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No Detention Policy: Rationale and Reality-An Appraisal

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Abstract

April 1, 2010 was a historic day for the people of India. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, popularly known as the Right to Education Act (RTE) '2009 came into force on that day. The right to education is now accorded the same legal status as the right to life as provided under Article 21A of the Indian Constitution. This entitles children to have the right to education enforced as a fundamental right. Every child between the age group of 6 to 14 years of age will get eight years of elementary education. Besides guaranteeing universal enrolment and retention, this act also looks forward to ensure quality education. To ensure this, the RTE Act, 2009 makes provision for "No Detention" policy. This policy ever since its introduction has remained in the center of controversy. Teachers, academicians, students and parents have blamed the policy for bringing down the quality of education in the country. The students now become cosmetically literate without any significant improvement in their educational standard. In the backdrop of these conflicting views, the present paper tries to delve deep into the rationale and objectives of the policy and the impact it has had on the quality of education across the country.

Key Words: *No detention, continuous and comprehensive evaluation, quality education, RTE, SSA, elementary education.*

Introduction: The constitution of free India that came into force in 1950, proposed to achieve universal elementary education within a period of ten years that is by 1960. But unfortunately the goal has not yet been achieved even today. Different projects have been undertaken at different times but it has remained an elusive goal. Of the initiatives, the most significant has been the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan launched in 2000. The flagship program has undoubtedly enhanced enrollment and retention of children in schools by means of infrastructural developments. But with the change in the global perspectives, the focus has shifted to quality improvement in education to meet the human resource demand and for the advancement of the society. Hence the Right to Education act 2009 came into effect on 1st April, 2010. The act proposes no detention up to class VIII to realize the goal of universalisation of elementary education and increase retention of children in schools by way of no pass- fail system. The policy states that no child can be detained in the same class for consecutive years or expelled from the class. The promotion to the next class will be made automatically irrespective of his performance in various tests for formative and summative assessment. The policy proposes to ensure quality education but real scenario is quite different. Ever since its implementation, the academicians and teachers are loud and clear in their opinion that it is more than responsible for the decline in quality of education in the recent times. So the policy certainly needs a review and if required, certain changes in the approach and strategies.

What is No Detention Policy?

The No detention policy is a clause under the RTE Act 2009 as entered in article-16. The article states, “No child admitted in a school shall be held back in any class or expelled from school till the completion of elementary education”. In simpler terms the policy does away with the traditional pass-fail system prevalent in India for long. The policy thus proposes to ensure universal retention of the students in the elementary level by preventing stagnation and wastage. The main purpose of this blanket rule is to ensure compulsory education up to the age of 14 years and prevent dropout rate in schools.

In India where the majority of the population lives in the villages and below poverty line, educational awareness is missing. So, late admission to school is a common phenomenon. The older student feels humiliated and embarrassed among the junior students. There is every chance of the student dropping out from the school. Again in some cases children miss school for long periods due to poverty, illness, engagement in child labor or lack of awareness on the part of the parents. Consequently, these children lag behind in their studies and do badly in the exams. Hence they are detained in the class and tend to drop out making the right to education meaningless. So despite access to school such children can remain unschooled forever. The no-detention policy addresses such issues. To complement the policy of smooth promotion, the RTE makes provision for age appropriate classroom, no expulsion and continuous and comprehensive evaluation of child's understanding and ability to apply the same.

No-Detention Policy: Rationale Behind: The no detention policy has attracted staunch criticism for doing away with the pass-fail system. But it has some strong rationale justifying its implementation. The no detention policy has been put into practice primarily to prevent drop outs. The traditional system of evaluation through examinations is often used to detain and eliminate a child who performs poorly. He is declared “fail” and made to repeat the class. The child would find least interest and motivation following the same syllabus, nor find any special resource to deal with the same syllabus requirement for yet another year. It is demotivating and discouraging. The child would feel humiliated. In most of the cases the child leaves the school. The fail-stigma makes him a laughing stock and an object of criticism and satire among his friends and relatives. Detention, therefore, has no positive justification, rather negative implication for the child. The no detention policy in the RTE does not imply the abolition of assessment but replacement of the traditional system of evaluation with continuous and comprehensive assessment that is non- threatening. It releases the child from fear and trauma of failure and enables the teacher to pay individual attention to the child's learning and performance. The new system has the best potential to improve quality, rather than punishment, fear of failure and detention. Again as stated in article 13, every child has the same potential for learning. In most of the cases, it is the inadequacy of the educational system that accounts for the failure of the child. So instead of punishing the child with detention we should address the improvement of the quality of the system. There is no study or research that suggests that detaining a child improves the quality of the learning of the child. In fact, more often than not the child abandons school and probably learning altogether.

We often tend to expel the students on grounds of deviant and aberrant behavior, which we apprehend, would influence and affect other children. But expulsion signifies the refusal of the system to serve the child. The notion of ‘expulsion’ is not compatible with the concept of ‘right’. In no civilized nation do we find the policy of ‘expulsion’ in effect to deal with the students of elementary schools. If such tender aged (6-14years) children engage into activities violating the rules and discipline of the school, the system has to take the responsibility. The system should

address the child differently -through counseling, by providing different curricular and co-curricular activities which enable the child to develop self-awareness, changing his behavioral pattern. Another reason to implement the no detention policy is to free the students from the pressure and fear of examination and give them a stress free academic environment and childhood.

No Detention Policy: The Reality: In spite of the various efforts being taken by the government of India to ensure quality in education, it is not happening in reality. Among the various reasons accounting for this, the no detention policy is one. Ever since its introduction, the clause in the RTE has been strongly resented by the teachers. Students' enrolment has increased remarkably but the improvement in their academic standard is hardly seen. Majority of the teachers are of the opinion that the "no pass-fail" system has encouraged a clear negligence and reluctance of children to study. As there are no exams, the students get carefree and leave the school after the mid-day meals.

Fall in educational standard: The situation looks dismal in the rural government schools. Surveys carried out on the students of the government schools express a disheartening picture. In the primary section nothing happens in most of the schools. The students attend the school, take mid-day-meal and come back. More than 90% students are found below the average level. A std-III student is not even acquainted with the vernacular alphabet. A std-.V student does not know how to count or the basic mathematical functions such as simple addition and subtraction. Similar surveys carried out in secondary schools for class V to VIII reveals an identical picture. Most of the students fall short of the average in performance in all the subjects. Even in class VII, students are unable to write all the 26 letters of English alphabet or read a text properly. Even the reading from their Bengali texts is not up to the mark. Their knowledge in Science, Math and English do not even show the performance level of class III or IV students. Having progressed through the automatic promotion system up to class VIII, the students develop a carefree and easy going attitude. In std-IX they are unable to change their attitude suddenly. Naturally, they fail to cope up with the academic pressure and collapse. Even in the Board Exams they do badly.

With the students taking it for granted that they will be promoted to the next class irrespective of their performance in the formative and summative tests, they are hardly serious and attentive to their studies. They are not regular to the school, or bunk it half the way. And the teachers find a hard time to teach the disinterested and demotivated lot. And when the teacher tries to make them realize the importance of study, the students are candid to reply that their promotion is guaranteed. Sometimes the students obtaining zero in all the subjects or not attending the school for a single day have to be promoted to the next class. It is not only ridiculous but unfortunate. These poor students, when they go to the higher classes fair even badly as they hardly understand what is taught in the class and tend to disturb the class. With the concept of the inclusive education in practice the bright students are there in the same class. Their academic progress is greatly hampered as the teacher can hardly raise the teaching standard to their level. A study by HRD Ministry has also suggested that commitment of students to education has declined at the primary level and they are scoring less in the Board Exams. The "no exam" policy at the elementary level is making the students lackadaisical.

Irregularity in attendance: With the fear of failing in the class absent, the students are not serious any more towards their studies. They do not come to take part in the teaching learning process attentively. Earlier they knew that to get promoted to the next class they would have to pass the exam, for that they would have to understand the lessons very well. Hence they regularly attended the school and seriously studied in the class and at home. Now that they know the formative and summative tests are mere formality, they do not bother to come to school regularly and remain absent for long periods. When asked, they offer lame excuses such as illness, visit to relatives etc.

Sometimes they work outside to support their family financially and enroll in the school only for the various benefits like free books, dress, scholarships and grants, bicycles etc. Due to the long absences, teaching learning process is hampered and the students learn almost nothing.

Difficulty in maintaining discipline: The no detention policy has affected the teaching-learning environment greatly. The students who come to school do not concentrate on their studies as they know very well that even if they do not learn anything and do poorly in the tests, they will be promoted to the next class. Hence they engage in all sorts of mischief disrupting the educational environment of the school. Most of the students studying in a particular class do not have the required educational competence, knowledge and skill to understand the lessons imparted in the class because they have not studied in the previous classes seriously. Hence they find no interest and motivation in the class. They are more prone to disturb the class and vitiate the atmosphere of the school. The law prohibits any punishment on the students. The no- detention policy also eliminates the provision of expulsion. Consequently there is nothing to stop the rowdy miscreants in the school.

Non-serious attitude in the teachers: The no-detention policy has made the teachers non-serious if not all, certainly many of them. Like the students, the teachers also know very well that the students will move to the next class automatically. The fact whether they teach properly or not in the class does not matter much. The promotion will not depend on how much they have learned their lessons. Hence the pressure is off the teachers to impart the lessons with sincerity and dedication. Again they lose all the motivation to teach when they realize that all the students even the one who did not study at all will go to the next class. In a class where the students hardly have any desire to study seriously the teachers cannot do much. Hence they grow unwilling and non-serious.

Attitude of the parents: Barring some conscious and educated parents, the policy has been a welcome one for most of the parents. They are happy with the fact that their children will not be detained in any class at least to class-VIII. They are not bothered to think, this would certainly affect the quality of education. Their children will of course move to next classes but in terms of knowledge, skill and competence they will fall far short of the average level. The poor parents are now to engage their children to household chores or in helping them. They may engage them in child labor as well. They are contented as long as their children are enrolled in the school and enjoying the various student-supporting schemes.

Evaluation: The no detention policy along with the CCE is in itself good but has failed to deliver because our country lacks the infrastructural support and awareness on the part of the guardians needed for the successful implementation of the policy. For both the policies to be implemented, a healthy teacher-taught ratio is necessary. The CCE has become a farce in schools where the teacher-student ratio ranges from 1:50 to 1:120. Again pedagogically, the no detention policy is effective if the teacher is professionally equipped, committed, works in a conducive environment, and is not over-burdened. Then she should be in a position to assess individual learning needs, appreciate individual differences and be committed to provide remedial inputs to each learner as per his or her requirements. The teacher should be also responsible to ensure that at no stage does the learner come under undue stress. But it is futile to expect this from the teachers who are not only burdened with hugely populated classes but also have to participate in election duties, census or sample surveys. It was an ill-conceived decision to introduce the no detention policy without taking into account its Feasibility and hence it is destined to fall flat.

Suggestion for improvement:

1. The student- teacher ratio in the class should be kept to manageable limit.
2. Regular orientation and training of the in-service teachers should be done to acquaint them with the principles and strategies of the policy needed for its successful implementation.
3. Parents' awareness should be generated.
4. Special training for the weaker students and the late entrants should be there to make them at par with the academic level required to be in a particular class.
5. Value education should be imparted among the students.
6. Teaching-learning process should be made more attractive and joyful so as to arrest the attention of the students.
7. Funding and resource allocation should be increased.

Conclusion: On the basis of the discussion above, we may conclude that the no detention policy might be aiming to ensure universal enrolment and retention but has certainly affected the quality of education and aim of education, which cannot be ignored. It is now high time that the controversial clause is reviewed to maintain focus on quality education. We must remember that mere educational qualification is not a means of social change. The real purpose of the schools should be to broaden the horizon of the students and not merely to offer certificates. Even with the dedicated teachers one needs a change of the policy to make children actually study. But revoking the policy in isolation without drastically overhauling the education system would only add more woes to the already overburdened lives of the poor Indian children. Hence the policy should either be renovated with adequate changes to neutralize the ill effects or replaced with a new policy that would take a balanced approach. The prime objective should be to effect an all-round development of children equipping them with life skills.

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