

Mahatma Night Degree College of Commerce (MNDC) caters to the need of the economically underprivileged students of the local area (Chembur, East), who are part time learners and are employed during the day. The college has been contributing to the upliftment of the academically and economically challenged section of society by empowering and equipping its students to become better citizens.

Most of the students of the college are first generation learners and as mentioned above belong to economically disadvantaged section of society. Some of the risk factors of this group include: poverty, low educational level of parents, the weak family structure, past academic pattern, and lack of academic experiences. Family background and domestic problems create an environment which negatively affects the value of education. Other academic risk factors are uncongenial atmosphere, poor comprehension, absenteeism, attitude and behavior of the teachers, and failure or repetition in the same class, etc. When students experience academic failure, they become frustrated with lack of achievement and end up alienated and experience exclusion leading to eventual dropout.

As a counselor of a night degree college, many students who come to visit me, come with stress related to finance, family problems and violence at home, both physical and emotional. The male students usually come with stress related to finances. Most of these students work during the day and come to college at night. Because of this they have problems with concentrating in class, absenteeism and inability to study as they do not get enough time to do so. These students leave from home early in the morning, to travel a few hours by public transport and then reach work. They leave from work only to come and attend college. Sometimes the students are not even able to reach in time for class. Once they come to college, they are physically and mental tired after a hard day's work leading to their lack in concentration and comprehension. For female students, most of them don't get time to study at home as most of them have to help at home and finish household chores. The female students who are working face the same problems as the boys. Some of them face the additional burden of finishing household chores before they leave for work and after they come home at night, leaving them with no time to study or even for themselves. Many of the students have to stay at home and fend for themselves and their younger siblings while their parents work long hours. This may lead to lack of interaction with other students their age leading to low social skills.

Another issue seen in the students is that of violence at home. Many students, who visit me, come with family problems. They have spoken to me about violence between their parents. This means that the father physically abuses the mother. In most of the cases the father is an alcoholic. This further leads to a lack of finances. Some students both boys and girls have come with problems related to being victims of physical violence themselves by their father. From this we can conclude that there are weak attachments between the parents and children typically seen in poor families. This further leads to insecurity, fear and lack of confidence during adolescent years. Many girl students who are victims of violence are not only battered by their father but also by their elder/ younger brothers. The cause of this is based on the traditional and conservative view of gender as seen in India- meaning that the place of a girl/ woman is at home and of taking care of others. Most often the fathers and the brothers find some reason or the other like coming late from college, having friends of the other sex etc and physically abuse the girls.

Another issue the girls face is that of emotional violence. The female students because of family issues, domestic violence, and threats by parents that they will stop her education and get her married, face a lot of emotional violence. They are extremely stressed as they want to complete their education but are always living in the fear that their parents will stop their education.

One student came to me seeking counseling as she was molested for many years by her uncle. The student was emotionally burdened with fear and guilt. She shared that she had never spoken about this to any one as she did not want the family to fight. She was also scared that her parents and especially her mother would not believe her and only blame her. She shared that sexual violence started when she was very young and lasted for a few years. At the beginning she would not understand what was happening, however later on when she understood, she was too scared to ask him to stop. The violence stopped when her uncle left for another city.

Other problems that students in the college face are logistical in nature. Most of the students live in the slum areas in and around Chembur and Kurla. Their houses are very small and they have large families. This means that they do not get enough place and silence to study. Some students shared that by the time everyone in their house finishes eating and watching TV, they want to switch off the lights and sleep. So they do not have any place to study. A few students shared that they study in the corridor light outside their house.

Many of the students, because lack of time, less English skills, no basic understanding of concepts, end up failing their classes. This reduces their motivation to study further, sometime leading to dropouts.

As far as the social space where the students live, it is important to understand that slums in Mumbai have a high political affiliation. Most of the boys are associated to mandal groups and political parties. This means that there is a lot of groupism, manipulation by local political leaders and sometimes even physical violence involved.

Many students because of the problems they face, family issues etc, have a low self esteem and lack confidence to face other people. Another factor adding to this is their lack of communication skill especially that in the case of English speaking. The students know and understand that they cannot compete with other students from other colleges and hence they will always be working at lower levels in organizations and thus most often won't be able to change their economic status. This is a real blow on their esteem and it leads to the development of a self-depreciating attitude. Because of this the students feel that there is no use in studying as there won't be any change in their status.

Educational Structure in India

The ever widening gap that we see between the rich and the poor in India is not only seen in the economic sphere but also in education. While Indian institutes of management and technology are world-class, primary and secondary schools, particularly in semi urban rural areas, face severe challenges.

The picture of education and especially primary education in India is dismal. According to 2011 census, literacy in India is 74.04%. In other words, nearly a quarter of parents are still illiterate. Their motivation to send their child to school or to monitor their child in school is low. A high percentage of absent students, significant absenteeism of teachers as well, discriminatory treatment of children from economically and socially disadvantaged background, and general dissatisfaction of parents is widely seen.

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) published every year by Pratham has brought the issue of quality of education to the center stage. Half of the children in schools are nowhere near their class-age appropriate learning levels. The challenges of quality of education are many – lack of understanding by children and parents, lack of appropriate tools in the hands of parents and community, lack of monitoring by authorities and more. According to the ASER of 2012, out of all rural children enrolled in standard five, only half can fluently read text from a standard two textbook. In arithmetic, only half of all standard five children can do a basic two-digit subtraction problem with the arithmetic operation of borrowing—a skill that is expected in standard two. Those children who have reached the fifth standard and do not have the fundamental skills of reading or arithmetic, there are very serious risks of not gaining much from continuing in school and completing eight years of schooling. Using ASER figures, we estimate that over 100 million children in India are two or more years below their grade level. Under the current circumstances, such children are very unlikely to reach the levels of capability expected of children after eight years of schooling. This may be at the root of why children are not learning.

Going back to the typical fifth standard classroom, try to imagine the challenge for the teacher. In our typical school, the fifth standard teacher uses the fifth standard textbook, trying to cover the material and activities that the textbook lays out. But whom should she teach? And how should she do it? Should she focus on those children who have basic skills, who are more likely to attend school regularly and, are therefore, easier to teach? What should she do with the other

half of the class who are not even at standard one or two level? This is a problem faced by almost all primary school teachers. Another problem with the system is the typical Indian schools focuses on completing the curriculum and are not structured to provide extra help to children who are not moving ahead at the expected pace or to those who are falling behind. Without the learning support that is critical, a large fraction of Indian children slip through the cracks. The problem is made worse by textbooks and curriculum whose pace and content accelerates through the primary school years.

One of the biggest challenges for improving learning outcomes is the numerous gaps in the system. Some schools continue to lack adequate infrastructure; several states still face a severe shortage of teachers. Many will complain about the poor quality of institutional support for teachers' professional development.

The usual assumption is that if these gaps are filled, children will learn and learn well. Sadly, it appears as though educated citizens, education experts, planners and policymakers, Union, state and local governments do not see this problem. This "theory of change" explains the push from within the government as well as from outside to ensure the timely provision of adequate inputs, and to point out the urgent need to build institutions that support schools and teachers.

For quality improvement, we have to re-think about the idea, structure and system of primary education which have very crucial motivating effects on the students. The teaching-learning environment and quality of education are so unsatisfactory particularly in government controlled primary schools that teachers of those schools themselves prefer to arrange education for their children in a better run school in private sector. The elite and rich groups of the society or village enroll their children in private schools where quality is presumed to be far better than the government schools. So the clients of these public schools are the poorest of the poor, economically and socially downtrodden people. The stakeholders of these schools being weak and vulnerable cannot ensure accountability of the system for quality education. The elite groups are not concerned about this, as their children are safe in private schools. The marginal groups of the society or villages are not in a position to enroll their children in private schools which provide quality education. Due to the economic factor they have to enroll their children in government run primary schools where quality is very poor. So the children belonging to marginal groups are deprived from good quality education and as a result they can hardly climb ladder of development.

Although India has made great strides in economic development and is now the 4th largest economy (some reports put it as 3rd largest – after U.S and China), it is home to one-third of the world's poor. Poverty seriously affects the focus on education. Even though India has done commendable work in universalizing primary education and has near resolved the issue of access to schools and enrolment, the challenge of quality of education is still questionable.

Some Observations:

- Most of the primary schools have dilapidated buildings.
- The schools with buildings have insufficient accommodation.
- Students mostly sit on broken desks or mats.
- High pupil-teacher ratio.
- Textbooks for teachers, which contain the methods for teaching for every unit of the curriculum, are not provided in time.
- Teaching aids are very old. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is still not used for teaching in primary education which is recognized as very effective for learning.
- The teachers of public schools often participate in political activity or other profitable activity rather than concentrating on teaching.
- Most of rural areas of India have their own local dialect. In many states the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction is not followed strictly. This is particularly so in case of the students belonging to linguistic minorities. The students belonging to the linguistic minorities have to study in the language of the linguistic majority of the state.
- Political nature of appointment of the primary teachers is largely responsible for poor quality of teaching.
- Resource materials are never provided in adequate quantity.
- Community support is at the very low.
- Absence of basic facilities like toilets and clean drinking water.
- A high absentee rate of the students in primary school particularly in rural areas.
- Co-curricular activities have not been given due importance as the teachers of the primary schools particularly of public schools and rural areas consider them as wastage of valuable time. As a result, making learning a fun for the students is not done.

- Inspection system for primary education has become only a ritual.
- Curriculum of primary education is hardly matches the surroundings of the students in which they live. As a result, students often suffer from fish-out-of-water syndrome leading to a high drop-out rate.

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