

NEEDED, EDUCATION DATA THAT ENGAGES THE POOR PARENT

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

'Data on school infrastructure at the district level, or learning levels at the State level cannot galvanise the masses' | Photo Credit: FARIHA FAROOQUI

When the children of the poor cannot read and write, when they do not play and dance in school, can the poor speak and demand change? We gather data on enrolments, retention, learning, infrastructure, and teacher training to understand the state of our public school system. But is data enough to inspire transformative change?

The case of Rajasthan is intriguing. Media writings in recent years have variously highlighted the marked fall or improvement in learning outcomes, depending on the dataset being referred to — the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) which is led by the non-governmental organisation, Pratham, or the National Achievement Survey (NAS) which is led by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). According to ASER 2019 data, Rajasthan was among the bottom five States in learning levels, while in NAS 2017, Rajasthan was among the top performers. Valid as this debate is, it has limited resonance for the ultimate end-user of a government school, i.e. the parent. Much like the Public Report on Basic Education (PROBE) in India of 1999 which highlighted the very poor state of government school infrastructure — shocking the education community in India — these debates do not involve school users.

Data on school education is collected to measure and monitor, fix flaws and reward achievements at the State and the national levels. Its end users are school administrators, government agencies, researchers, and civil society activists. Despite near consensus among policymakers and those who produce the data, that parents are one of the key constituencies of school data, and intense efforts to disseminate data among them, it is rarely used by poor parents. For them, schooling is about examination outcome, which is a proxy for learning, English language skills and a chance for secondary and graduate level degrees. Data on school infrastructure at the district level, or learning levels at the State level cannot galvanise the masses; at worse it can come across as a descriptor of the way things are in a government system — immutable, and hopeless.

To inspire transformation, data has to be linked with a vision of school education which addresses the anxieties and aspirations of parents, and is actionable at the level of governance closest to them, i.e. the local administrative and political system. The poor will speak when the data speaks to them and they can speak to the authorities empowered to act.

A national-level policy is just one form of an inspiring education vision. Ideally, it should encompass the essence of the vision of the people. And the vision will manifest itself differently at the national, State, district and local levels and exist in both policy and non-policy forms — for example, in the workings of say panchayat schools, when it focuses on learning and personality development among migrant children, or non-governmental organisation programmes strengthening teacher capacity for multilingual classrooms. Presently, there is no vision of education below the national level, least of all at those which engage the marginalised.

The district and school development plans introduced in national-level programmes such as the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) have largely

remained administrative practices. They were not representatives of parent-school consensus on what schooling means. Community-based consultative bodies such as the school management committees and parent-teacher committees could not become platforms to facilitate this.

A locally rooted education vision is one that emerges from social and political consensus on why a child needs a school education. Is it to reach college? Is it to get a job after school? Is it for personality development? Is it to be an active citizen? What does a top-class government elementary school mean? This vision has to be led by local political actors and become a central part of local politics which involves both formal actors such as political party workers, and non-formal ones such as community leaders. This does not mean that ideas, practices and policies from the national level are discarded as irrelevant and elitist. Elite ideas are not necessarily elitist. On the one hand, a vision of schooling will balance immediate, tangible, popularly understandable objectives such as reading, writing as well as livelihood relevant skills and knowledge. On the other, it will include long term and abstract objectives such as peer connections, negotiating social diversity, and curiosity for new knowledge and experiences.

There is nothing about the poor that suggests that they cannot imagine schooling beyond basic livelihood to include art and culture. It is the skill and dynamics of local politicians and politics, respectively, to uphold such a vision and ensure its implementation through contestation.

Presently, our school education is de-politicised, except for a few aspects such as history curriculum, language of instruction and so on. These energise national politics. Not local level contestations where some of the issues are rather settled, parents want English language competency for their children, and what they learn in history is not as worthy as maths.

It is only when data is connected with a locally developed and politically owned vision of school education that it will move beyond the administrator and the activist. Social welfare is about people, and their participation has to be simple, intuitive and energetic. If the right systems of governance and authority are designed and tools to engage with them are made available, the poor will speak up. What we lack and need is data which can hold the local vision of education and local actors accountable as much as the one we have right now, which focuses on the national one. Why should a 30-year-old parent in Bundi district in Rajasthan care whether her district had contradictory results on learning surveys of ASER and NAS? The data we collect assumes that she does not need to. It is not her business.

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