

Are we consolidating or destabilizing primary education?

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The anxiety of Govt. of Andhra Pradesh to restructure primary education and promote the foundation should be welcomed. Particularly in the context that two year old national education policy although given importance to primary education it has not come up with any new specifics beyond indicating in mid 2020 that up to class five it will be preschool and 6 to 8 is middle and 9-12 is high school. The AP govt.'s initiatives are specific in this regard, as reported in Sakshi news paper last fortnight. These initiatives deserve not only public sensitivities but involvement of parents and experts in that process.

In 2019, in my book 'As We Sow, So We Reap,' I discussed pre-school and primary years and schooling and pointed to certain missing links in empowering our children. This book since has been translated into Telugu, 'Taravelu Digi Vachina Vela,' reminds foundational aspects in the upbringing of our children and how woefully our education system has missed taking cognisance of these early years. I argued in that book that without considering pre primary years with elders and basing on our cultural roots and traditions in families, foundations of a generation cannot be any different. It is good that the AP govt. is considering "foundation schools." Foundation and fundamentals are beyond structure centric.

The proposals of govt. now include focus on foundation by bringing together Anganwadis with pre -primary-one and two levels and classes one and two of primary schools. And, integrate class 3,4, and 5 from primary and middle level into secondary high schools. It is 5+3+3+4 system. The anxiety of the govt. is to focus on fragile age group of four to eight as those years are known as crucial for the development of the brain. That school is not the only source in that foundational process has missed the concerns. Neither the criticality of early years nor the role of parents or families is emphasised.

Digitalisation of schools good initiative

Another good initiative of AP govt. announced in April is proposal to establish digital libraries in 1600 villages. This scheme cannot be viewed unconnected to restructuring primary education since the govt. also has intensified plans to deploy digital tools in schools. With no concern for the contents and a focus, the desired objectives cannot be achieved. These initiatives however cannot be viewed as unconnected to the larger trends. The foremost fundamental issue of all is our

national fixation. That is viewing education as a qualification “for employment” and there is no evidence of de-emphasising this fix on “jobs”. Six other larger concerns in the context of AP are briefly referred here.

First, why on literacy level Andhra Pradesh continues to remain below national average, even lower than Bihar? Why over the years we could not identify, despite so many surveys, the vulnerable ones and focus on those families and pockets of the state? One third or more of certain sections are still illiterate. Should that not be a priority? **Second**, why over the years the govt. schools are allowed to decline despite no fees, free books, uniforms, midday meal, trained teachers, infrastructure and to all this the govt. even has added more incentives like Amma Vodi, etc? Why private schools are allowed to mushroom as if the govt. abdicated its primary responsibility? The dilemma arising out of it could not be sincerely and effectively addressed. **Third**, why over the years so many teacher posts remain vacant as if there is a shortage. Only recently teacher vacancies have come down at least marginally from over 40,000 a few years ago.

Fourth, when the need is otherwise, budgetary allocations for education have been on continuous decline. The latest budget for 2021-22 had Rs. 24,624 crore against Rs. 32,618 crore for 2019-20. In percentage terms the budget allocation for education has come down from 16 in 2019-20 to 10 .7 in 2021-22. This is against 30 percent recommended by Kothari commission several years ago. Of course, that the situation is no better in most states should not be a consolation for AP. **Fifth**, despite so many professionals coming out annually and going abroad and making good name for themselves and the country, the decline in standards of education at primary and secondary levels has been going on unabated. But the govts. continue to talk about all out efforts to better. **Sixth**, despite penetration of television and that more than one third of viewers are children what has been the content priorities of channels and attempts of govt. to launch targeted school channels? There is no evidence of any change. Only recently some efforts were there in schools, as in AP, to promote book reading which has been amply proved to be a better way of motivating and empowering children.

Even more, certain contradictory trends in the country have been glaring. **First**, despite sensitivities, public policies are hardly discussed and transparency is maintained as if they are decisions to be taken solely by the party in power. **Second**, there is no local concern, involvement or engagement at grassroots with parents and children themselves in the functioning of the schools. **Third**, party centric politicalisation has crept into pre and primary level as never before and as if deliberately. Can we expect to make long lasting difference in school education without depoliticising?

3 visionary women who inspired my village

The story from my village, Mudunuru in krishna district of Andhra Pradesh, offers multiple insights relevant today. I have been describing my village as “Mugguru Ammala Mudunuru”. For, it was foresight of these three women which inspired the village nearly hundred years ago. All the three were widowed by then with no schooling but self motivated to do lasting-good for the village. Imagine three decades before a formal school started in the village, a library was established by an illiterate widow with books of well known Telugu writers of the time, including controversial social reformists like Chalam. The library literally fired the imagination of many young villagers. It was responsible for the village becoming a hub of freedom movement and for establishing world's first “Ethiest centre”. But there was neither her name or her photograph anywhere and very few knew even then who was responsible for that initiative. That library was also a place of interactive engagement with all ages and backgrounds and future leaders. The first community radio in the village was set up there and has become a news hub. A couple of decades later two other widows with similar background were responsible for the buildings of middle school and high school. Neither of these buildings is known by their names nor their pictures were there nor were they ever honoured. All such local initiatives had made a difference both qualitatively and quantitatively. Do we see such local initiatives now? How much are they allowed and even encouraged?

The governments are possessive of everything public even denying a role for citizen in the affairs as if more the govt the better. I refer to my own experience in my village over the years. Of five initiatives I took up over the years in only one case I could make some difference. The girls vocational centre for which I gave a bit of land and money to build to the MRO could be completed after vigorous follow-up for two years and after all that a revenue office was located in the building ignoring the primary purpose. Taking cue from that bitter experience, I built directly a pre primary school building in Harijanwada, thanks to the volunteers, this school is continuing. I had pursued a friend to build a school in Doosarpalem. My offer to build a library in place of depleting building could not be pursued as the concerned authority wants the money to be handed over to it which I was not willing as I was not sure. Similar is the case with the high school for which I got the design and offered the resource and the enlightened head master from the village even took it up. In this school I and my father have been giving scholarships and merit prizes for girls for nearly thirty years. I know many others who studied in the school also are doing and would like to do something more but could not.

Mudunuru experiment

Inspired by the library in the village I did a three year long “Mudunuru Experiment” in local middle school one year each, first with television and then a computer and then reading selected books and making the children take the books home. Contrary to the general impression, book reading made a lasting difference than the television or the computer even with 18 software programmes including songs and lessons supplementary to the syllabus. Two important points here are that we need to be concerned about the difference any initiative in school education and schooling of children in their outlook and perspective. Second, to make sure the difference is in empowering, initiatives in schools should first be experimental or tried on pilot basis. Today it is high time that initiatives being taken are consulted with stakeholders and assessed transparently, particularly those at pre, primary and secondary schooling.

I hereby sum up my insights from visiting schools in my village and in a few others annually for over 26 years. The real blooming of children happens from singing, story listening and playing games in the family and outside and from reading and sharing it. These activities offer lasting opportunities, more than structured learning formats. The role of childhood situations, interactions with parents and siblings during years before getting into a primary school is very important. As I discussed in my book the public policies of the countries which are being ranked high on happiness criteria, should remind us of our policies and practices.

(The birth anniversary of Dr. N. Bhaskara Rao's mother Nagulapalli Somidevamma is June 17)

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