

A quality learning initiative

The 2013 Companies Act and Strategic Priorities for CSR Funding in Education

Beginning 1 April 2014, the 2013 Companies Act has mandated that all companies exceeding a specified turnover are required to spend at least 2 per cent of their average net profits on activities relating to corporate social responsibility (CSR). Sizeable CSR funds will soon be made available for education and other social sectors. Individual corporations and large networks like CII and FICCI, who wish to fund education, could use this historic opportunity to strategically invest in improving the quality of learning of Indian students.

Since significantly improved learning would have both immediate and long-term benefits for individuals, educational institutions, industry and the nation, a Quality Learning Initiative is outlined in this article with key areas recommended for focussed CSR funding. The case for this CSR Quality Learning Initiative is based on a review of the research evidence on deficiencies in learning attainment of Indian students attending schools and colleges.

Poor skills of graduate engineers

Indian engineering colleges annually graduate hundreds of thousands of engineers. A study of 54,000 engineering students from over 250 engineering institutes, who graduated in 2011, revealed that over one third of them had a weak understanding of mathematical concepts as elementary as decimals, ratios, fractions and the ability to apply these concepts to real-world problems. More than a quarter did not have adequate English skills for daily conversations or for following their academic lectures. Many young engineers did not have the English comprehension skills required to understand the engineering curriculum.

Other studies have also observed that the quality of training imparted in the vast majority of engineering colleges is inadequate. And only about 25 per cent of India's graduating engineering students are employable.

Poor skills of arts and science students

The language and mathematics skills of average Indian undergraduates and postgraduates are likely to be similar to skills acquired by elementary school teachers, who have similar formal educational backgrounds. A recent large scale Pratham study of elementary school teachers indicated that only about 60 per cent of them



JOHN KURRIEN

were able to solve percentage problems expected of a Fourth Standard student. Less than 50 per cent of teachers were able to summarise accurately the main points covered in a paragraph.

Smaller studies and anecdotal evidence indicate that most Indian college students are also likely to have very limited English skills – far worse than those of the more selective group of young engineering graduates cited earlier.

Abysmal learning attainment in schools

Learning in elementary schools in India has been extensively researched, and there is little disagreement among educators that these levels are terrible. For, example, a 2011 extensive study of rural children by Pratham noted that 52 per cent of students in Class V could not read a Standard II text and 72 per cent of them could not do simple division.

India was one of the 74 countries that participated in the 2009 PISA evaluation of 15-year-old school pupil's performance in reading, mathematics and science. India came either third last, second last or last in all three subjects outperforming only Kyrgyzstan.

In the PISA science test, Level II was viewed as the minimum level of knowledge of science and technology. Eighty per cent of Indian secondary students could only achieve Level I or lower, demonstrating that they knew very little science or nothing at all. Another large-scale World Bank study indicated that about one third of students in Class IX could not pass a low international benchmark described as 'some basic mathematical knowledge'.

Two large-scale studies of primary and secondary school students attending India's best urban schools were conducted by Educational Initiatives and Wipro. Key concepts in mathematics, science and language were tested. Contrary to expectations of the general public and those of most educators, the report concluded that students of our top English medium schools were merely average by world standards.

Consequences of neglect in early learning

In most of our government and low-cost private schools, most students in Class II have not acquired basic literacy and numeracy skills. Since remedial action is rarely taken in Class II or in the later years, many students in subsequent

The author is director emeritus, Centre for Learning Resources, Pune. He can be contacted at johnkurrien@gmail.com

grades show limited improvement in basic language and mathematics skills.

This limited improvement in reading comprehension mainly accounts for the lack of conceptual understanding of all other subjects in the secondary school and higher education syllabus. And deficiencies in foundational primary mathematics skills are reflected in the poor mathematics skills of secondary school and college students, as well as teachers and engineers.

Tragic consequences of rote learning

Rote learning is the dominant mode of learning in almost every school and college. The top performers in board examinations are those that excel in the ability to regurgitate ideal answers to a more or less predictable universe of questions.

But this exclusive focus on memorisation and regurgitation comes at a huge cost, tragically unrecognised. According to the 2011 Quality Education study, students even in India’s top schools are mediocre performers in questions testing deeper understanding, application of concepts and practical competencies. Consequently, only a minuscule proportion of our students are top performers in international secondary school evaluations, even in subjects like mathematics in which India is supposed to have a special proficiency.

Neglect of ethical and civic values

Schools have an important role in promoting and instilling values appropriate for a secular, pluralistic and developing India. The 2011 study of top urban schools revealed that a fairly large proportion of students in Classes IV, VI and VIII reflected deep rooted biases towards girls, people from other religions, immigrants and the disabled. Smaller, but unacceptably high percentage of student responses showed a limited commitment to civic values, ecological issues and the amicable resolution of interpersonal conflicts.

A CSR quality learning initiative

There is a growing consensus that it is the quality of skills acquired by students in schools and institutions of higher education that will accelerate or impede the economic and social development of a nation in the 21st century. As a recent World Bank Study notes, India’s engineering

institutions churn out a glut of poorly equipped and mostly unemployable ‘transactional’ engineers, and produce too few ‘dynamic’ engineers equipped with technical skills, as well as innovative and problem-solving capacities.

To capitalise on our youth dividend, a CSR Quality Learning Initiative is critically needed for individual human development, which would benefit all sectors of the Indian economy. The capacity to recruit from a larger pool of more employable entrants will make Indian corporations better able to compete nationally and globally, and also reduce significantly their costs on retraining new employees. An earlier study noted that India’s \$60 billion outsourcing industry alone spent almost \$1 billion a year on new graduate entrants.

The learning initiative – key areas

Remedial instruction to improve student learning in schools and colleges: Major remedial instruction initiatives in every class for improving learning in schools and colleges in key subject areas like language, mathematics and science. Additional daily classes, weekends and vacations can be utilised for this.

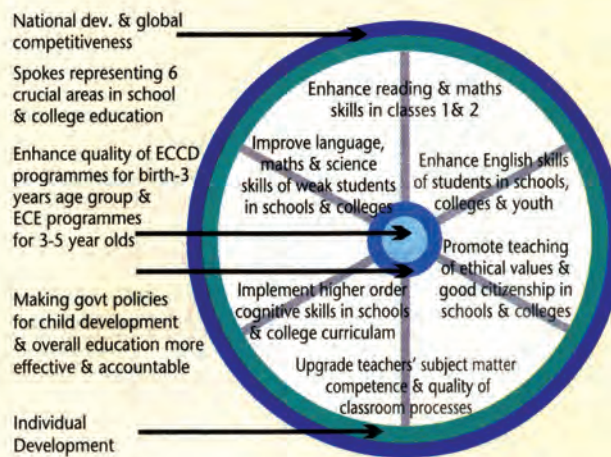
Focussing on reading and mathematics learning in classes I and II: There is increasing evidence in India and abroad that improved learning in our schools requires a major initiative to ensure the acquisition of early foundational reading and arithmetic skills in

Classes I and II.

Improving English skills: To promote learning, as well as equity and economic development, schemes to significantly improve English skills of youth, including students in schools and colleges, require to be promoted.

Focus on limiting rote learning and promoting practical and higher order cognitive skills: Concrete steps need to be initiated in schools and colleges. An advocacy strategy needs to be also developed which communicates to opinion-makers, parents and students the importance of communication and higher order cognitive and practical skills for improving individual development and employment prospects in contemporary India.

Promoting ethical values and good citizenship: Our schools and colleges need to promote a broad ethical values and good citizenship agenda. The



great challenge is to conceptualise and implement this curriculum beginning at the pre-primary level and extending through college.

Improving subject matter competence of teachers and classroom processes: Without school and college teachers who have a good grasp of the subjects they teach, we will not be able to implement the CSR Quality Learning Initiative. Equally important is to pay attention on 'how' it is taught in the classrooms.

Focus on quality in early childhood care and development (0-3 years) and early childhood education (3-5 years): Global research indicates that half of all mental development potential is reached by age four, and that the early environment greatly influences brain function. The impact of the CSR Quality Initiative on student learning significantly depends on the quality of early infant and child development inputs provided to India's youngest children.

Advocacy for making government policies effective and accountable: The CSR Quality Learning Initiative would require continuous and critical engagement with existing policies and schemes of government, schools and college authorities. Industry should jointly work with other civil society organisations in advocating that government should fulfil all its existing developmental and educational responsibilities and commitments. This advocacy agenda should include getting governments to increase their budgets in these areas, and spend them more effectively.

What individual corporations can do

Individual corporates or any small group of industries can select one or more of the areas listed in the CSR Quality Learning Initiative. They may wish to limit their CSR funding to projects in their area of operations.

For example, major food and pharmaceutical companies could work at state or district level, or only focus on neighbouring communities, on improving the knowledge and practices of caregivers of infants. IT and manufacturing companies may wish to improve English in regional medium schools and colleges, and engage in novel projects that spread awareness of the higher order cognitive and soft skills that they are looking for in new employees.

What associations of industries can do

Large networks like CII and FICCI can do a number of things. They can initiate discussions on the 8 areas of the proposed Quality Learning Initiative, carefully selecting institutions and individuals knowledgeable about how to improve learning. There are no alternatives to critically assessing whether proposals submitted for each of the 8 areas will make a significant impact on student learning.

We should especially evaluate populist technological fixes promoted as panaceas to propel India into meeting the challenges of the 21st century. These are being widely implemented because they are being unrelentingly promoted by politicians and educational administrators, with support from some multinationals and Indian corporations. It also helps that huge funds are involved in implementing these costly educational technology projects.

Clearly technology has an important role to play, for example, to build the capacities of teachers and supervisory personnel. But important questions need to be asked of its use in the classroom by teachers and students, such as whether existing educational technological projects have made any significant, demonstrable and sustainable impact on student learning, before entertaining proposals of more of the same.

Industry associations can also provide guidelines on how to assess proposals, and help coordinate the implementation of the proposed CSR Quality Learning Initiative. They can also use their comparative influence and capacity to engage with issues related to educational policy that impinge on learning. The focus should be especially on state, district and local urban bodies that are mainly responsible for educational policy and implementation.

It is hoped that the CSR Quality Learning Initiative that has been outlined will spark off a dialogue on what the corporate sector should be funding in education. Given that the 2013 Companies Act will come into effect on 1 April 2014, it is important to begin this discussion now. To make informed decisions on CSR funding next year, clarity on the strategic educational initiatives that can make a significant difference to the quality of learning will be crucial for individual growth, as well as the development of the nation and corporate India. ♦

**We should especially
evaluate populist
technological fixes
promoted as panaceas
to propel India into
meeting the challenges
of the 21st century.**