

English For All Children Current Myths and Prospects

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The unprecedented and extraordinary demand for English medium schooling by the rich and poor in India is directly related to its pervasive use in higher education and employment. In true Indian fashion, the market has responded by providing separate English medium schools for the rich, the middle class and the poor.

At the upper end of the spectrum are the established boarding and day schools. In the last decade, a new breed of schools have been established by educational entrepreneurs providing upper middle class and rich children with educational buffets, served in five star comfort, and at five star prices. More modest in provision, but far larger in number, are the English medium schools— often government-aided – catering to the expanding middle classes. A more recent phenomenon has been the opening of fee-charging English medium schools for the poor in slums and villages all over India- many merely English medium in name.

The fact that now even the poor want their children to study in English reflects a sea-change from the Angrezi Hatao days. English medium schooling is now being promoted explicitly, and sometimes aggressively, as being absolutely critical and empowering for the poor in contemporary India. It is a view that has many articulate and diverse spokesmen including Kancha Iiah ,a Dalit activist, Narayana Murthy of Infosys fame and Rajasekhara Reddy, Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh. Epitomising this current perspective of the emancipatory role of English medium instruction in the lives of the marginalised, is the recent establishment of an English public school for 'scavengers' in New Delhi by Sulabh – better known for its work in low-cost sanitation.

In the last decade, various initiatives have been undertaken by state governments to promote English medium schooling. This is a

major reversal of decades of language policy, advocating regional languages as the medium of instruction with English being taught as a subject in the curriculum. The state governments have, however generally been hesitant in promoting large-scale English medium schooling. Not so the Jammu and Kashmir government, which overnight made English the medium of instruction in the entire state!

No significant benefits will accrue to the poor from the overnight opening of English medium schools by municipal corporations and state governments. Few understand what it takes to start a school, recruit and sustain good teachers, and be able to provide a reasonably good education. And in even well - known English medium schools, ambitious parents and highly paid tutors play a critical role in supporting school learning and remedying any deficits. In educated middle class homes, the presence of books, newspapers and computers, and interactions with relatives and friends expose children to varying degrees of spoken and written English.

It is ambitious parents providing hugely supportive home environments, that account in large measure for the 'success' of English medium schools that educate middle and upper class children. Most poor semi-literate parents are not likely to provide this environment. And so English medium schools that cater largely to their children will need enlightened leadership, competent and dedicated English –speaking teachers and well equipped schools that are sensitive to the special needs of poor children. These schools should help them not only to excel in examinations, but more importantly promote their all-round development. Anything less, as is currently the case with most government efforts, is merely hoodwinking, unconsciously or deliberately, the poor and lower middle classes.

At present, state educational budgets cannot even provide toilets and basic facilities in most schools. Given the financial and human resources required, good English medium schools for poor children therefore cannot be instantly produced in large numbers through government dictats, or the pleadings of the more ardent pro-poor English medium-wallahs. Reserving seats for children in private schools, as well as industry starting good schools, should certainly be encouraged. But this will not make any appreciable dent in the large numbers of schools required to make good English medium schooling an option, for even a small proportion of the poor and lower middle classes.

A far better pedagogical and cost-effective option is to make significant improvements in the teaching of English in the regional medium schools, attended by the vast majority of children in India. There is overwhelming support from research, and national and international educational commissions and organizations, that education in the mother tongue is best for the mental and overall development of children. When English is introduced by teachers in the later primary years, its acquisition would be strengthened by the acquisition of early literacy skills in the mother tongue. However, all endeavours to teach English are doomed to failure unless we have competent teachers who know English.

In the last decade, there has been yet another striking reversal of language policy. Many of the states which previously began English, at the middle school stage in regional medium schools, have now started introducing its study in Std 1. But almost nothing has been done to train primary school teachers, the vast majority of whom can barely speak, leave alone teach, in English. Accusations of being casteist and anti-poor have silenced many from publicly voicing any doubts as to whether merely introducing English in Std.1, or the overnight expansion of English medium schooling, will best serve the interests of the poor. Those dissenters, who have gone or sent their children to English medium schools, are additionally branded as being hypocritical.

There is a false consciousness that India has an overabundance of English speakers, and thus a competitive edge. A significant improvement in the teaching and learning of English in all schools, especially in our regional medium schools, is critical to our aspirations to becoming a leading knowledge economy, and to also meet the legitimate aspirations of the poor. Unfortunately, our state governments have not even begun to comprehend the magnitude and complexity of what is required, for example in the critical area of training of teachers. What is astounding is the complete lack of any academic leadership and guidance from our national and state-level institutions entrusted with curriculum revision, textbooks and teacher training. Only the Knowledge Commission seems to have understood the significance of a major thrust in improving English, and has acted on it by appointing a working group. Far far more needs to be done.

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