

A colleague in office coughs up Rs. 20,000 per month as school fees – for he wants his child in a school with great infrastructure, access to all kinds of sport and art, access to internet and technology; and since the school claims to build leaders of tomorrow. For some parents, a school's board examination result is the primary measure of quality. Many families consider the rigour and discipline of convent education as the benchmark; others aspire to send their children to English medium schools.

Given such diversity of aspiration, what form of quality education should we attempt to universalise?

To build universal perspective on Quality Education, it is important to understand quality, not in the context of varied individual desire, but in the context of the kind of society India aspires to be. Let me explain.

India was born again in 1947 with the promise of democracy. The premise of democracy is that every citizen is intrinsically and equally worthy. It presumes each person is independent in his/her ability to think, act and live. It believes each citizen is capable of seeing the ethic of equity, the essentiality of diversity, the ethos of justice, and is thus driven to social action.

If education is charged with the aim of creating such a society, then one can arrive at the touchstones of quality – an education that is equitable; an education that helps children develop into independent thinkers, creators and actors; and an education that embodies them with the spirit of social sensitivity and action.

### **Some assumptions**

Before we begin to look for solutions, I will make some assumptions.

The first assumption is that there are no simple solutions. Here is one example: In many states, there is a huge shortfall in the number of teachers needed in Government schools. This shortfall exists for two reasons: insufficient funds to pay teacher salary and lack of qualified teachers. The Government solution: para-teachers. Para-teachers are not professionally qualified, and they are paid minimum wages through temporary job contracts.

The second assumption is that the solution will be expensive and will take time. In the above example, the solution lies in opening more teacher training institutions, and in making the teaching profession more attractive to young people – by improving the work environment and by paying full salaries.

The third assumption is that we cannot plan the complete route to quality education, for we are talking of a truly macro system with enormous legacy and rigidity. What we need to do is to be cognizant of the goal, and to take confident first steps in the right direction. With every step we take, we need to evaluate where we have reached before planning the next step.

With these assumptions in mind, I will elaborate on some key issues which I think will trigger a chain of further action. These are a subset of the many actions we need to take to impact school quality.

### **1. Creating necessary Learning Conditions**

Despite the progress made in the past two decades, we are still a long way from offering every child quality access to a school with sufficient classrooms, toilets, drinking water, play ground, teachers, learning material, quality mid-day meals, timely text books, etc. Additionally, the concept of maintaining school infrastructure or recreating those that are dilapidated does not exist.

A recent newspaper report suggests this will cost us 8-10% of our GDP – close to three times current levels. The experience of other nations suggests there is no alternative to this kind of investment in education.

This is clearly within our control, and we have to fix this problem on priority without excuse – we should target for achieving this by 2007. I would strongly advocate using the Education Cess exclusively for such capital expenditure.

## 2. Resolving systemic, historic and cultural inequity

Business Today has thousands of readers. Let me hazard a guess – not one of us has a child studying in a Government school. This is the first symptom of inequity – that today there is a different school for each section of society.

The rich send their children to air-conditioned international schools; the urban middle class send their children to popular private schools; government servants send their children to Kendriya Vidyalayas; and if you are a parent above poverty line, you might attempt to send your child to an English medium school. This only accounts for a fraction of society, for 9 out of 10 children in India are enrolled in a Government school. If you are in a tribal area, the closest school might be a non-formal education centre with an unqualified teacher. If you are a migrant daily-wage worker, probably your child does not go to any school.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. To go deeper, we have to witness the second symptom of inequity – the classroom.

The first indicator is the unequal and often autocratic teacher-child relationship. Then there are the hierarchies amongst the children – defined by academic performance in urban private schools, and by gender and caste in rural government schools.

There is one other indicator, one that is not immediately apparent. Equity does not mean everyone is the same, but that each is equal though each is different. Respecting that each child is different, and customising the teaching-learning process to each child's requirement, is also a subtle form of equity. To me, this is the most powerful manifestation of true equity. Almost every classroom in our country (even those in elite, expensive and popular schools) fails this test.

To me, the idea of creating neighbourhood schools for all children, irrespective of socio-economic background is deeply appealing. Many would argue that societal inequity is at an extreme, and that this is no longer feasible. To me, the same reason offers strong argument for such schools. To begin with, it will force the Government system to drastically improve quality levels. Eventually, I feel it will unleash a wave of change towards better schools and a more equitable society.

## 3. Enhancing appropriateness of curriculum

To me, curriculum is a term that encompasses three questions – why we teach, what we teach, and how we teach. Here are some ideas, many of which are mirrored in the National Curriculum Framework of 2005.

### ***Why we teach***

Our schools have become so caught up in the act of teaching that they have lost track of why they exist in the first place. Today, it seems we teach so that students can do well in exams. Examinations have replaced all else to become the divine aim of education. Perhaps doing well in exams is a ticket to a good future, perhaps it is not. Yet this link is so strong in our minds, that we willingly sacrifice our children's curiosity and talents for "good results".

What will it take for our schools to re-vision their raison d'être? Schools have to become places that help children grow as creative, critical and caring citizens. Schools have to become places where our society lives its ideals.

### ***What we teach***

Closely related to this is the question of what we teach. The operating paradigm is that there is a body of knowledge that already exists in mutually exclusive disciplines such as science, social science, math, language, etc. Typically, this is a random collection of information (the battle of Panipat was fought in...), definitions (a trapezoid is...), laws (Newton's first law of motion is...), and algorithms ( $[a+b]^2 = a^2 + b^2 + 2ab$ ).

This forgets that the world around us is inherently whole. The tsunami is a study of geography, science, politics, management, finances, human relationships. Through the manicured disintegration of the world into subjects, topics, and chapters, we lose the essence of the synthesis and the inherent synergy of the whole.

We teach children that this body of knowledge is a static entity; that it has already been created and packaged – and the child's job is to possess this end product. It also devalues the importance of local knowledge that exists in the child's immediate environment.

A simpler malaise is the notion that art, craft and sport are extra-curricular activities – as if they only lie on the fence of existence.

### **How we teach**

Finally, the question of how we teach. We teach for examinations that test the student's ability to recall information/algorithms. Hence, invariably teaching becomes a didactic and mechanical one-way process – and children respond to this with rote learning.

True learning happens when children construct their own meaning. One does not learn the laws of motion by remembering definitions. Rather, you learn when you observe motion, hypothesize, test, make inferences, validate, and so on. This process of learning by self-discovery, guided by the teacher, is what leads to true understanding. In turn, this will help the child become an independent thinker and learner.

## **4. Radical reengineering**

Today's top-down control structure of education management needs to be replaced with a structure with the child at the centre. For the teacher, the child's context, status, preferences and interests becomes the primary input to develop curriculum. The school and community, in turn, support the teacher with physical and developmental resources that the teacher requires. The local government official now supports and mentors the schools; he stops being a controller. In this flat concentric structure, management, autonomy and accountability shifts to the school.

Creating conditions for such autonomy and accountability is not an easy process. Especially in the current hierarchical, top-down, ruthless bureaucratic system. This issue needs to be addressed at multiple levels:

*Shifts in the mindset:* From activity and program orientation to outcome orientation, from inward focus to stakeholder focus, from top-down control to systemic mentoring and support.

*Openness and transparency:* Make outcomes of the school, including teacher performance, transparent to the community. Create a culture of openness throughout the system.

*Unity of action:* Align the many components of the education delivery organisation – such as the administration, academic structure, school committee and panchayat – to achieve a well integrated action towards excellence in delivery.

*Continuous capacity building:* Target continuous development of the people responsible for delivering education – the education functionaries, teachers, school leaders, community members.

### **A final word**

India has a rich tradition of leaders who dreamt big and dreamt ahead of their times. Over the past decades, however, I feel we have become a reactionary society. This will not do.

If we would like to achieve universal quality education, as a nation, we have to dream big again. We will need to act with vision. And we have to act with the same kind of courage and commitment we demonstrated during our years of struggle for freedom. And yes, we must never compromise on our Constitutional values.

## **Azim H. Premji**

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