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Para-teacher scheme and quality education for all in India: policy perspectives and challenges for school effectiveness

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Improvement in the quality, efficiency, and equity of education, to a considerable extent, depends on the nexus of teaching and learning, which is in turn influenced by the quality of teachers. The teacher has been identified as the single most important factor influencing the quality of education by the Indian Education Commission and the National Policy on Education. Consequently, the government of India, like that of many other developing countries, has been trying to meet the challenge of improving the quality of education by improving teacher quality on several fronts—by raising pre-service education requirements, improving teacher training, increasing the diversity of the teaching force and promoting stronger participation by local government and community organizations. However, the appointment of contract teachers, popularly termed as ‘para-teachers’, in the primary education sector at a mass level raises serious question regarding the quality of education at primary level, as in the majority of schemes the academic and professional qualifications for these teachers have been relaxed and lowered as compared to those of regular teachers. They are also paid less. Therefore, a peculiar situation is prevailing in India’s primary schools where we have two sets of teachers appointed as ‘regular’ and ‘para-teachers’ working in the same school and performing the same duties, but are governed by different service conditions. This situation raises questions such as ‘Can India aspire to quality education and school effectiveness in such a situation?’, ‘Who are these para-teachers, what is the rationale behind their appointment and how widespread is the practice?’ These and other important concerns are discussed in this paper, and the implications identified for school effectiveness and quality of primary education in India.

Introduction

Vygotsky’s (1978) socio-cultural theory of learning entails that learning occurs through social interactions as learners engage in culturally meaningful, productive activity with the responsive assistance of a more competent other. There is ample

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research evidence to indicate that teachers and students who share a common primary language, cultural understanding and experiences may be better able to develop inter subjectivity necessary for effective meditation. It is also empirically established that teachers' lack of knowledge of students' languages, cultures and communities results in deficiency of perspective and inhibits the development of close relationships with students. Thus the relationships between minority children and teachers have often been reported as strained (McQuillan, 1981; Heath, 1983; Phillips, 1983; Valenzuela, 1999), with Valenzuela (1999), for example, finding that the majority of the Mexican and Chicano students in her study believed that their teachers did not care about them because they failed to address the students' broader needs and social concerns.

The underlying philosophy behind the appointment of para-teachers in various countries, including the para-teacher scheme in India, has been that a local person appointed as teacher is better able to establish a good rapport with the local community. Monzo and Rueda (2001) working with Latino para-educators found that sharing the culture, language, and experiences of their students helped them to relate with students in meaningful ways. These para-educators are generally members of the same or similar community in which they teach and therefore share many of the experiences and cultural practices of their students, including their primary languages and cultural practices. In India, the state of Rajasthan has been able to overcome the problem of teacher shortage and teacher absenteeism through these para-professionals under the 'Shiksha Karmi Project', which is also the origin of the para-teacher scheme in the country.

The use of para-professionals/educators in the field of education is not new as both developed and developing countries utilize the services of these professionals, though the context and their service conditions differ widely. A decade ago the report of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty First Century (1996) recommended using members of the community as auxiliary teachers or para-professionals within the school system as one form of community participation. The report further highlighted the fact that the use of a teacher recruited from the community to work alongside a government appointed teacher had proved to be very successful in countries like Guinea, and Zimbabwe. Para-teachers can also be found in developed countries like the USA and UK. But the context in which para-teachers are used in developed and developing countries is entirely different even if the basic principle remains the same. The 'Project PARA' of the University of Nebraska Lincoln (UNL), for instance, defines para-teacher as 'an individual who serves under the direction of a teacher as an assistant in the educational process'. The project considers para-educators as a viable means for enriching services to students if programmes are systematically planned and personnel are properly trained.

The use of the term 'para-educators' by Monzo and Rueda (2001) indicates school personnel hired to assist directly students in the classroom. Often they are referred to as teaching assistants, para-professionals, or instructional aides. Para-educators in many developed countries are being employed in increasing numbers as a means of extending services to students, in addition to the teachers, and they have

well defined roles and responsibilities. The 'Project PARA' clearly delineates the roles and responsibilities of a para-educator, and describes certain responsibilities which these professionals are not allowed to perform independently. This includes, among other responsibilities, not to be solely responsible for a classroom or a professional service, and not to substitute for a regular teacher if they do not possess appropriate substitute teacher certificates.

In the UK teaching assistants or auxiliary teachers currently work alongside experienced and qualified teachers. Some teaching assistants are attached to a whole class while others may support one child or a small group of children with special needs. Their duties vary depending on the particular job and the age of the children; however, some of their duties include assisting individual children to complete tasks, supporting children in special areas of curriculum such as numeracy and helping with routine administrative tasks, etc. In addition the proposal that their responsibilities be considerably extended are currently the subject of debate.

However, para-teachers in India and other developing countries are appointed due to the compulsion of governments to provide basic education facilities to children in the most economical manner. Para-teachers in these countries are generally less well qualified than the regular teachers, and are also less well paid. These para-teachers work as full-time teachers in schools alongside a permanent teacher getting full scale salary for the same work. India at present has more than 500,000 para-teachers in a number of states, and in spite of serious concerns raised by different forums about the quality of education provided by these teachers the scheme has flourished and the majority of states in the country have para-teachers.

The para-teacher scheme in India: the evolution and rationale

The para-teacher scheme in India has evolved in different states to meet the constitutional obligation of free and compulsory education to each and every child of the country in the six to 14 years age group. A quick glance at the primary education scenario in India reveals that it is 'a mixed bag of glaring gaps and remarkable successes'. While the literacy rate of the country has reported a sharp increase from a mere 18.39% in 1950–1951 to 65.38% in 2000–2001, according to the Tenth Five Year Plan (2002–2007) even after 50 years of planned efforts in the sector of education, one third of the population, or nearly 300 million persons in the age group seven years and above, are illiterate in the country. Forty-two million children in the country in the age group six to 14 years still do not attend schools. In addition, there are problems related to high dropout rates, low level of achievement, low participation of children coming from various underprivileged sections of society such as Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and girls, etc. Approximately 16.64% areas of the country still do not have the facilities of primary schooling. There are also other systemic issues like inadequate school infrastructure, non-availability of teachers in remote rural, hilly, and tribal areas, high teacher absenteeism, large scale teacher vacancies, and inadequate allocation of resources for education.

In addition, in spite of impressive increase in the number of primary school teachers from 538,000 in 1950–1951 to 1,809,661 in 2002, the national average for the number of qualified teachers in government-managed primary schools has only been 2.47. The Operation Blackboard Scheme (OB) initiated in 1987 envisaged the provision of at least two teachers at the primary level. But 16.29% schools in the country still do not have two teachers. There are state wise variations in the average number of teachers also. Thus while Kerala has an average of 6.04 teachers in primary schools, in the states of Bihar (1.93 teachers), Jharkhand (1.83), and Rajasthan (1.98) the average number of teachers is even lower than two. Uttar Pradesh has the highest number of teachers in primary schools (0.27 million) which accounts for 17% of the total primary teachers in the country, but still faces difficulty in providing even a single teacher in 921 of its primary schools. Incidentally these are also the states which have a low literacy rates, a high teacher–pupil ratio and high dropout rates among students at the primary level. These states, therefore, consider para-teacher scheme as a powerful means to overcome teacher shortage, and fulfil the promise of Education for All.

The genesis of contract teachers at primary level, popularly known as ‘para-teachers’, lies in these circumstances which were prevailing in different states, and the constitutional obligation of the state to make education accessible to each and every child. Its origin may be traced to the ‘Shiksha Karmi Project’ in the state of Rajasthan, undertaken in the 1980s with assistance from the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA). The state education department found it difficult to deploy qualified teachers in remote and difficult areas of the state. The outsiders, and city-based teachers if posted in such areas, would give up their job on account of inconvenient living conditions in the remote areas, and if they managed to stay they found it difficult to establish rapport with the local community due to differences in their cultural backgrounds. This situation had arisen due to non-availability of qualified local youths in the remote areas. Therefore, the Shiksha Karmi project envisaged engaging local educated youths, though academically under-qualified, and professionally untrained, as teachers. These teachers who were provided training of short duration after recruitment received a monthly honorarium at a fixed rate. Soon Himachal Pradesh also utilized the services of these local contract teachers known as ‘volunteer teachers’. The scheme was popularized by the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and implemented in selected states of the country in the 1990s with international assistance and the ‘Education Guarantee Scheme’ of Madhya Pradesh towards the later part of the 1990s.

These schemes served twin purposes, i.e. overcoming the problem of teacher shortage and teacher absenteeism in rural and remote areas, and providing employment opportunities to local youths who were otherwise not qualified for a regular teacher’s job. But the scheme soon caught the attention of other state governments and became so popular that almost every state now has para-teachers working in regular schools.

The term ‘para-teacher’ is thus used in the Indian context as an umbrella term encompassing teachers working in formal institutions, as well as non-formal

institutions. It broadly refers to teachers recruited by the community (though not always) on a contractual basis and on a fixed honorarium to meet the demand of basic education. There have been varied reasons for the appointment of para-teachers in different states. Consequently, while in some states these teachers are appointed in small habitations in remote and tribal areas, which do not qualify for a formal school, in others these teachers are appointed in regular schools to ensure a minimum of two teachers in the school. In some cases para-teachers are appointed to improve the teacher–pupil ratio due to the shortage of teachers. This shortage arises either due to the non-availability or unwillingness of teachers to serve in schools located in rural or remote areas, and/or the non-recruitment of teachers by the state government. Para-teachers are appointed in these schools, as it does not put any significant financial burden on the state exchequer in the financially starved states. Schemes like ‘Guruji’ of Madhya Pradesh, ‘Vidhya Sahayak’ of Gujarat and ‘Shikshan Sevaks’ of Maharashtra consider the appointment of para-teachers as an interim measure to meet the financial paucity of the state. Madhya Pradesh has even adopted the policy to recruit primary teachers on a short-term contract basis only, and the government makes no regular appointment.

The evolution and growth of para-teachers in different states, therefore, is due to a variety of factors such as:

- Providing universal access to all children to meet the challenges of universal primary education.
- Providing an alternative mode of education for remote habitations that do not qualify for formal school and have no school within an approachable distance of 1 km.
- Overcoming the shortage of teachers in schools; for instance, there are still quite a few single teacher schools in different states in spite of the efforts made under the Operation Blackboard Scheme to provide at least two teachers in primary schools.
- Overcoming the problems of teacher recruitment due to the unwillingness of urban teachers to serve in rural or remote areas.
- The failure of the state government to fill large numbers of vacancies for primary teachers in spite of availability of fully qualified teachers, due to either financial reasons or their own apathy towards education.

Table 1 shows the statewide distribution of para-teachers in primary schools of the country.

It is noteworthy that para-teachers are not confined to primary and upper primary schools only, but a good number of them have been appointed at other levels of school education also. According to the Seventh All India Survey (2005) there are 104,894 para-teachers at the upper primary level, 37,950 at the secondary level, and 33,911 para-teachers at the higher secondary level. Across the country as many as 198,000 para-teachers were appointed in 2003, and in 45,387 schools only para-teachers were posted. The number of such schools was highest in Rajasthan (19,974) and Madhya Pradesh (15,704) as reported by Mehta (2003), which is 24.61% and 18.43% of the total schools in these states. It is followed by

Table 1. Teachers in primary schools

Sr. no.	State	Full-time teachers including principals and head masters (excluding para-teachers)	Para-teachers	Pupil-teacher ratio
	Andhra Pradesh	160,357	19,604	33
	Arunachal Pradesh	2833	385	27
	Assam	83,848	2264	30
	Bihar	76,143	2061	83
	Chhatisgarh	58,348	0	43
	Goa	2523	0	21
	Gujarat	12,309	5899	31
	Haryana	38,558	471	41
	Himachal Pradesh	26,069	2949	22
	Jammu & Kashmir	23,843	2496	19
	Jharkhand	29,120	1073	59
	Karnataka	58,901	2103	26
	Kerala	42,039	458	28
	Madhya Pradesh	146,766	0	36
	Maharashtra	116,604	6788	36
	Manipur	8245	0	21
	Meghalaya	14,220	177	22
	Mizoram	4557	71	19
	Nagaland	6865	146	12
	Orissa	79,177	6583	40
	Punjab	41,524	0	38
	Rajasthan	90,711	2003	41
	Sikkim	2704	42	12
	Tamil Nadu	118,196	5173	34
	Tripura	8857	94	23
	Uttar Pradesh	345,752	38,853	55
	Uttaranchal	34,635	2288	29
	West Bengal	150,329	926	53
	A&N Islands	782	6	17
	Chandigarh	299	1	34
	D&N Haveli	258	19	39
	Daman & Diu	258	19	39
	Delhi	22,277	334	40
	Lakshdweep	36	0	20
	Pondicharry	1754	0	21
	India	1,809,661	103,270	42

Source: Seventh All India School Education Survey, Provisional Statistics (as on 30 September 2002), NCERT, New Delhi, Delhi (2005).

Chhattisgarh (3662), Andhra Pradesh (2641), and Himachal Pradesh (1039). Incidentally, the states in the northern parts of the country are recruiting more para-teachers than the southern states. A high percentage of para-teachers (compared to fully qualified teachers) in primary schools is observed in the states of Andhra Pradesh (11.11%), Chhattisgarh (40.57%), Madhya Pradesh (51.89%), Rajasthan

(31.61%), and Himachal Pradesh (22.64%). Primary schools alone in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh have 36,593 and 80,509 para-teachers, respectively, which accounts for 20.90% and 45.98% of the total para-teachers in primary schools (Mehta, 2003).

Policy perspectives on para-teachers: a critique

The pivotal position of teachers in an educational system and in particular in nation building in general is critical. The UNESCO report (1996) made the strong observation that 'improving the quality of education depends on first improving the recruitment, training, social status, and conditions of work of teachers; they need the appropriate knowledge and skills, personal characteristics, professional prospects and motivation if they are to meet the expectations placed upon them'. The Indian Education Commission had expressed similar sentiments some 20 years previously in 1964–1966 arguing that no system of education can rise above the level of its teachers. Making an unequivocal statement, the commission asserted that a sound programme of professional education of teachers is essential for the qualitative improvement of education. Investment in teacher education can yield rich dividends because the financial resources required are small when measured against the resulting improvements in the education of millions. During the last half century of the post dependence period all the commissions and committees on education (such as the University Education Commission, 1948–1949, the Secondary Education Commission, 1952–1953, the Indian Education Commission, 1964–1966, various visiting teams and working groups of NCTE and UNESCO, the National Commissions of Teachers, the National Policy on Education, 1986 and its Programme of Action, Ramamurthy Commission, 1991, Janardhan Reddy Commission, and several state education commissions) have stressed the need for the professional preparation of teachers and continuous upgrading of their pedagogical knowledge, skills and attitudes so as to improve the quality of education. The National Policy on Education (NPE) maintains that 'teacher education is a continuous process, and pre-service and in-service are inseparable components of this continuum'. The policy strongly recommended improving the working conditions of teachers in schools, including their social and economic status, leaving no scope for recruitment of any teacher on contract basis. The para-teacher scheme, therefore, is the violation of very essence of NPE (1986), i.e. improving the quality and status of qualified teachers.

It is noteworthy that education in India is placed in the concurrent list of the constitution. This means that both state and central government can legislate on policies related to education; however, in the event of any conflict the central legislation shall prevail. In practice, the school system in India has been considered a state government's responsibility, and the role of central government is confined to formulating broad policy frameworks in order to ensure quality, and to set norms for utilization of resources through various centrally sponsored schemes from time to time. Consequently, while the policies related to the academic and professional

qualifications of teachers are decided by the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE)—a statutory body established through an Act of Parliament in 1993 to improve the quality and standard of teacher education—the policies related to recruitment and service conditions of qualified teachers, as well as para-teachers, are determined by state governments. Therefore, variations are observed in the para-teacher schemes of various states.

The para-teacher scheme has been promoted by the central government as a cost effective measure of overcoming the shortage of primary teachers, especially, in remote rural and hilly areas. The post-Jometien summit developments in India witnessed a large number of interventions to achieve the goals of UEE, such as the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Education for All) programme. DPEP popularized the practice of contract teachers on fixed honorarium. Later some policy documents at the national level, such as the 'Report of the National Committee of State Education Ministers' under the Chairmanship of the Minister of Human Resource Development aimed at developing the structure and outline of Implementing Universal Elementary Education in a 'Mission Mode' (1999), endorsed it. This document not only promotes the practice of using para-teacher, but also tries to justify the adoption of the practice of para-teachers. Referring to the problem of teacher shortage this committee maintains:

Lack of community control over teachers, teacher absenteeism, and low teacher motivation is often cited as reasons for not recruiting new teachers but for only concentrating on reducing wastage and internal inefficiency of the educational system. Even after making allowance for enrolment in unaided and unorganized private schools, the teacher shortage is very significant. It is on this account that the recruitment of para-teachers has to be considered a priority if all vacancies have to be filled up in shortest period of time. The issue of teachers/para-teacher recruitment has to be addressed by all states as the long term implications for the states. (pp. 22–23)

Interestingly the committee suggested the appointment of unqualified youths as para-teachers to overcome the shortage of teachers, totally ignoring the fact that although large scale vacancies of primary teachers are not being filled by the states, there are thousands of trained and qualified candidates available waiting for a placement. It might appear that the promise for quality education for all, therefore, has been compromised in the effort to impress the international community by merely raising the literacy percentage of the country.

The National Committee further ignored the suggestions made by an earlier committee—the Expert Group Report on Financial Requirements for Making Elementary Education a Fundamental Right, popularly known as the Majumdar Committee (1999), appointed to assess the 'financial requirements for making elementary education a fundamental right'—which severely criticized the practice of para-teachers as follows:

some of the states have been experimenting with Shiksha Karmi or Para-teachers. While promotion of local context and selection of personnel willing to serve in remote rural locations is to be encouraged, provision of para-teachers only as a means to reduce the costs of elementary education would not be fair. Ultimately, in the long run, the

argument for equal pay for equal work would catch up. While the Group felt that para-teachers could be useful in extremely remote locations, there should never be a national programme for recruiting para-teachers. (p. 34)

In addition the committee stated that:

Quality elementary schooling would require proper provisioning and a system of continuous human resource development for well trained, qualified, and well equipped teachers. Arrangement for improvement of educational qualification of teachers could be encouraged. The rigour of teacher selection, however, must be maintained with a high degree of community involvement in a transparent selection process. (p. 34)

However, this concern was totally ignored by the National Committee, which rationalizes the para-teacher scheme as:

meeting the demand for teachers in a manner that the state can afford. Appointment of pay scale teachers to fill up all teacher vacancies as per teacher pupil norms would require resources that state governments are finding increasingly difficult to meet. The economic argument for para-teachers is that provision of these teachers as per requirement is possible within the financial resources available with the states. The non-economic argument for para-teachers is that a locally selected youth, accountable to the local community, undertakes the duties of teaching children with much greater interest ... The quest for UEE as Fundamental Right signifies a certain sense of urgency in doing so. This urgency calls for appropriate modification in National Policy in order respond to local felt needs. The recruitment of para-teachers is a step in this direction. (pp. 22–23)

Hence the recommendations of this committee not only negates but also ignores totally the NPE (1986) which suggested the improvement of working conditions, and social and economic status of teachers.

The committee was well aware that the appointment of para-teachers on a lump sum emolument is sometimes criticized as an infringement of the principle of 'equal pay for equal work' inviting many litigations in different states, but it suggested the Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh models be used to resolve such problems. It is noteworthy that these models are not identical. Whilst Gujarat appoints fully qualified and trained candidates as para-teachers on fixed pay who are absorbed as regular teachers after a certain period of time, as and when vacancies arise, Madhya Pradesh has stopped appointing regular primary teachers altogether, and appoints only para-teachers called 'Guruji' with lower qualifications. But since the state has abolished the post of regular teachers, the qualified unemployed youths are left with no option but to accept the position of 'Guruji' on a fixed honorarium.

Even the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) scheme also endorsed the appointment and training of para-teachers, especially in remote hilly, rural and tribal areas. It stresses 'there will be "no compromise on standards, even though payments of less than the State pay scale, as an interim measure, may be adopted in states with large scale vacancies"'. The SSA document emphasized decentralization, and involvement of local governments in the recruitment of teachers and recommended that the 'Gujarat model of recruiting fully trained teachers on fixed pay, as an interim strategy, could be adopted in states with large scale teacher vacancies. SSA would like to improve the accountability of the teacher vis-à-vis the community without

diluting the standards for selection of teachers as laid down from time to time by the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE)' (p. 56).

This statement indicates the unwillingness of government to pay the full salary to teachers even though they are well qualified and trained. This conclusion further derives support from the Tenth Five Year Plan (2002–2007) which says steps would have to be initiated to fill all the existing vacancies of the teachers, 'though in a time bound manner, with defined responsibility to local bodies and communities, and to improve legal impediments in the recruitment of para-teachers'.

Therefore, the concerns of the Majumdar Committee notwithstanding the para-teacher schemes in various states are painted in a positive light and flourishing. This is also against the very spirit of the National Policy on Education (NPE, 1986) which left no scope for any such scheme as it has strongly recommended improving the working conditions, including the economic and social status, of teachers.

The educational and professional backgrounds of para-teachers

Para-teachers are generally local youths with prescribed minimum educational qualification, which in the majority of states is senior secondary, i.e. 12 years of school education, except for the Shiksha Karmi Project of Rajasthan where the qualification is as low as eight years of education. Pre-service training is not deemed necessary for these teachers, though Gujarat and Maharashtra are exceptions to this general trend as in both cases pre-service training is mandatory. These teachers are generally appointed by the Village Education Committee, and Village Head, and are therefore accountable to them. They have to undergo a mandatory induction level training—the duration of which varies from 20 to 40 days. They are given a fixed honorarium through the account of the Village Head, which is one fourth or even one fifth of what a regular teacher is paid for the same work, and their appointment is contracted for a period of nine to 11 months. In many states they have to furnish an undertaking that they would not seek regular appointment on the basis of their present appointment. These 'teachers', identified with different names in different states, are engaged in both formal and alternate schools, and have become an integral part of the primary education system. Though each state has different reasons to appoint these teachers, there are certain communalities in all schemes across various states. These are as follows:

- These teachers are paid a fixed honorarium, which is much lower than the full-time teacher's salary.
- In all the schemes para-teachers are appointed on a contract basis.
- Para-teachers, working in formal schools, are required to work as full-time teachers in the school even though they are paid less than such teachers.
- In the majority of cases the para-teachers are appointed from the local community by the Gram Panchayats/Village Education Committees (VEC).
- The honorarium to the para-teachers is usually paid by the local community.

In the majority of para-teacher schemes the essential teacher qualifications are relaxed, and so they are less qualified than the regular teachers. In a number of schemes the minimum qualification of para-teachers is senior secondary (class 12). However, in Rajasthan the qualification for para-teachers ('Shiksha Karmi') working under 'Shiksha Karmi Project' is as low as class VIII and class V, respectively.

Pre-service training is not considered essential for para-teachers. But the states of Gujarat, and Maharashtra have made it mandatory for these teachers. In almost all the states para-teachers are provided induction level training by the Block Resource Centre (BRC)/Cluster Resource Centre (CRC)/District Institute of Education and Training (DIET). The duration of training, however, varies from state to state. In Andhra Pradesh 'Vidhya Volunteers' are provided only seven days of induction level training, while the 'Shiksha Mitra', and Acharyaji' of Uttar Pradesh receive 30 days of induction training.

In all the states the official documents describe these teachers as volunteers who have joined with a desire to do social service and not to seek employment. The 'Guruji' scheme of Madhya Pradesh is the pioneer of this principle. However, field realities belie this claim, and the findings of whatever few empirical studies are available in this area suggest that unemployment forced most of the highly educated candidates to join as para-teachers (Mehta, 2003; Pandey & Raj Rani, 2003; Govinda & Josephine, 2004).

Pandey and Raj Rani (2003) examined the profiles of 373 para-teachers of Uttar Pradesh and reported 45% of the para-teachers as having a graduate degree, while 11.52% were post graduates. Mehta (2003) also arrived at similar conclusions and reported that para-teachers were better qualified than regular teachers. According to Mehta, of the 198,000 para-teachers of 461 districts of the country, more than half (56.0%) are graduate and above, compared to which only 48.56% regular primary school teachers are graduate and above. Only 2.44% para-teachers are educated below secondary level, compared to 4.25% regular primary school teachers below secondary level; 9.97% of primary school teachers are postgraduate as compared to 17.38% para-teachers, and a few para-teachers are even holders of M.Phils.

This data reflect the plight of educated youths who are forced to work on a meagre honorarium. The large percentage of highly qualified persons working as para-teachers also nullifies two major arguments put forth by the proponents of the scheme, i.e. local educated youths are not available in rural areas, and highly qualified candidates do not want to serve in these areas. In reality the financially starved states find this scheme a powerful alternative to appointing qualified teachers without putting too much additional burden to state exchequers, and use every opportunity to glorify the scheme, with impressive names, such as 'Shiksha Mitra' and 'Acharyaji' in Uttar Pradesh, 'Guruji' and 'Shiksha Karmi' in Madhya Pradesh, 'Vidya Sahayak' in Gujarat, and 'Vidhya Volunteers' in Andhra Pradesh. These teachers are also presented as totally devoted to the cause of serving children, highly motivated, and dedicated to their work. However, the field realities suggest that the fundamental rights of these teachers are denied by the government itself in terms of non-payment of equal wages for equal work, non-payment of honoraria directly to

their personal accounts, denial of any leave to them, including no provision of medical or maternity leave, as these teachers are appointed on *ad hoc* contracts.

Para-teachers and quality of education

The quality of education is determined by a variety of factors within and outside the education system, but teacher and teaching–learning processes in the classroom play a crucial role in maintaining quality.

The Indian government has pursued a fivefold strategy in the 1990s to improve the quality of education in general, and of basic education in particular. These include improvement in the provision of infrastructure and human resources for primary education; provision of improved curriculum and teaching–learning material; improvement in the quality of teaching–learning process through the introduction of child-centred pedagogy; attention to teachers capacity building; and an increased focus on specification and measurement of learners' achievement levels. Teachers and the quality of their teaching have been given high priority and importance in this context. One of the major objectives of DPEP, which popularized the scheme of para-teachers, had been ensuring the quality of education. However, by appointing under-qualified and untrained teachers, this objective was seriously neglected at the very onset of the scheme of DPEP.

Though the area of para-teachers has yet to catch the attention of many researchers so as to invite rigorous scholarly research study, a few attempts have been made to analyse the classroom processes and quality of teaching–learning in para-teacher schools. The studies undertaken in this area by the Public Report on Basic Education in India (PROBE, 1999), Bodha Shiksha Samiti (1999), Dayaram (2000), Pandey and Raj Rani (2003), and Govinda and Josephine (2004) lamented the poor quality of these teachers. PROBE (1999) complimented some of these teachers and reported that despite their lower qualifications and salaries Shiksha Karmis sometimes (though not always) work distinctly harder than regular teachers. It concluded that there might be several reasons for the better performance of Shiksha Karmis than regular teachers, such as the hope to get 'regularized' in the future, accountability to local community, careful selection of shiksha karmis, and their training and support. The report states some Shiksha Karmis reported quite frankly that their overriding hope was 'to become regular teachers, so that they could relax ever after'. This statement is quite revealing, and identifies the real motive of some of these teachers, despite all their sincerity and hard work. PROBE concluded that when Shiksha Karmis are left to their own devices, without a minimal support and accountability structure, they can be extremely slack, in particular those working in non-formal education.

Bodha Shiksha Samiti (1999) had undertaken an in depth study of the Shiksha Karmi Programme of Rajasthan; the Alternative Schooling Programme, the Education Gurentee Scheme and Shiksha Karmi Youjana of Madhya Pradesh, and Volunteer Teacher Scheme of Himachal Pradesh. The study, conducted on a sample of 32 para-teachers and 27 regular teachers (included only as referral point),

arrived at the conclusion that the performance of para-teachers was uniformly poor, but more so in the case of para-teachers having lower qualifications. In-service inputs also did not make any noticeable impact on the performance of para-teachers. The study also belied the claim that these teachers were happy to be seen as volunteers as it concluded that:

of all the para-teachers in the sample, not a single para-teacher was aware that she/he was doing voluntary work. Their voluntarism was limited to filling up forms, writing applications for villagers or giving advice whenever required, which they would have done in any case as members of the community. All of them spoke of a salary not honorarium; many complained that it was not commensurate with the work they did; and hoped that eventually their post would become permanent, and they would be absorbed as regular teachers. (p. 93)

Though the sample was too small to lend itself to any generalizations it reflects the reality and the mindset of people engaged in para-teachers' work. The aspiration to be 'regularized' some day appears to be the chief motivating factor for these teachers rather than a sense of voluntarism.

Similar conclusions have been arrived at in the study conducted by Pandey and Raj Rani (2003). Adopting a holistic approach, these researchers have comprehensively explored various facets of para-teachers' academic life—the professional support provided to these teachers, its quality, its impact on their classroom processes, and the problems they encounter in discharging their duties. The sample of this study was much larger, including 373 para-teachers, and observation of classroom processes of 45 para-teacher. The study found that the classroom transactions of these teachers remained dull and ineffective. The teaching–learning process was largely textbook-based and was neither child-centred nor activity-based. The whole teaching/learning process lacked understanding of content and pedagogy, and the enthusiasm, involvement, continuity, and dynamism required for quality improvement of education. In the absence of any formal orientation on the methodology of teaching classes III, IV and V, these teachers often evolved their own approaches, which were not always effective.

Officially the para-teacher schemes are being propagated as voluntary with a keen desire on the part of para-teacher to serve. However, the focused group discussions and personal interviews undertaken by the investigators with teachers reveal that these teachers aspired to a permanent and salaried job, and considered their present assignment as nothing more than a stepping-stone. This is natural, bearing in mind the high rate of unemployment in the country. The expectation to be 'regularized' in future motivates these teachers to be sincere, regular, and even tolerate their exploitation at the hands of Village Heads, such as non-payment of honorarium in their personal account, and non-payment of honorarium in time. In addition, the uncertainty regarding their future was another de-motivating and stressful factor for these para-teachers.

Ironically, although the government continues to praise the para-teachers scheme, the government also publishes reports which express serious concerns over the quality of education provided by these teachers. For instance, para 3.11 of the

Hundred Forty Ninth Report of parliamentary committee on demands for grants 2004–2005 of the Department of Elementary Education and Literacy (MHRD) presented to the Rajya Sabha on the 20 August 2004 states that the:

Committee is a little apprehensive about the feasibility of appointing education volunteer/para-teachers for imparting quality education to the children. The Committee strongly feels that a child needs to be tended under well-trained hands to initiate him into the art of learning. The Committee is aware of the fact that there was a problem in getting regular teachers in remote and inaccessible habitations. It, however, emphasizes the importance of trained teachers for child education. The Committee is happy to know that the Department had made a provision of pre-service induction/training as well as in service training of Education Volunteers even at block/cluster levels. But the Committee finds that due to a shortage of teachers, not to speak of trained teachers/qualified resource persons at block and cluster levels, the aims of the programme are not being achieved. (para 3.11, p. 6)

The committee further expressed its serious concerns regarding the non-appointment of teachers, as of 406,148 post only 138,090 (30%) were filled in the last two years. Against the fixed target for recruitment of teachers, states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal could achieve 0%, 22% and 21% of their targets, respectively. These are, incidentally, also the states with low literacy and large populations of children between six and 14 years. This reflects the apathy of states to address the issue of teacher recruitment, even if the funds are available. Later the state of West Bengal, in expressing its inability to pay regular salaries to the 70,000 teachers it needs, decided instead to hire contract/para-teachers at a salary of Rs.1000 per month against Rs.7000 to Rs10,000 a month for regular teachers, even though the education minister of the state felt 'having two sets of teachers doing similar jobs at such differential salary is not conducive to a healthy school atmosphere'. Appointing para-teachers as a cost effective measure under exploitative conditions of service is, even for the minister, clearly indefensible.

The government is also fully aware of this problem as reflected by the observations made by the Majumdar Committee (MHRD, 1999) and the 149 Standing Committee Report (2004), yet its inclusion in the Tenth Five Year Plan and Sarve Shiksha Abhiyan clearly indicates that the quality concerns are compromised and subverted by the government itself. In the case of Madhya Pradesh, the older policy of teacher appointments on a permanent basis as regular government employees has now been replaced by the appointment of teachers on a contract by district and block authorities. Since all the teachers are now appointed on a contract basis in the state, and the cadre of regular teacher has been done away with, the contract para-teacher system has in effect become the regular system. The government of Rajasthan has also taken a similar policy decision. Other states are also following in these footsteps.

Therefore, in the race to improve the literacy percentage, the quality issue has been seriously compromised and state governments put forth various arguments to justify the appointment of para-teachers ignoring all the concerns expressed by various committees from time to time and the suggestions of research findings. It is worthwhile here to mention a finding of the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005,

which should serve as reminder for Indian education policy makers if they really wish to improve the quality of education. Analysing the education system of Canada, Cuba, Finland and the Republic of Korea, which achieved high standards of education quality, the report concludes:

The experiences of these four countries suggest three common ... characteristics. The first concerns teachers. High esteem for teaching profession, thorough pre-service training and sometimes restrictive admission, and a well developed constellation of in-service training, plus mutual learning and teacher support are evident in all these countries. There are no concessions on teacher ... quality, even where teacher shortage exist. (p. 52)

It is high time, therefore, to review the policy of 'para-teachers' and adopt a more effective way of teacher recruitment to overcome the teacher shortage in India. The National Commission on Teachers I (1983) suggested the recruitment of untrained teacher with first class graduate/post graduate degree and then giving them on-the-job training to be followed by full training at the school as one alternative to meet the shortage of teachers which may be adopted in the country. We cannot ensure quality of education and effectiveness of schools until and unless we evolve a mechanism whereby teachers with merit and scholarship only are allowed to enter into the profession.

Conclusion

The promotion in India of the alternative measures of teacher recruitment promoted since early 1990s has pushed the issue of quality of education in the background. The government itself on pragmatic economic and bureaucratic grounds is justifying the para-teacher scheme. Large scale recruitment of para-teachers within the formal school system and an attitude of resignation towards pre-service programmes have become an integral part of state provisioning for elementary education, which can create serious problems of quality and equity in education, besides creating differential kinds of inequalities among teachers themselves. There is also a general sense of dissatisfaction among various stakeholders that second class options are being passed on to the poorer sections of the society, thereby widening the gap between the rich and well educated and the poor and poorly educated children. By accepting the scheme of para-teachers the government is encouraging the states to evade their responsibilities of building a strong cadre of qualified teachers. The trend has diluted the identity of the teacher as a professional. The para-teacher scheme may serve the purpose of UEE in far flung, remote rural and hilly areas as a viable option, but adopting this scheme to replace the regular teachers is detrimental for the quality of education and effectiveness of schools and needs to be avoided.

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