

ARE THEY LEARNING? More children have started attending schools recently, but are they getting the kind of education that would ensure them decent jobs in the future?

RAVENHORN/AP/P



Quality Not Quantity

The student enrolment rates in primary and secondary levels have increased significantly. But does going to school guarantee that students are benefiting from it?

RUPAK D SHARMA IN POKHARA
ASIA NEWS NETWORK

At the library of Sishu Shishu Kalyan Primary School in Bharatpokhari, around 10km from scenic western city of Pokhara in Nepal, a drawing hanging on the wall shows a cigarette and a cross on top of it. The title of the sketch warns: "Don't Smoking".

This gives a hint of the quality of English that the primary school is offering. Ironically, the state-owned Shishu Kalyan has recently changed

its language of instruction from Nepali to English to compete with private schools in the locality, which were attracting more students due to their English medium courses.

The initiative taken by this school—where most of the government-run institutions fail to adapt to change as long as they get state subsidy—is praiseworthy. But what kind of products will it generate is a big question.

This kind of quality-related problem in education sector is not only prevalent in Nepal. In India, a survey conducted in 28 states found that 38.2 per cent of the Grade 1 students could not

read alphabets and 53.7 per cent failed to identify numbers. While 47 per cent of children in Grade 5 could not even read a Grade 2 text fluently.

Another study conducted in Pakistan showed that a bare majority of Grade 3 students had mastered the Grade 1 mathematics curriculum and only 31 per cent could correctly form a sentence with the word 'school' in the vernacular Urdu. While in Laos, only 1 per cent of the children completing Grade 5 were found to have reached a level of competency in mathematics that would allow them to continue their studies fur-

ther. The corresponding figure for language was 17 per cent.

These instances sum up the quality of education provided by public schools in Asia, where enrollment rates in primary and secondary levels have increased significantly in the last two decades but very few are getting the kind of education that would make them competitive and ensure them decent jobs in the future.

This low quality of education is feared to take a toll on the children of poor families.

As is known, most of the students attending public schools belong to economically disadvantaged families. These families do not even earn US\$1 a day and thus cannot afford expensive private school education. Low quality education in this segment means imparting knowledge and skills that will not get recognition in the market. In today's knowledge-based society, where people can also generate self-employment through the education, low quality education will ultimately force them and their families to stay in the bottom rungs of the economic ladder.

Another important feature of the students belonging to economically disadvantaged families is that they are first generation learners whose parents have never attended school and do not know the true value of education. If these first generation learners do not see tangible benefits of formal education, they, like their parents, will not consider going to school a worthwhile mission. This may increase their chances of dropping out of school, Rakha Rashid, education specialist of United Nations Children's Education Fund (Unicef) tells *AsiaNews* on the sidelines of United Nations Girls Education Initiative (Ungei) Global Advisory Committee meeting held recently in Kathmandu, Nepal.

So who should be blamed for this situation?

As many reports have said, one of the important factors affecting student achievement is teachers. A study conducted among 400,000 students in 3,000 schools worldwide concluded that "while school quality is an important determinant of student achievement, the most important predictor is teacher quality".

This is where Asia seems to be lagging behind. Although Southeast and

East Asia seem to be having relatively more number of qualified teachers, the situation is particularly startling in South Asia. In Nepal, only 31 per cent of the teachers have received professional training. In Bangladesh, the number is 48 per cent, while in Afghanistan only 36 per cent of the teachers are trained.

"Even in countries where more than 70 per cent of teachers have received professional training, one finds wide variation across different regions," says professor Rangachar Govinda of National University of Education Planning and Administration of New Delhi.

For instance, the northeastern states in India have a very low proportion of trained teachers compared with other regions. While in other countries, schools located in difficult terrain and schools attended by linguistic minority groups suffer from lack of trained teachers.

But in some cases it is also apathy of teachers. In countries like Nepal, public school teachers usually draw more salary than private school teachers and are at times better trained than private school teachers. However, their performance seems to be lagging behind mainly due to their focus on their private businesses rather than on school work.

This is where organisations like Ungei have to intervene, says Rajan Sharma, advisor of Education Journalists Group, Nepal.

Ungei—which has now taken the initiative of providing quality education to all the children, including those with disabilities and HIV/AIDS—comprises representatives of major donor agencies, including the World Bank and DFID, Danida and Norad, the international development agencies of the UK, Denmark and Norway, respectively.

"Ungei should urge these donor agencies to create pressure on governments to put education on top of the agenda and introduce programmes to enhance the quality of teachers," says Sharma.

Adds Els Heijen-Maathuis, regional representative of Save the Children-Sweden for South and Central Asia: "Delay in providing proper education to teachers may prove to be detrimental to the achievements made in increasing the enrollment rates of students in schools."

Still A Boys' Zone

RUPAK D SHARMA IN POKHARA
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Thirty-something Raj Kumar Thapa likes to call himself an open-minded father. Although the fruit seller cannot give a clear definition of an 'open minded' person, he deems it has to be someone like him. "Someone who does not discriminate between a boy and a girl child," he says.

In a conservative male-dominated society like Nepal, where daughters are still considered an economic liability and thus denied equal opportunity, Thapa's definition of 'open mindedness' holds some meaning. But what contradicts his assertion is his choice.

Thapa, a resident of a small village in Hemja, around 10km from Pokhara in Nepal, is a father of three children. From a daily income of 150 rupees to 200 rupees (US\$2.17 to \$2.90), he is managing to send all of his three children, an eight-year-old son and two daughters aged 12 and 15, to school. The only difference is: while his son attends a private school his two daughters go to a public school.

A soft-spoken Thapa, however, does not consider this discrimination. "It is a compulsion not a choice," he says. "If I had enough money I would have sent all three children to private school."

In a country like Nepal, where public schools usually generate unsaleable and inferior products, parents send their children to private school believing education in a private institution will enhance their competency level in the job market. They also believe private school education will teach them how to think critically and turn them into smarter kids than their peers attending public schools.

But the beneficiaries of this quality education, especially in lower-middle class families, usually become boys, as the parents believe it is them who will

STILL LEFT BEHIND: Girls' enrolments have increased in schools but societies are far from achieving true gender equality.

PHOTO: GUYA/AFIP



despite rising levels of education, are ultimately limiting overall growth of women and ruining their chances of playing critical roles in the societies.

An example of education failing to benefit women can be seen in Sri Lanka's non-agricultural labour market. In spite of having higher education level among women, female labour participation in the country is much lower than in Bangladesh and Nepal, meaning most of the women are either engaged in subsistence agricultural activities or staying at home and taking care of children and participating in unpaid labour.

Situation is pretty much the same in India, which recorded lowest female labour participation despite registering high economic growth rates in recent years. In fact, the whole South Asia lags behind the world, where only 18 per cent of women are currently employed in non-agricultural sector, compared with the world average of 39 per cent.

"This unevenness highlights the complexity of efforts required for implementing an agenda of gender equality," says Govinda.

To address this problem many governments in Asia have introduced laws to ease the entry of women in the labour market and enhance their performance in every sector. Some of the countries like Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka and Maldives have also established special organisations to streamline gender-related concerns.

"These policy measures and mechanisms have undoubtedly brought gender concerns to the centre stage of policymaking, says Govinda. "But actual progress at the ground level has been very slow."

He adds: "Effective action in this regard requires strong commitment on the part of the top leadership to push ahead necessary reforms and legislations with a gender perspective. Equally important is the role of the civil society in facilitating transformation of social attitudes and perspectives among the people at large."

Failure in this regard could spawn more people like Thapa who hold biased attitude towards women.

support the family once they grow old. "Whereas daughters are considered temporary family members, who will stop contributing to the household economy once they get married and move to their husband's home," says Om Bahadur Kunwar, a teacher of Gauri Shankar Higher Secondary School.

Because of this belief, parents do not mind investing 10-20 times more on boys' education. Girls, on the other hand, suffer silent exclusion like in the case of Thapa's youngest daughter, Ritu, who, despite performing well, was transferred from private to public school while in Grade 3.

This tendency of sending boys to private schools is increasing the population of girls in public schools.

In a village where population of girls and boys is almost equal, statistics of the state-owned Gauri Shankar School show presence of only 134 boys as against 219 girls.

"We do not know how to address this problem but we fear this tendency may develop inferiority complex in girls," says Kunwar.

After the launch of the Unesco-led Education For All campaign in 1990, various governments, NGOs and donor agencies have been working relentlessly to improve girls' access to formal education. And in the last 18 years, significant achievements

have been made not only in Nepal but throughout Asia. A few decades ago, girls constituted only one-third of the total enrolment in Asia's primary schools. Whereas today there are nearly equal number of boys and girls in schools. And in some countries in Southeast Asia, such as Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand, more girls have started attending school than boys.

But even as the presence of girls in the schools are increasing, gender disparities still persist in subtle and insidious ways like in the small village in Nepal.

"These unchallenged gender biases and stereotypes are seriously constraining efforts to achieve true gender equalities," says professor Rangachar Govinda of the National University of Education Planning and Administration of New Delhi. These practices,

	Net Enrollment in Primary Education School Year Ending in			
	1999		2005	
	Total (000)	% Female	Total (000)	% Female
Brunei	46	47	46	48
Burma	4733	49	4948	50
Cambodia	2127	46	2695	47
China	-	-	108925	47
Indonesia	-	-	291150	48
Laos	828	45	891	46
Malaysia	3040	48	3159	49
Philippines	12503	49	13084	49
Thailand	6120	48	5844	48
Viet Nam	10250	47	7773	47
Bangladesh	17622	49	17953	50
India	110986	43	146375	47
Nepal	3588	42	4503	47

Source: Education For All Global Monitoring Report 2008