



Declining Quality Of Primary Education In West Bengal: Challenges And Solutions

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Abstract

This has raised a concern of West Bengal in regards to the quality of primary education in the region despite the tremendous growth of enrollment, development of infrastructure, and policy interventions. Recent evaluations have shown that a high percentage of students in lower grades are not well equipped with basics in literacy and numeracy activities which is a sign of systemic failure in the processes of teaching-learning. In this paper, the significant issues that have contributed towards the decline are critically looked at which include teacher shortages, poor training, infrastructural disconnects, socio-economic hindrances, and administrative inefficiencies. Using the current reports, observations in the classroom, and secondary information, the research illuminates the collective effect of these factors as they negatively affect learning outcomes and increase educational inequalities especially in rural and disadvantaged communities.

The paper also gives a discussion of evidence-based solutions that can be used to restore the primary education system. These involve fortification of basic learning courses, timely hiring of teachers, professional development, school infrastructure and encouragement of parental and community involvement. They are focussed on the incorporation of technology, open governance, and inclusive practices in accordance with NEP 2020. It claims that learners should be subjected to holistic and multi-level reforms to gain meaningful and long-lasting reforms in the standard of learning. Finally, the paper recommends a team-based solution that entails the government agencies, the teaching fraternity, the communities, and the civil society to regain the trust and revive the credibility of primary education in West Bengal.

Keywords: West Bengal, learning outcomes, foundational literacy, Teacher shortages, NEP 2020, school infrastructure, learning governance, social-economic barriers to education, and quality education.

Introduction

Primary school is the basis of academic, social and emotional growth of a child. The state government in West Bengal has gone a long way in improving access by increasing school coverage, midday meals scheme, and several incentive programs. Nonetheless, the issues concerning the deteriorating level of learning have become more salient over the last several years. Various surveys show that Classes I-V have a significant number of students with poor reading and arithmetic skills, which is an indication of gaps in the basic learning. Long school shutdowns in the COVID-19 pandemic have also worsened these problems, with rural and disadvantaged students being affected disproportionately.

The loss of learning quality is not due to one factor only; on the contrary, it is a result of a set of structural, pedagogic and socio-economic difficulties. Lack of trained teacher, imbalance in teaching staff, adverse school facilities, insufficient professional training and community involvement all contribute to a considerable extent. It is important to know these challenges and find feasible, long term solutions in order to improve the primary education system. This paper sets out to critically evaluate the systemic causes of deterioration in the standard of education in West Bengal as well as recommend effective strategies that are in tandem with the contemporary pedagogical theories and policy guidelines including NEP 2020.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the recent situation of primary education in West Bengal.
2. To establish major gaps in learning among primary students.
3. To examine the problem of shortages of teachers and deployment.
4. To investigate how effective teacher training programs are.
5. To determine the effect of school infrastructure on the quality of learning.
6. To investigate socio-economic issues that have an impact on student attendance.
7. To measure the issue of administration and governance.
8. To examine the importance of parents and communities in school.
9. In order to examine the policy-level interventions that affect primary education.
10. To give viable and appropriate solutions to enhance learning outcomes.

Research Methodology

The research design of this study is a qualitative one through secondary analysis of data. The sources of information include government reports, educational surveys, journal articles, and the policy documents. The analysis is backed by classroom observations and case based insights.

▪ Main Body :Challenges:-

In West Bengal, there has been a significant increase in the enrolment rates, expansion of infrastructures and the provision of midday meals in the primary education system; the general quality of learning outcomes has been on a downward trend. There are a number of interconnected problems that contribute to this problem both in the teaching-learning processes as well as in the systemic functioning. Further examination will demonstrate structural, pedagogical, and socio-economic conditions, which in combination with each other, undermine the performance of primary education within the state.

Learning Gaps and Weak Underlying Skills.

Increasing learning gap among primary students is considered one of the greatest issues. There are numerous children in classes I-V with the deficiency of basic literacy and numeracy skills. It has been consistently demonstrated in annual surveys that a significant portion of the student body is illiterate when it comes to reading grade level texts or engaging in simple arithmetic. Poor initial preparatory skills result in compounded learning gaps in children as they advance to more advanced grades, which eventually make them lack confidence in academic work and overall performance. These gaps were further increased by frequent school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially among the rural and disadvantaged learners.

Teacher shortage and teacher distribution.

Another critical challenge is the lack of trained teachers, as well as uneven distribution. A large number of the government schools in rural or remote regions are run with a low number of teaching staff, which results in high pupil-teacher ratios. The concept of multi-grade teaching can hardly be avoided when two or more classes are assigned to one teacher at the same time. Moreover, the administrative and legal problems have resulted in long-term vacancies caused by the delays in the recruitment of teachers. This is further contributed by the unspecialized teachers in areas such as English and mathematics which results in poor performance.

Poor Teacher Preparation and development.

Professional growth among teachers is still underdeveloped and ineffective. The essential background knowledge of the primary teachers to child-centered, activity-based pedagogy is not well trained in accordance with national guidelines such as NEP 2020. Training initiatives tend to be non-practical, brief and do not involve a follow-up. Another problem is the lack of exposure and bad digital infrastructure that hinders the integration of ICT tools into classroom practices by teachers. The lack of regular enhancement of the skills does not allow teachers to meet the needs of various learners or learn the latest effective methods of teaching.

Weak Infrastructure and Educational Facility.

Most schools are poorly equipped even though there are those that do not have well-maintained classrooms, working toilets, potable water, libraries, and playgrounds that can be used. The lack of teaching-learning resources and accessibility to online sources also limit the achievement of engagement in the classroom. In other schools, overpopulated classes and improper ventilation is a hindrance to concentration. The difference between the infrastructure availability and its practical functionality is a long-standing problem, particularly in the economically backward districts.

Social-Economic impediments and Absenteeism.

In West Bengal, a big percentage of children are economically challenged. Irregular attendance is mostly caused by poverty, child labour, migration and unstable household conditions. A great number of children are first-generation learners, who do not receive academic support at home. Concentration and learning ability are also influenced by such issues as malnutrition and health problems. Girls living in certain societies also have other problems concerning the duties at home and early marriage, leading to intermittent schooling.

Policy Gaps and Administrative Inefficiencies.

There is a lack of proper administration because of the delays, poor monitoring and lack of consistency in the implementation of policies in the governance of primary education. The school inspections are not regular, and the process of data collection is not usually accurate. Infrastructure improvement or learning materials do not reach schools on time at times. There are also political factors that interfere with efficient operation such as political influence in teacher postings and hiring, bureaucratic red tape, etc. Schools will not have a lot of accountability mechanisms to ensure that they uphold academic standards.

Low Parental and Community involvement.

In most parts of West Bengal, the parental engagement in the learning of children is relatively low. Parents, particularly those belonging to the marginalized groups, are not usually aware of the significance of regular attendance, reading, and home-based academic assistance. School Management Committees (SMCs) are in existence yet their operation differs across the board, diminishing the level of participation amongst communities in the decision-making processes and school development.

- **Probable Solutions**

The deterioration in the quality of primary education in West Bengal is a complex phenomenon that needs a multi-dimensional solution that emphasizes on basic education, teacher development, bettering of infrastructure, and a socio-educational environment that is conducive. The solutions should be long-term systemic and school-level with the emphasis on the long-term sustainability and child-centered pedagogy.

Improving Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN).

Enhancing the outcomes in Classes I-III in learning has to be the starting point of improvement. Structured FLN programs that are aligned with NEP 2020 and NIPUN Bharat should be adopted by the state, with the focus on early reading, comprehension, and number sense and problem-solving. Learning gaps can be identified and addressed through the use of basic diagnostic instruments, periodic evaluations and remedial teaching. Learning can be made meaningful and child-friendly through the use of activity-based learning, storytelling, phonics and concrete manipulatives. Daily FLN blocks ought to be allocated in schools to facilitate a regular reinforcement.

Quick Recruitment and sound deployment of Teachers.

It is imperative to fill the vacancies in the teaching staff to lower the pupil-teacher ratios and eliminate the multi-grade teaching in one classroom. Digital systems can be used to facilitate a transparent and time-bound recruitment process that will help fill the posts fast. Regional shortages can be solved through rational deployment, which is a deployment of teachers according to need, as opposed to preferences. To enhance the quality of learning, appointment of specialized subject teachers in English, mathematics and inclusive education at the primary level can be used. Until the appointment of full-time teachers, para-teachers are supposed to be well trained and supported.

Ongoing Professional Experience and Improved Pedagogy.

Teacher training should change to being workshop-based to the permanent and practice-based professional training. There can be regular in-service training on the activity-based learning, formative assessment, inclusive pedagogy, and digital literacy to improve the quality of teaching. The development of resource centres at block levels where peers learn together, in demonstration classes, and mentor will aid the teachers reflect and make improvements. Increasing classroom interaction and innovation can be encouraged by encouraging teachers to work with local teaching-learning materials (TLMs) and use ICT tools.

Infrastructure Upgrade and Availability of Resources.

Physical environment of schools should be improved in order to have a positive learning experience. There should be provision of functional toilets, safe drinking water, electricity, libraries, and playgrounds. Blended learning can be facilitated by enhancing digital infrastructure, e.g. smart classrooms and tablets. The schools should get a timely funds to carry out the maintenance and acquisition of learning materials. Learning spaces can be stimulated by creating colorful and print-filled classrooms using charts, word walls, and displays of work by the students.

Improving Attendances and Minimizing Socio-Economic Obstacles.

Regular attendance can be enhanced with the help of community-based efforts. Making schemes such as midday meals, school health programs, free uniforms and scholarships more powerful may help ease the burden on the family. Migrant children, first-generation learners and children of marginalized communities require special outreach programs. Struggling learners can be assisted through bridge courses, home based learning kits and after school support centres. Further learning can be achieved through the cooperation with NGOs and local volunteers.

Increasing Monitoring, Governance and Accountability.

Proper governance is the key to sustainable improvement. Accountability can be improved by conducting regular school inspections, making decisions that are data-driven, and having an open reporting system. The leadership training is necessary to help the head teachers handle the school activities, observe learning, and maintain the relationship with the community. The provision of funds in time and easy administrative processes will make the running of schools at the school level smooth.

Public confidence can be restored through political impartiality in the procedure of hiring and transfer of teachers.

Parent and Community involvement should be increased.

Communities and parents have proven to be a crucial part of education of children. Greater learning partnerships can be achieved by conducting frequent parent-teacher meetings, literacy awareness and community reading programs. School Management Committee (SMC) should be imparted to be involved in the process of planning, monitoring, and mobilization of resources. Local mentorship programs and community libraries should be encouraged as a way of providing a favorable learning environment outside the classroom.

Conclusion

The problem of the deteriorating status of primary educational standards in West Bengal is indicative of systemic problems that need to be addressed urgently and on a long-term basis. Although there have been admirable gains by the state in the growth of access to schooling and enhanced basic infrastructure, such gains have failed to translate to good learning performance. The systematic deficiencies in the level of basic literacy and numeracy, poor teacher accessibility, lack of training, and socio-economic limitations remain the major obstacles to the overall efficiency of new education system. Also, bureaucracy, lack of policy consistency, and poor accountability systems also hamper school operations.

Nevertheless, the analysis also shows that the challenges are not impossible to overcome. Enhancement of the basic learning programs, making the process of teacher recruitment timely and transparent, increasing the process of continuous professional development, and improving the infrastructure of the school can help the quality of education to be raised to a completely new level. It is also vital that the community engagement and involvement of parents and specific support of disadvantaged learners are necessary. Integrating state efforts with national strategies like NEP 2020 can offer a precise guide on the overall reformation.

Finally, enriching the primary education in West Bengal will need a concerted effort between the policymakers, teachers, parents, and civil society. Developing the state can create a better education system that defines meaningful learning to every child by doing so in a way that is committed and accountable to the issues of both structural and pedagogical aspects.

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