges and struggles of government schoolteachers or students. Interestingly, the Department of Education and NCERT justify this behavior by saying that government school teachers do not have much experience in curriculum revision. It was stated that, “Hardly any of the teachers have ever published an article in a journal. They don’t read much, hence, they have no clue on the workings of the academic world.”

While there is truth in the fact that primary school teachers do not to publish or keep up with academic readings, it cannot be ignored that they work directly with the target audience at whom the new curriculum is targeted. Therefore, teachers have valuable insights on the practical ‘do’s and don’ts’ of curriculum formulation that cannot be found elsewhere. Unfortunately, they are useful resources being left unexplored and, consequently, their status is reduced to nothing more than a powerless government servant.

Teachers have to carry out multiple tasks ranging from maintaining registers (for mid-day meal, activity funds and so on), organizing SMC meetings to non-academic work like election and census duties. In the midst of dealing with such time-consuming work, the amount of time they are able to dedicate to their prime duty, teaching, is highly questionable. The department of education blames teachers by saying that “they are provided with better salaries and school facilities, there is no reason they should not teach.” However, providing better facilities does not simply mean constructing concrete buildings in every locality, providing meals for children and establishing SMCs, it also includes provisions with which to operationalize these policies. Mid-day Meals will continue to interfere with teaching time until they find a solution wherein teachers are not required to supervise and serve food to hundreds of children within twenty minutes.

Similarly, curriculum change and the CCEP exam pattern will not be considered a successful measure to improve education quality until such a time that all teachers are not onboard. It will require conducting teacher trainings in the real sense and not just on paper. Teachers complain about having to deal with tasks like picking up books from zonal administrative offices so as to ensure timely distribution to children, finding someone to fix school water coolers and, not to mention, all of this work is done in school hours. Policy development, implementation and operationalization cannot be treated as three separate tasks. In order to achieve successful outcomes, all three components must go hand-in-hand. One of the root causes of unsuccessful policy implementation is this lack of impractical planning and management, which ultimately affect the quality of education.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This thesis investigates the issues within the national education policies implemented in India following the imposition of global frameworks such as Education for All and, more recently, the Millennium Development Goal number 2- Universal Primary Education. I argued that national policies, such as *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (Education for All Campaign), implemented by the central government of India are affecting the quality of education adversely. I used a qualitative methodology of semi-structured interviews to capture the social, economic and political factors that render policies ineffective at the ground-level. The research questions that propelled my research were:

What are the impacts of the national education policies stemming from global frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals, on the quality of education at the local level?

What is the perception of education policies by local actors involved in policy implementation (teaching staff, ground level officials)?

My five weeks of conversations with primary school teachers, officials at the Department of Education and NCERT gave me an opportunity to closely examine the system and understand the re-contextualization of education policies in local settings and the challenges entailed. Below, I summarize the key points from my findings that answer my original research question.

Policy Impacts on Primary Education

This time in the history of India is revolutionary for primary education. As discussed throughout this thesis, the impetus to achieve universal primary education has been at its peak for the past decade. The talk concerning infrastructure, girls' education, right to education, choice of school, hierarchical problems, community involvement and accountability (among many more) and more have made their way into discussions about achieving the second Millennium Development Goal. Policies implemented under initiatives like the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* have tried to address most of these challenges concerning primary education. The Right to Education Act has also undergone several amendments for a better, more wholesome approach to education. However, my research concludes that policy formulation and implementation have largely ignored taking into account the situation surrounding the social diversity and inequality of the country. Policy and acts like the Right to Education promise to impact and benefit children from all backgrounds across the nation equally, but in reality this is not the case. It is a challenge to deliver the promise of, say, a right to free and compulsory education to all children in a country with high social deprivation and inequality. Challenges like poverty, unemployment, etc. prevent children from enjoying their right to education (Mooij, 2011). Policy formulation, thus, must be mindful of the inequalities prevalent in the society in order to be successful.

From the point of view of policy implementation, this research brings out the challenges of hierarchy, lack of coordination and disengagement between the various actors within the primary education system. For example, efforts, such as change in textbook curriculum, exam patterns, and teachers training, are beneficial, but they cannot

be fully effective until the programs are well-coordinated. The implementation of a new curriculum will be a failed initiative unless teachers are well-trained and confident in implementing it in their classrooms. Similarly, the formulation of School Management Committees will remain restricted to policy (that was only effective on paper) until they are redesigned to include the community in the real sense- i.e by understanding their economic limitations and devising ways to work alongside them, instead of working against them. The practical implementation of policies was found to be much more different than the promising claims made within policies on paper. This wide difference between theory and practice must be addressed for the success of policy initiatives.

Perception of Local Actors

My second research question investigates the perception of local actors involved in primary education regarding the national policies. The local actors in this research refer to the teaching staff of government primary schools. The discontentment surrounding education policy formulation and implementation was a key theme throughout my research interviews. There is a considerable amount of disengagement between teachers and the rest of the education department in spite of the rigorous efforts in decentralization of the system. Teachers expressed concern for the degrading quality of education and the growing hollowness of primary schooling. They constantly referred to the new policies and curriculum changes being a ‘westernization’ of primary education. According to them, the challenges of high social and economic inequalities in India do not create a supportive environment for such policy reforms. Furthermore, the gap between theory and practice has created ground level challenges that will, inevitably, be dealt by teachers. They feel pressured by new policies and their own inability to deal with

local challenges due to a lack of support from higher authorities. The ‘blame game’ between teachers, curriculum advisors and the Department of Education put into perspective the bureaucracy at play on every level in the education sector.

Public Private Partnership in Education

Verger et al. (2012) elaborate on idea of the Public Private Partner (PPPs) in the primary education sector of India. The country has previously implemented the PPP model in infrastructure and solid waste management with a fair amount of success. The inclusion of the PPP model in the education sector is a recent development. This model has gained strong support from the international aid agencies such as the World Bank, UNESCO and Asian Development Bank. It would be fair to say that the PPP is viewed as a resourceful education investment especially for developing countries striving to achieve quality education for all. As the name suggests, PPPs are partnerships between the public and private sectors meant to boost productivity, which in the case of education means better accessibility and quality. The partnership involves contracted work by private organizations that could range from managing school infrastructure to the management of teachers. The state, on the other hand, controls the overall hiring process of staff, payment of salaries, etc.

Building on Verger’s research, promoting the idea of experimenting further with the PPP model for education is recommended for India. This is beneficial since it especially targets accessibility and quality of education. Furthermore, Verger (2011) describes the conditions of clarity, consistency, familiarity, feasibility and resonance as necessary for successful the re-contextualization of policy models at the national level. In the case of India, the familiarity and success of PPPs in other sectors makes it less foreign

and risky to local policymakers. In addition, India has had a long history of involvement from private organizations in the education sector. Even during the pre-independence era, philanthropic organizations participated in managing schools to impart education (Verger et al., 2011). Now, with the increasing awareness and demand for quality education (especially at primary level), PPP resonates well with the Indian educational sector. Shifting focus to another contextual factor, the model works in compliance with the social context of India where elitism and private schooling in the English medium are an integral part of the society. There is also enough evidence to prove that the public are discontent with the quality of schooling provided in government schools. Keeping these factors in mind, the PPP model offers a feasible solution to achieving the goal of universal primary education without compromising on the quality of education. This is not to say, however, that nothing should be done about social class differences and the deeply embedded elitism in the Indian society. These are big challenges that weaken any society and absolutely must be addressed. However, looking at the bigger goal of providing quality education to all children, PPPs allow for the delivering of positive results while working within the forces of the social context of the country.

Finally, PPPs can be looked at as a strategy to combat the problem of unrecognized schools. The increasing demand for quality education and diminishing public faith in government schools has led to the establishment of a large number of these schools in urban areas. This implies a natural privatization of education. If the government introduces more PPP ventures in primary education while making sure it is affordable for all, the problem of unrecognized schools can be regulated.

The introduction of Public Private Partnership is by no means an ideal or sole solution to the problems pertaining to education policy formulation and implementation. Since the PPP model is still in its initial experimental stages in the education sector in India, there is much apprehension among the government, states and stakeholders regarding its pros and cons. Verger (2011) points to the debates surrounding the lack of clarity of PPPs in education, its impacts on the various actors involved in the education sector and the division of authority between the government and the private sector. It is clear from the above discussion that Public Private Partnerships is at its highly experimental stages in India. Further research in the sector will open venues for more comprehensive solutions suited to the needs of the world's largest democracy - India.

APPENDIX
INTERVIEW GUIDES

Teaching Staff

1. When did you start working in this school?
2. What grade do you teach?
3. How many children are enrolled in this school?
4. Approximately, how many children are in each grade?
5. What is the background of children you are studying in this school?
6. Do children drop out of school frequently? How many drop out every school year?
7. What is the quality of education like in government schools?
8. Are there any specific policies implemented by the government of provide better education under SSA?
9. What do you know about the RTE Act?
10. Do you know anything about the Millennium Development Goals?
11. Do you as teachers give any input on what is working in schools in terms of good education?
12. Are you involved in curriculum planning at school level?
13. Are there any policies in particular that have been especially successful in school?
14. What challenges do you face at school level while carrying out policies?
15. Do you feel like you get the required support from the Ministry of Education/your superiors?

16. Are there any problems you face in your day-to-day work as a teacher that you are unsatisfied with? Or feel like you are not being heard?
17. What are your thoughts on the changes being made in primary education?
18. Is there anything in terms of providing good quality education to children that should be done differently?

Department of Education/NCERT

1. What are some of the pressing issues in primary education in India regarding the achievement of Universal Primary Education?
2. What policies is the government implementing under SSA?
3. What are your thoughts on Millennium Development Goal (specifically goal 2)?
Where does India stand in achieving MDG 2?
4. What is the Department of Education's role in providing primary education to all children?
5. How do you coordinate with schools, teachers and the Ministry of Human Resource and Development?
6. How do you ensure successful implementation of programmes implemented under SSA?
7. Are there any challenges you face during the implementation phase?
8. How effective have the programmes implemented under SSA been?
9. What is your involvement in curriculum development for primary schools? Can you explain the process?
10. How do you ensure the quality aspect of education in schools?
11. Does your department hold meetings or training sessions with school staff?

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