

## Centring “classroom life” in India’s debate on quality of education

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- 1 In a country like India with myriad forms of social inequalities, it is old news that the school system is embedded within the “social field of power”, and that schooling opportunities and successes, or the lack thereof, depend to a considerable extent on (favourable or unfavourable) social determinants. In short, the so-called “outside” matters. Keeping these background social and structural factors in mind, this paper, however, aims to focus on the “inside”, on what schools and schoolteachers can or cannot do, in terms of enlivening the inner space of classrooms with a democratic culture of free and non-hierarchical interaction and of inculcating among their pupils a spirit of enquiry, critical thinking, and empathy (Apple 2002, Rose 2014). The so-called quality debate, this paper therefore argues, ought to revolve first and foremost around the internal workings of the school system.
- 2 Classroom life, however, itself constitutes a vast subject, and hence, at the risk being partial and non-exhaustive, a limited set of questions is addressed here: What kind of social life do children experience in the classroom; and do social inequalities get reproduced or reduced here? This arguably is a measure of the quality of school life. Again, is schooling an individuated and fiercely competitive “marks race” or a collaborative and shared pursuit to develop a “taste for understanding” (Majumdar & Mooij, 2012, Kumar 2018)? It is useful to point out that the current Indian debate on quality of education, which focuses on low academic standards and low learning achievements of students, tends to foreground what may be called “the individual-responsibility view” of quality. This means that there is relative neglect of the systemic deficiencies that stand in the way of quality- and equity-enhancing educational reforms. For example, it is important to ask, though often overlooked, whether there is a need for the system to fail pupils due to rationing of school places. More importantly, “this global manufacture of a learning crisis”, to echo Rampal (2018), is likely to divert our attention from “classroom practices that have the strongest association with learning and achievement”.

- 3 Similarly, the teacher-responsibility view of quality often projects their alleged “truancy” as the main driver of the poorly running “school mill”, with relative inattention paid to the critical need for their professional development, independence, and freedom for social justice activism in shaping the overall learning environment and teaching–learning quality in school. Surely, the quality of teaching is critical for students’ learning outcomes, but to ensure that, schoolteachers have to be treated by the system as part of a professional workforce, and not as subordinate cogs in the educational wheel.
- 4 Again, the responsibility for their low learning outcomes is laid primarily at the door of individual students; they are the ones who perennially experience the fear of failure while in school and are made to swallow the “bitter pill” of personal failure at the end of their school cycle, if they do not make it in the high-stakes examinations. There is an urgent need, however, to have a serious debate about the quality of the assessment tools themselves, which are often deployed, scholars argue, to mostly test “rote-learnt knowledge”. As a result, it often becomes possible for a student to score high marks, without necessarily having developed a meaningful understanding of the subject matter under review. The systemic deficit in this case impedes quality in two distinct ways: it serves as an unfair tool of *elimination*, and it fails as a mechanism of *evaluation* of deeper learning.
- 5 Let us take a quick look at a few examination questions used for the officially conducted external evaluation of fourth-grade students in the Indian state of West Bengal. These leave us with the impression that they are mostly routine questions, which do not test pupils’ conceptual understanding or critical abilities. For example, papers on mathematics ask students to identify odd and even numbers, to name units of measurements of weight, height, liquid, volume, etc., to identify various geometric figures, to expand LCM and HCF, and so on. Also, a special affinity for Greek and Roman history becomes palpable when children are asked: “Is Herodotus called the Father of History?”, or “Were amphitheatres built like stadiums?”
- 6 In contrast, consider a set of questions that draw on images of women in different parts of India performing a variety of household chores and then ask the learner: “What chores does your mother do at home, and your father?”, or “Why doesn’t your mother do what your father does? (and vice versa)”. The pupil is not only asked to describe reality but is also encouraged to think critically about it. As Somerset astutely observes (1997: 97): “To the maximum extent possible, *examination questions should teach as well as test ...*” Yet he reminds us (p. 91) that “The most pervasive weakness of many national examinations is their propensity to focus on the testing of passive, inert knowledge ... Good examinations, by contrast, test active ideas ...”.
- 7 Debating about “good” and “bad” examinations is by no means to argue in favour of dilution of academic challenges. And it is by no means to argue against the critical importance of academic standards and rigorous pedagogy in a discussion of quality schooling. Indeed, we need not be forced to choose between academically challenging classroom life and fair and meaningful assessment of student achievement. Standards and assessments are a form of contradictory resource: when fairly and creatively employed, they may enhance students’ eagerness and ability to meet academic expectations, but when manipulated to limit, ration and sort students, they may compromise the goals of both quality and equity in education.

- 8 The arc of India’s debate on quality education therefore needs to be bent towards these first-order questions of classroom life.
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## ABSTRACTS

India is a continent-like country, with country-sized constituent provinces, and hence is, not unexpectedly, internally differentiated when measured in terms of the dominant educational imagination, educational programmes and policies, and the nature of democratic politics itself, which either opens up or closes down educational opportunity for the masses. What enables the relatively disadvantaged social groups to step into the classroom and continue their school life in some parts of India but disable them from doing so elsewhere is a matter of great import, as it invites us to make use of a comparative lens in order to “learn from India by India”, and to be both critical and constructive in our research and action for universal schooling of quality. This paper has the inherent limitation of not covering the vast and diverse educational landscape of India, trying instead to shed light on only a few corners of this huge canvas, grounding the discussion mainly on preschool and elementary education in the Indian state of West Bengal.

The paper addresses the central question of the quality of “classroom life” in its everyday form in government-run schools, against the general backdrop of widespread cynicism with anything public, which is noticeable in recent times in both India and many other parts of the globe. The analyses and arguments advanced here in defence of public education and the larger ethos of democratic education seek to counter this view, without in any way dismissing the role of private alternatives. This reasoning in favour of democratic and inclusive education is, however, not a mere assertion about the inevitable progress of public institutions, but rather an attempt to translate our “constructive impatience” – to borrow the pithy term used by Amartya Sen – with the serious inadequacies of the public education system into effective and egalitarian remedial action.

L’Inde présente une palette de nuances quant à la nature des politiques démocratiques qui ouvrent ou ferment les portes des chances de s’instruire pour les masses. Nous nous intéresserons ici à l’éducation préscolaire et élémentaire dans l’État indien du Bengale occidental.

Nous traiterons de la qualité de la « vie dans la classe » au quotidien, dans les écoles publiques : si on sait bien que la réussite et les chances en matière de scolarité dépendent dans une large mesure de déterminants sociaux favorables ou défavorables, cet article met l’accent sur « l’intérieur », sur la qualité de ce que les écoles et les enseignants peuvent faire ou ne pas faire pour animer l’espace intérieur de leur salle de classe d’une culture démocratique d’interaction libre et sans hiérarchie. De quel type de vie sociale les enfants font-ils l’expérience en classe ? Les inégalités sociales y sont-elles reproduites ou réduites ? La scolarité est-elle une « course aux bonnes notes » individuelle et acharnée, ou bien une quête collaborative et partagée du savoir pour comprendre. On peut agir aussi sur les modalités d’évaluation des élèves, qui trop souvent ne font pas sens pour eux ou les condamnent à l’échec, alors qu’elles peuvent être pour eux des occasions d’aiguiser leur appétit.

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**Mots-clés:** accès à l’éducation, résultats de l’éducation, réforme, qualité de l’enseignement, vie scolaire, réussite scolaire

**Palabras claves:** acceso a la educación, reforma, calidad de la enseñanza, vida escolar, éxito escolar

**Keywords:** access to education, education outcomes, reform, teaching quality, school life, academic success

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