



Expert View

Barriers such as dropouts and lack of access to Education impede on our progress as a nation. As a part of the **Certificate Course on Public Policy organised by CERSSE**, some participating students interviewed **Dr. R.S. Deshpande, Former-Director, Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore**, and sought his views on the issues of dropouts and accessibility of education at the primary and upper-primary levels, mainly in rural India. They also sought his expert opinion on whether the National Policy of Education 2020, addresses these issues. Here are the excerpts of the interview.

Students: *The Right to Education Act 2009 mentions Universal Access to Education, but India still faces a huge challenge of dealing with increasing number of dropout students, especially in rural areas. What according to you are the challenges faced by the Indian government in curtailing dropouts and ensuring universal access to education to all the children in India?*

RSD: There are four reasons for dropouts which the government has not been able to address till now: a) inadequate infrastructure in schools, b) poverty in rural areas and the number of hands needed to sustain the household/ livelihood system, c) schooling methodology, where we teach the children, and not make them learn, d) there is no change in textbooks, and information is out-dated.

Students: *As per the National Sample Survey study in 2017-2018, the dropout rates at the primary education level are 10.6 percent in rural areas and 7.8 percent in urban areas. At the upper primary education level, the dropout rates are 18.2 percent in rural areas and 15.2 percent in urban areas. Why do you think there is a difference between the urban and rural dropout rates?*

RSD: Poverty in rural areas is more dense than in urban areas. Secondly, school infrastructure is slightly better in urban areas, in comparison. Bad roads, no connectivity and low school density mark rural area schools. Harassment towards girls and lack of infrastructure add to the dropout gap between primary and upper primary levels, whether it is rural or urban. Needless to say that lack of good teaching and learning methodologies only furthers this gap, no matter at what level.

Students: *There have been various schemes introduced earlier by the government like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan and Midday Meal Schemes. However, they haven't been satisfying in curtailing dropouts. What according to you are the reasons for this?*

RSD: The philosophy of both these schemes is not to ensure retention of children in the schools. They focus only on making children visit schools. The child will visit the school in order to eat, but does not have an interest in learning. The same is for Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. The child is told that 'you come to school, and you will get the things'. What is not told is 'you come to

school, you learn, and then you will get these things'. The schemes are designed in a way which is not conducive to learning, that is what I feel.

Students: *NEP 2020 has a separate section to address drop outs and various measures have been pro- posed. How do you think NEP 2020 is different from the rest of the schemes introduced by the government in this direction?*

RSD: The NEP proposes the concept of learning which is British in its design. Montessori design says that the child should be in school at three years of age. In ancient India, and according to our scrip- tures, a child is supposed to play at the age of three years. If they come to school and play, that be- comes an institutional set up where the teacher teaches the rules of the game to play. That is not the concept of playing. Age 3 to 6 is the formation age and children should be encouraged to play, whether it is with numbers or alphabets or addition and subtraction. Only then children will have interest to attend school. The problem is that enrolment is done forcefully in rural areas and hence the rates are high. Due to the various schemes in place, teacher also says that children will get food in school, so the children attend only for the sake of meals and if an interest for learning is not devel- oped, the attendance rates are bound to decline.

Students: *Various measures are undertaken to ensure access to education to socio economically disadvan- taged groups earlier and a special mention of this has been made in the NEP 2020. Do you think the NEP will be the ray of hope that the socio economically disadvantaged groups have been looking for since ages?*

RSD: My viewpoint of the NEP is quite critical. I think they should have had teachers of all different levels come together to draft the NEP. Teaching and learning for the deprived classes requires a dif- ferent skill set. It requires identification with the students. Teachers have to be like parents. For them all should be children, irrespective of religious or economic background. Education is not schooling, but learning.

Students: *According to you, what does the NEP miss out on in the direction of curtailing dropouts? Do you have any suggestions with respect to this?*

RSD: Just like I said earlier, the dichotomy between a teacher and learner must be bridged. The give- and-take between teachers and students should be turned around to “we learn”, “we make mistakes”. This is where the NEP has missed, because the dichotomy between ‘learners and the learned’ re- mains. More individuals who are directly involved in schools and education systems and have a field level first- hand experience should have been a part of the policy making committee.

Students: *Do you have any final thoughts on the issue of dropouts in India?*

RSD: We need to give scholarships for good performances, 100 percent attendance, good behaviour etc. Being a voluntary teacher at a government school, I give cash prizes like this twice a year. If the government gives these prizes, the children’s parents will also be willing to send the children to school. You need to incentivise through monetary methods. Secondly, the dichotomy between teach- ers and students should go. Play and learn should be introduced.

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