

Education in rural areas: A matter of right

Education is an intrinsic value and must be available for all children through formal schools, whether rural or urban. The quality and content of education must have equal standards, regardless of diversities in location, culture, and the levels of development a particularly society is embedded in.

Regardless of equal rights for all children to have access to schools, whether rural or urban, in many developing societies one is struck by the large numbers of children who do not attend schools in the rural areas. This also has an impact on how schools are actually run in the countryside. Thus the quality and content of education in rural schools is largely dependent on removing all barriers to enable every child access to school.

Rural child labour – some misconceptions!

Children working in the agricultural sector constitute at least 80 percent of the child labour force in India and the world over. Indeed the rice, wheat and cereals we consume today are made from the sweat and toil of these children burnt under scorching heat. Even as they work, children are subject to hazards such as inhaling pesticides that shrink their lungs and give them dizziness and mental depression.

Agricultural work is seldom seen as being hazardous by policy-makers and adults at large. It seems as if these children blend with nature so well, under the blue sky, working on farms, herding sheep and cattle, that we do not want to disturb this poetic imagination. The idyllic picture is in fact untrue. With large numbers of school-going-age children out of school, it is inevitable that they join the labour force. The markets are always ready to absorb them as they are a source of cheap labour. Consequently, children from villages not only work on farms but are also trafficked to distant places to work in sweat shops and in the informal sector.

Traditional crafts versus rural children at school

Likewise, there is a tendency to romanticise the whole issue of traditional crafts. The view that is often expressed is that traditional crafts have for centuries sustained the rural economy with an efficiency which modern systems cannot achieve. As a result, it is believed that initiating a child to

the family profession as early as possible is beneficial to the child who will ultimately end up doing what he is likely to be best at, viz. the family profession. Taken to its logical conclusion, this approach implies that it is best for children to continue in their family profession. This is not too different from the traditional social system where certain professions were earmarked for certain communities.

In this approach, the choice of deciding their future is completely taken away from the children at a very early stage. The fallacy in this approach is that it ignores the fact that the rural society is replete with examples of individuals belonging to artisan families who have risen to very high levels outside their family profession and who, in all probability, would have been misfits if they had not changed their profession. The true nature of education is that it equips a person to make a calculated choice at the right time. It is this capacity of the child to decide his or her own future that we take away when we deny education in the name of providing secure employment.

Even the argument that a child initiated to the family craft at a young age picks up skills faster is not particularly true. In fact there is evidence to show that they do so much better after they achieve a certain proficiency in studies and after they complete at least secondary school education.

The approach of incorporating children into the family occupation at an early age views childhood as a process of converting a child into a worker and divides society into two broad categories: one comprising those who can afford to wait for their children to equip themselves before they face

Without a school leaving certificate children very often are misused for cheap labour force.



Dr Shantha Sinha



Photo: Sinha

Dr Shantha Sinha

Chairperson

National Commission for Protection of Child Rights

Founder MV Foundation

Hyderabad, Andra Pradesh, India

Shantha.Sinha@nic.in

Zusammenfassung

Alle Kinder müssen durch formelle Schulen auf dem Land ebenso wie in den Städten Zugang zu Bildung haben. Bildungsqualität und -inhalte müssen einheitlichen Standards entsprechen, unabhängig von geografischen und kulturellen Unterschieden und Entwicklungsstand. Während wir einerseits die Universalität der Bildung betonen, müssen wir jedoch andererseits auch auf die Besonderheiten der Region achten, in der ein Kind aufwächst. In den ländlichen Bildungseinrichtungen müssen Erfahrungen und der Reichtum einer Gesellschaft auf kreative Weise in die Lehrpläne eingebunden werden. Sie müssen die Kinder in die Lage versetzen, die Dynamik der ländlichen Gesellschaft, die Formen der Landnutzung und -bewirtschaftung und vieles mehr zu verstehen. In vielen Entwicklungsländern ist es bestürzend, wie viele Kinder in ländlichen Gegenden keine Schule besuchen. Ihr täglicher Überlebenskampf außerhalb der Schule beeinflusst auch die Art des Schulbetriebs auf dem Land. Qualität und Inhalt der Bildung in ländlichen Schulen hängen weitgehend davon ab, ob die Hindernisse beseitigt werden können, die Kindern den Zugang zu Schulen erschweren.

Resumen

La educación debe estar al alcance de todos los niños a través de escuelas formales, ya sean rurales o urbanas. La calidad y el contenido de la educación deben responder siempre a los mismos estándares, sin importar las diferencias de ubicación, cultura y niveles de desarrollo. Si bien celebramos la universalidad de la educación, es necesario al mismo tiempo apreciar las especificidades de la región en que crece cada niño. Los procesos de educación rural deben ser creativos para poder integrar las experiencias y la riqueza de la sociedad en los currículos escolares. Deben poder facultar al niño para entender la dinámica de la sociedad rural, sus patrones de uso de la tierra y de prácticas agrícolas, etc. Dicho esto, en muchas sociedades llama la atención el gran número de niños que no asisten a la escuela en áreas rurales. Los problemas cotidianos que marcan su existencia fuera de la escuela tienen un impacto en el manejo de las escuelas rurales. Los temas de calidad y contenido de la educación en las escuelas rurales dependen en gran medida de la remoción de todas las barreras, permitiendo de este modo que todos los niños puedan acceder a la educación escolar.

the challenges of adulthood, and the other comprising those who need to put their children to work as soon as possible so that they do not become a burden on society.

Rural girls' education

For the girls in the rural areas, working is a widely accepted way of life. Right from the age of five years, they are engaged to support their mothers, sometimes to carry water and at others to collect fuel and firewood. They routinely assist in the running of the kitchen and are almost invariably utilised to take care of younger siblings. Beside working on the farms, girls are also engaged to work in stone and lime quarries where they carry head loads of earth and rubble from pits. Few girls have spare time for play or for leisure, and the general refrain is that being a girl is only a preparatory stage for a more significant role as a wife and mother.

Perhaps the one institution that has had some impact on the life of the girl child, in recent times, is the school. While a large number of social and cultural factors adversely affect girls, the fact remains that going to school has the capacity to transform a girl's life in more ways than one. Apart from relieving the child from the drudgery of low-level repetitive work, it opens up avenues for the child's mental development and almost invariably delays marriage, an aspect that has crucial implications for the health of the child. Education is the best solution for the emancipation of girls.

All children in school and quality in education

As long as there is a tolerance of out-of-school children and school dropouts, there will be no pressure on the system to keep every child in school. This indirectly gives the

message that children may not learn and teachers need not perform because poor children would not continue school in any case. Given such an atmosphere, efforts to improve the quality of education to retain children in schools are infructuous. Thus, there is a weak provisioning of infrastructure, classrooms, reading material, and inaccessibility of schools. There is a general 'understanding approach' when school teachers seek transfer of services from rural to urban areas.

On the other hand, an inclusive education that retains every child in school as a matter of right would provoke imaginative education material and texts, as creativity and innovation alone would enable retention of all such children. Many aspects, such as what kind of education, how much of standardised curriculum should be used, what is the medium of instruction, and the need for local specific knowledge to comfort the children and enhance their horizons, have become real issues of discussion.

In this context there is a need to see rural society of today not as isolated entities but as socio-economic formations getting integrated into the world market as well as into the State's development policies and global networks. A good education in these societies must foster capacities of children for greater mobility and increase opportunities. It must give them confidence to deal with existing institutions without being overwhelmed by them. It must therefore equip them with language and culture for negotiating with structures of authority and power.

This process must at the same time empower the children to utilise their existing systems of knowledge and language thus giving them a sense of pride and self-respect. Such a blend of local and global education and democratisation of schools is possible only when every child is in school as a matter of right.