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Need to accelerate inclusive education

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Educational institutes must carefully nurture Right to Education Act, which has systematically enabled choice and access to quality education for economically weaker sections, write Sridhar Iyer and Rarun Cherukuri

An equal and easy access to education for vulnerable sections of our population is imperative for achieving the vision of UNDP Sustainable Goals of 'Education for all'. The Right to Education (RTE) Act passed in 2009 has played an important role in accelerating the country's progress towards this goal by facilitating parity in access to quality education. It has not only enabled the poor to choose between government and private schools but has also helped both girls and boys gain an equal right to education.

The Section 12-1-c of the RTE mandates all unaided private schools across India to reserve 25% of their entry grade seats to children belonging to economically weak or socially disadvantaged families. Every year, about six lakh (600,000) children from Economically Weaker Section (EWS) backgrounds seek enrolment under Section 12-1-c, and potential one crore (10 million) children across the country stand to gain over the next four years. Under the clause, several states such as Uttarakhand and Bihar have encouraged equal number of admissions for girls and boys. In the national capital, admission of the girl child has gone up from 41% to 47% in just three years. If this trend is extrapolated to the entire country, it would mean that each year an additional 132,000 girls would get an opportunity to enrol in private schools.

Retention rate

Like for every positive change, many skeptics have questioned the impact of the policy – the fall in retention rate of EWS children being a prime one, especially due to alleged "psychological stress" that EWS children go through. We analysed the existing research and data and concluded that most of these doubts are unfounded. A paper by Dr. Vijay Kumar (IAS officer, Blavatnik Scholar and D.Phil, Public Policy, Oxford) last year provides empirical evidence that debunks myths that children admitted under reservation quotas are at a psycho-social disadvantage due to discrimination at schools. In a research conducted in Karnataka, significant improvement was seen in the self-efficacy of children belonging to the most disadvantaged social groups, especially, girls, admitted under policy.

The Annual Retention Survey conducted by Indus Action provides a closer look at post-admission outcomes. The retention trends in Delhi (among the students supported and admitted over the last two years) show that out of 4,924 children who got allotted schools, 83% have remained in the same schools. Only 3% who dropped out, 1% cited commuting as the prime reason, followed by ancillary costs such as books and stationery (0.57%). Only 0.42% of respondents cited non-inclusive teachers and peers as other reasons for dropping out.

The survey also showed that close to 30% parents expected some form of support for their kids to improve their learning levels and 8% from this set wanted themselves to be enabled to teach their kids better. This clearly indicates the desire among parents to take ownership of their children's learning – another reason that we believe RTE has been successful in changing mindsets towards education among the poor.

Poor students-a bad influence?

We would like to dispel another perception that children from poor families are a 'bad influence' on other children in the classroom. Gautam Rao, Assistant Professor at the Department of Economics at Harvard, in his paper titled, 'Familiarity does not breed contempt,' found that having poor classmates makes rich students more generous and egalitarian. Research has also shown children with privileged backgrounds can imbibe life and character building qualities of empathy and kindness at a young age.

The RTE Act offers an immense potential to reach a critical mass and enabling education for all. However, for the policy to reach its optimum and intended impact, it is critical to urgently address the issues parents face, chief among them commuting and ancillary costs. Streamlining and making transparent reimbursement frameworks for tuition fees, books and uniforms through end-to-end MIS systems and an improved school mapping for better neighbourhood school allocation, can not only significantly reduce drop-out rates but also motivate many more parents to benefit fully from an advantageous policy.

School Readiness Programs for both parents and children through Anganwadis can also cultivate secure attachment between mother-child and improve learning habits. At the other end, effective grievance redressal systems will help the government resolve issues between school and parents within set time frame. In addition, reward systems for high performing schools will go a long way in encouraging schools to create an environment of inclusion.

Inclusive education is indeed one of the most powerful vehicles for sustainable development of a nation. By carefully nurturing impactful policies such as RTE and monitoring the progress of children and families, India as a nation can fundamentally reverse the trend of exclusion in education.