

Teach First

Ensure Instruction in Schools before Innovation

By John Kurrien

The amount and quality of instruction, in that order, determine what children learn in our elementary schools, particularly our government schools. The present debate on education reform is, however, centred more around curricula and teaching methods than the sheer paucity of teaching.

Parents who send their children to government schools are often poor, semi-literate or illiterate and cannot tutor, or afford tutors, to compensate for deficiencies in their children's schooling. Unfortunately, it is in these schools, where good quality instruction is most required, that our children receive little or no systematic teaching.

Consider the number of school days per year. Though government schools are meant to work for around 200 days in a year, they invariably function for 150 days or less. Schools are closed at the drop of a hat, for local festivals, preparation for national celebrations, and other official and unofficial reasons. In the nation's capital, municipal schools were closed in honour of a local married politician, who was murdered by his mistress for paying attention to another woman!

Typically, the prescribed duration of a school day is five to six hours. Most elementary schools, especially in rural areas, routinely start late and end early — some schools do not open after lunch. In municipal schools, where students attend the morning or afternoon shift, actual instruction time is limited to about two or three hours.

Shorter academic years, taken together with shorter school days, effectively reduce the prescribed hours of instruction almost by half. The more serious problem is that poor children attend schools where teachers are either absent, or present but not teaching systematically. An international study of teacher absence in seven low- and middle-income countries, indicated that 25% of all government primary school teachers in India were absent on a typical school day, exceeded only by Uganda (27%). Teacher absentee rates varied from 15% in Gujarat to 39% in Bihar.

What about teachers who do attend? The PROBE survey of schools in north India indicated that only about 50% of the activities of teachers present could be classified as teaching. Other activities include maintaining discipline, administrative work, talking to other teachers, sleeping, and getting students to massage them.

Shorter academic years and school hours, absentee teachers, and poor quality teaching have had a disastrous effect on the education of most poor children attending government schools. When teachers are chronically absent, many children simply stop attending school. Many complete Class V but are virtually illiterate. Some do not even know the alphabet by Class VII.

No innovation attempting to improve

teaching and learning can succeed in our government schools unless teachers teach regularly. Strangely enough, there have been no lack of well-publicised claims, made by state governments, international agencies, funding bodies and NGOs about innovative schemes, teaching methods and learning materials that have worked. These claims are rarely based on sustained changes in teaching styles and children's learning, when innovations are scaled up in a large number of mainstream government schools.

Innovations, like better textbooks and better teacher training, will continue to be important and necessary. But their contribution to significant improvement in children's learning will be limited, when so little teaching actually takes place. When teachers do attend school, one estimate notes that the average teaching time a group of rural students gets could be as little as 25 minutes a day!

Is there any hope for change? The good news, for example, is that among other measures, the present government has reconstituted the Central Advisory Board on Education (CABE) and committed itself to significantly increasing the elementary education budget.

But we must be clear that even exponentially increased funding for our non-functioning government schools will not prevent them from collapsing. Despairing the quality of education in these schools, large numbers of poor parents are now sending their children, especially boys, to private schools they can ill afford.

What can be done to improve the quantity and quality of learning in our government schools? Every state must ensure that all schools are open for the prescribed number of days and hours of instruction. During school hours, no teacher should be expected to attend meetings, training courses or help in health and cattle censuses. All possible measures should drive home the message that the fundamental duty of all teachers is to be present, and teach, in school.

We must simultaneously look at other issues which impinge on making schools more attractive and effective places for learning. These include articulating the requirements for a school, including the training, recruitment and transfer of teachers. The CABE in collaboration with the NCERT and the NCTE could take the lead role in initiating national and state level discussions on these and other related issues.

The entire educational system will have to become more transparent and accountable. However, powerful political and bureaucratic interests will not easily give up the illegal income and power they get from the recruitment and transfer of teachers, and construction of schools. Without significant educational reform, millions of children will be denied a better future.

