

Schools Marginalise Children in Multiple ways: Language Policy, Right to Education Act and Classroom Practices in India

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THE CONTEXT: In India, some 30% children of above three years age are not attending any kind of pre-school. Only 48% of girls enroll in primary school. Retention rates in primary school are 74.92% and transition rates from primary to upper primary levels are 82.68%.

Education in India has always been a part of the political agenda of the dominant class and native languages and cultures of the socio-economically marginalised communities have been poorly served. Vast numbers of children are marginalised in multiple ways.

Children from ethnolinguistic minorities attending school in unfamiliar languages not only perform poorly but are bound to drop out. This is a significant challenge for the recently passed Right to Education Act, 2009, which provides a fundamental right to free and compulsory education to every Indian child in the 6-14-years age group.

CHALLENGES:

There is a long way to go to achieve universal primary education. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes¹ have a very high percentage of children dropping out of school. Dropout rates are 42.3% for Scheduled Tribe children and 34.2% for Scheduled Caste children.

Language Policy and Practice

India is a multilingual and multicultural society, with hundreds of languages. A three-language formula (for school) is a guiding principle but in practical terms tribal children struggle at the entry level.

Consider the case of *Korku* children from Maharashtra. Children of this community speak *Korku*, and understand *Hindi* but the medium of instruction in school is *Marathi* (the state language) and *English* is a compulsory subject in primary grades. The majority of teachers posted in this region speak Marathi and don't understand Korku.

In North-Eastern India, only Bodo, Garo and Khasi tribal languages are being used as a medium of instruction. In other parts, tribal children are being educated through state languages even with a huge number of schools containing more than 50 percent of children from the Scheduled Tribes group.

Right to Education Act, 2009

The act makes education a requirement rather than a privilege, however in practice the road ahead is still uphill. The use of mainstream languages in formal schooling such as English, Hindi and state languages is increasing enormously. There have been minimal efforts to prepare text books, learning materials in regional languages or to standardise local languages to facilitate a strong foundation of learning for disadvantaged children. Rather, states have been taking initiatives to introduce English as a medium of instruction and a compulsory subject from standard-1 instead of using a transitional approach helping children to shift slowly from mother tongue to language of school in primary classes. Currently fewer than 20 languages are being used as a medium of instruction.

The Right to Education Act does not put emphasis on language issues. It does not guarantee pre-school education for children below six years. There are still different school systems for different classes of people.

¹ In the Indian context these terms are acceptable and in standard use – also in official documents.

Teacher's social perceptions

Most teachers have pre-conceived notions about the un-educability of students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds and often make use of their family business, caste, native place, mother language as a tool to make insulting remarks about the children and their communities. Due to such discrimination, children hesitate to join activities, develop low self esteem and leave school.

No provision for migrant children

Schools do not provide for the fact that children of seasonal migrant workers often do not attend schools at the destination state/ near work sites because often the medium of instruction differs from one state to another.

THE WAY FORWARD

Given that the Right to Education Act 2009 does not focus on language, and that this is vital for the future of children, a new education policy needs to be designed.

+ Note, research references for this item are in the Powerpoint presentation and the full paper