

## Beyond physical access to schools

India has around 1.1 million elementary schools with 200 million children enrolled in them. About 96% of the habitations now have elementary schools within a 3km radius. In the last two decades, enrolment has been driven primarily by private schools. We see a mass exodus of students from government schools, resulting in the growth of small and tiny schools in both urban and rural areas. In 2015-16, there were about 250,000 elementary schools with an enrolment of 30 or less, out of which 78,300 have less than 15 students, according to Udise (unified district information system for education) data. Nearly 7,200 schools have zero enrolment. India stares at a huge dysfunctional public school system with small, tiny and empty schools scattered across the country.

Small schools compromise quality and efficiency by imposing enormous costs on providing physical and human resources, and for measuring and monitoring schooling outcomes. Many studies have shown that small schools lead to increase in per-child expenditure, create distributional inefficiencies, poor schooling quality, and breed schooling inequality among social groups. The per child expenditure on teacher salary in tiny schools (20 or fewer students) is about Rs78,000, almost eight times the average government schools, making them unviable in the long run.

Multi-grade teaching is common in small schools due to the difficulty in meeting teacher demands and increased cost, compromising schooling quality. In addition to completing the curriculum, teachers are expected to handle a multitude of administrative tasks, such as monitoring midday meals and maintaining attendance records. Teachers are also used for election duties and surveys. The burden of school management and administration is much higher in small schools than large schools. Moreover, teacher absenteeism further compounds the problem.

Aser (Annual Status of Education Report) surveys from 2005-14 have indicated a learning-level crisis in India in reading and mathematics. Due to low teaching inputs and infrastructural support, children in small schools are likely to have poor learning outcomes. Parents even from relatively poor backgrounds tend to avoid small schools if alternatives are available.

A closer look at small and tiny schools reveals startling realities about the challenges they face. In a pilot study in Karnataka (conducted with K. Vijayanti of the Akshara Foundation), we came face to face with several small schools and the challenges faced by their teachers and students. Small and tiny government schools could be seen in almost every district we visited, although the geographical spread and density of schools varied considerably between rural, urban and tribal areas.

In a government higher primary school in Vagata (about 40km from Bengaluru city), in Bengaluru rural, the total enrolment in [classes I-VII declined from 134 in 2014-15 to 96 in 2016-17](#). The school register of 2017-18 showed even lower enrolment, of 82 students. On the day of our visit, only about 60 students were attending classes. These students were mostly children from the Scheduled Castes or Muslim community. The upper class has largely left the public school system. Four teachers have been appointed to the school, out of which three were present on the day of the visit. The head teacher was busy managing school affairs, effectively leaving only two teachers to teach seven classes.

The story of this school repeats in many small schools in the surrounding area. Teachers quote multiple reasons for this dwindling enrolment, such as availability of low-cost private schools in the surrounding area, rise in admissions under the "right to education" quota in private schools, and parental demand for English-medium schools. They lament that empty rooms leave them with no

motivation to teach. For the remaining few students, a single teacher is expected to teach 15-20 subjects for three to five classes, along with other administrative duties.

Changing perception about public schooling is essential for its survival. Restructuring the school systems by consolidating small schools in close proximity would bring efficiency by pooling students and teachers, without compromising access. This would result in better utilization of resources, and monitoring. The school management committees should be made functional with the effective participation of parents in monitoring school activities, and empowered to take financial decisions. The medium of instruction, instead of being strictly vernacular, can combine with English from the early stages.

There are a few examples where the trend of dwindling enrolment has been reversed, largely when concerted efforts were made to make schools functional. Within the government school systems, Navodaya Vidyalayas and Kendriya Vidyalayas have better teaching and infrastructural resources, show better learning outcomes, and continue to remain in demand. Where government and civil society have worked hard to make schools functional with adequate infrastructure, teachers have adopted sound pedagogical practices. Scaling and replicating such initiatives needs careful restructuring of the entire schooling system.

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