

# Para teachers and Quality Elementary Education: Issues in Evaluating Teaching Effectiveness

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## Abstract

*During the past sixty five years, schooling facilities at elementary level have expanded enormously in the country. This development, however, has largely been in quantitative terms as the quality of education provided by our schools, especially the government schools, have been of insufficient and poor. This poor performance has partly been linked to the practice of recruiting 'para teachers' or 'contract teachers' by the states as part of DPEP and SSA. While several researchers have found this trend unhealthy for the quality of education, many others have favored it for being helpful in providing education to all in a low cost way. This paper critiques the RTE Act-2009 on the issue of para teachers and attempts to highlight the issues involved in the prevalent methods of determining the effectiveness of para teachers. the paper also suggests some educative alternatives for evaluating the effectiveness of such teachers.*

**Keywords:** Para teachers, contract teachers, teaching effectiveness, quality elementary education

## Introduction

India has witnessed an enormous expansion of elementary level schooling facilities during the past six and half decades, but the development has largely been in quantitative terms. Though there has been a considerable increase in number of schools, and enrollment rates have shot up, the 'quality of education' delivered by the government run elementary schools has been unimpressive and questionable. The reason behind such 'poor performance' has partly been linked to the failure of the states to recruit teachers of appropriate quality in sufficient number, especially after the nineties. The practice of recruiting professionally untrained and academically under qualified teachers—referred as 'Para Teachers' or 'Contract Teachers' in the academic literature—to serve in the formal elementary schools of the country has been rampant since the 1990s as part of DPEP and SSA.

While several researchers have raised serious concerns about the capability of para/contract teachers to teach in elementary schools of the country and have warned against the de-professionalization of the teaching cadre, many researchers have praised them for being more 'accountable' than the regular teachers and have seen them as a low cost way for the state to increase the number of teachers in the face of rising student populations, budgetary troubles and rapid real increases in salaries of regular teachers. In this paper, I critique the RTE Act-2009 on the issue of para teachers and attempt to highlight the issues involved in the prevalent methods of determining the effectiveness of para teachers. I also suggest some educative alternatives for evaluating the effectiveness of para teachers.

### **Para teachers in Elementary Education: Historical Background**

Providing free and compulsory elementary education of eight years to every child up to fourteen years of age has been a constitutional target in our country since it became a Republic in 1950. Subsequent governments at the Centre and the State have, therefore, formulated several policies and have rolled a number of programmes to achieve the goal of universalization of elementary education in the country. As a result, the schooling facilities at the elementary level have undergone a massive expansion in the last six and half decades. While the access to schools has improved a lot and the enrolment rates have shot up, the phenomena of dropouts and the abysmally poor standards of students' ability to read, write, and do simple arithmetic continues to haunt the system. Thus the 'quality of education' delivered by the government run elementary schools has become questionable. The reason behind such 'poor performance' has partly been linked to the failure of the states to recruit teachers of appropriate quality in sufficient number to meet the increasing demand of teachers created by a sudden increase in enrolments and number of retiring teachers, especially after the nineties. Prior to 1990s, most of the states used to recruit candidates having a 10 or 12 years of formal schooling coupled with a degree or diploma in teaching as full time permanent teachers to serve in the formal schools. Such teacher recruits received a regular pay-scale commensurate with the salary of other government employees of the same level and qualification.

The early 1990s witnessed a major shift in the state policy towards teachers and the education system as a consequence of the imperatives of the "structural adjustment of the Indian economy to the world capitalist system" (Kumar, *et.al.*, 2001) when most of the educationally backward states, running short of financial resources came up with "several alternative

measures of teachers' recruitment and training, justified on pragmatic, economic and bureaucratic grounds" (NCF, 2005). One such measure—initiated by the Rajasthan government in 1984— was the '*Shiksha Karmi Project*' (financed by the Swedish International Development Authority), which aimed at solving the problem of teacher absenteeism in remote areas. In the '*Shiksha Karmi Project*', local males possessing 8 years of formal schooling without any professional training and local females having only 5 years of formal schooling with no professional training were recruited on a renewable contract to teach elementary classes in formal and alternative schools of Rajasthan. Such teachers, called '*Shiksha Karmi*' (or Education Worker), had to run both the night and day schools for which they received an honorarium of Rs. 1300+500/- per month (Pandey & Rajrani, 2003).

Enthused by the purported success of '*Shiksha Karmi experiment*', state after state began to recruit such teachers for solving the problem of teacher shortage and absenteeism in a cost effective way under various nomenclatures as part of DPEP and also under SSA. For instance, Madhya Pradesh adopted the scheme ('*Guruji*') in 1994; Gujarat ('*Vidya Sahayak*' Scheme) in 1996; Andhra Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh ('*Vidya Upasak*' Scheme) in 1998; Maharashtra ('*Shiksha Sevak*' Scheme) and Uttar Pradesh ('*Shiksha Mitra*' Scheme) in 2000, and Bihar ('*Shiksha Mitra*' Scheme) in 2002—which was further revised in 2006, 2008, and 2012 ('*Prarambhik Shikshak*').

These teachers, known by a variety of euphemistic vernacular names ('*Shiksha Karmi*', '*Guruji*', '*Vidya Sahayak*', '*Vidya Upasak*', '*Shiksha Sevak*', '*Shiksha Mitra*,' and '*Prarambhik Shikshak*'), are referred as 'Para teachers' in the academic literature. "Although many state-wide variations in the use of 'Para teachers' exist, in almost all cases, the 'Para teachers' are full-time employees in the formal/alternative schools and are not necessarily professionally qualified as regular school teachers. Their salary, recruitment procedure and service conditions are entirely different from that of the regular teachers" (Working Committee Report, 2001). "Generally Para teachers have (often annually) renewable contracts rather than regular teachers' lifetime employment guarantees. They are not required to have pre-service teacher training and the educational qualification requirements for Para teachers are also lower than those for regular teachers. Finally, Para teachers are typically recruited and paid by the village local government, rather than being employed directly by the state government as regular teachers are" (Atherton & Kingdon, 2009).

This practice of recruiting teachers with lowered academic and no professional qualifications to serve in the formal schools on a contract basis has experienced

enormous expansion and the number of such teachers across the country has steadily increased (Govinda & Josephine, 2004). There were 514,000 para teachers in India in 2006-07 (Mehta, 2007). In fact, the para teacher schemes were considered as “stop-gap arrangements that were to be replaced when the teacher shortage was over and they were no longer required, but the country experience over the years reveal that these programs were very cost effective measures by the governments of developing countries, and over a period of time, instead of being dropped, they became the essential component of the education system” (Pandey, 2009).

### **Para teachers and the Quality of Elementary Education**

The Education Commission (1964-66) had suggested four important dimensions of UEE: universal provision, universal enrollment, universal retention and universal quality. Various policy documents have stated that the goal of UEE cannot be achieved unless the centrality of the teacher is recognized in the process of educational reforms. While the access and enrollment have become nearly universal; retention and quality are far from being universal. This is perhaps because the criticality of the role played by teachers in ensuring quality education has been ignored. A massive expansion of the system has *negatively* influenced the quality of teachers and the support system available for guiding them in their work.

“The relative effectiveness of regular and para teachers is not obvious, since international research fails to show a consistent positive association between certification (teacher education, training), tenure and salary on the one hand and student achievement on the other. Moreover, even if lower education, training and salary reduce para teachers’ effectiveness, there may be compensating positive effects” (Atherton & Kingdon, 2009). Researchers working in this area are factionalized--- there are both proponents and detractors of the use of para teachers in education. The proponents hold that their use provides a low cost way for the state to increase the number of teachers in the face of rising student populations, budgetary troubles and rapid real increases in salaries of regular teachers, who are unionized and frequently absent from school. The detractors of the scheme, on the other hand, raise concerns regarding educational quality and educational equity. The quality concern is the fear that these less trained teachers may be less effective in imparting learning. The equity concern arises because many para-teachers are appointed in the remoter schools or in the ‘Education Guarantee’ schools that serve poorer children (e.g. child laborers, small-habitations or tribal children), raising the fear that poorer children are being condemned

to lower quality teachers, exacerbating social inequality. Thus, ‘alternatives like using para teachers instead of regular teachers... need careful evaluation’ (World Bank, 2000).

### **The RTE Act-2009 and Para teachers**

The use of para teachers or *Para teachers* in elementary education which was initially considered as a stopgap arrangement has remained in place and there seems no going back of the scheme. Even the much trumpeted RTE Act-2009 has not taken any decisive measure to tackle the problem of para teachers.

With the enforcement of ‘Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act-2009’ on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2010, the generic term ‘para teachers’ has been replaced by the term ‘contract teachers’, especially in the official documents prepared by the MHRD and its affiliates, to refer to ‘all such full- time school employees (working in the formal/alternative schools) which are not necessarily professionally qualified as regular school teachers and/ or whose salary, recruitment procedure and service conditions still remain entirely different from that of the ‘regular teachers’.

While the RTE Act-2009 attempts to ‘define’ the terms like ‘child’, ‘guardian’, ‘school’, etc., it evades any definition of the term ‘teacher’. Further, instead of clarifying upon the issues of the qualifications for appointment and terms and conditions of service of teachers, it leaves it on the ‘academic authority’ of the State (Clause 23 (1), (2), (3)). The only thing the Act pronounces with much clarity is the ‘duties of teachers’ (Clause 24). Thus, the general perception that para teachers will no longer exist after the notification of the RTE Act-2009 is far from reality, as the Clause 23(2) of this Act makes room for the appointment of para teachers even after the notification of the Act:

“where a state does not have adequate institutions offering courses or training in teacher education, or teachers possessing minimum qualifications as laid down under sub-section (1) are not available in sufficient numbers, the Central Government may, if it deems necessary, by notification, *relax the minimum qualifications required for appointment as a teacher*, for such period, not exceeding five years, as may be specified in that notification.

Provided that a teacher who, at the commencement of this Act, does not possess minimum qualifications as laid down under sub-section (1), shall acquire such minimum qualifications within a period of five years”.

—(Emphasis added).

The above mentioned provisions of the RTE Act have at best created a smokescreen about ‘teacher quality’ and have evaded any definition of ‘teacher quality’ or ‘teaching effectiveness’. In the following section some of the important issues involved in determining the effectiveness of para teachers have been discussed.

### **Issues in Evaluating the Effectiveness of Para teachers**

There is a general consensus among educational researchers that good teaching matters and that it may be the single most important school based factor in improving student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Wright, Horn & Sanders, 1997; quoted in Goe, *et. al.*, 2008). However, because of a lack of clear consensus on what makes a teacher effective and what s/he does, measuring teacher effectiveness has remained elusive and no generally agreed upon method of evaluating teacher effectiveness has evolved. Thus, the first most important issue in evaluating the effectiveness of para teachers/*Para teachers* is of *defining what constitutes effective teaching*. Is it the mere ability to produce gains in students’ learning as measured by achievement scores, or is it the capability to bring in positive academic, attitudinal, and social outcomes for students as well? This becomes important because “what is measured is a reflection of what is valued, and as a corollary, what is measured is valued” (Goe, *et. al.*, 2008). Surprisingly, no study conducted on para teachers defines teacher effectiveness explicitly—leaving the definition of teacher effectiveness to conjecture.

Another issue lies in *the way teacher evaluation is approached*—whether only outcomes of teaching are measured or the teachers’ background and classroom processes are also taken into consideration. A teachers’ professional practice, in fact, is contingent upon several factors—her beliefs, expectations, experience, pedagogical and content knowledge, certification and licensure, and educational attainment that constitute her *background* and is also referred to as the *inputs*. These *inputs* influence a teachers’ planning, decision-making, and subsequent classroom interaction (*processes*) which in turn affects student achievement, school completion rates, student behavior, engagement, attitudes, and social emotional well-being—referred to as the *outputs* of teaching (Goe, *et. al.*, 2008). Researches done on the effectiveness of para teachers/*Para teachers* have either focused solely on classroom processes (DPEP, 1998; Bodh Shiksha Samiti, 1999; PROBE Report, 1999; Kumar *et.al.*, 2001; Pandey & Rajrani, 2003) or have often been limited to focus on student outcomes (Prasad, 2007; Sankar, 2008; Atherton & Kingdon, 2009).

The final issue concerns the *methods adopted* for evaluating the effectiveness of para teachers/*Para teachers*. While *classroom observations* and *value-added models* have been the most widely used measures of para teachers' / *Para teachers'* effectiveness, other methods such as, *principal evaluations*, *analyses of classroom artifacts*, *portfolios*, *self-reports of practice*, and *student evaluations*, have rarely been used. Most studies (DPEP, 1998; Bodh Shiksha Samiti, 1999; PROBE Report, 1999; Kumar *et.al.*, 2001; Pandey & Rajrani, 2003) have used *Classroom Observations*, followed by *Value Added Models* (Sankar, 2008; Atherton & Kingdon, 2009) for determining the teaching effectiveness of para teachers.

Classroom observations, however, vary widely in how they are conducted and what they evaluate. They can be created by the state/district authorities or purchased as products; can be conducted by a school administrator or an outside evaluator; can measure general teaching practices or subject-specific techniques; can be formally scheduled or unannounced, and can occur once or several times per year” (Goe, *et. al.*, 2008). Valid and appropriate instruments and well trained and calibrated observers are crucial to any use of the classroom observation, in the lack of which observations can fluctuate threatening the utility and credibility of the protocols themselves (*ibid.*, p.7).

Value-added models are complex statistical and technological development driven models of teacher effectiveness, first used and marketed by William Sanders (1996), which claim to provide an objective means of determining which teachers are successful at promoting student achievement as measured by gains on standardized tests. Rather than considering other influences such as, schools, families, or peers that also contribute to student outcomes, value-added models assume that teachers are solely accountable for student achievement ((*ibid.*, p.6). Value- added scores need to be interpreted with caution since there is much uncertainty in the statistical estimates for individual teachers, and they focus only on data from standardized tests. Since several methodological problems also threaten the validity of value-added models (McCaffrey *et al.*, 2003) “reliance on value-added model as a primary means of evaluating teacher effectiveness may be premature” (Goe, *et al.*, 2008).

## Conclusion

While the overall findings of the existing researches on para teachers or *Para teachers* has been inconclusive about their effectiveness, some recent attempts (Sankar, 2008; Atherton & Kingdon, 2009) need to be read carefully as they use complex value added models to show that para teachers are

relatively more effective than regular teachers. First of all a consensus on what constitutes 'effective teaching' needs to be arrived at by the researchers, educationists and policy makers. This definition of teaching effectiveness should in no circumstances, be reduced to a single score obtained with an observation schedule or using a value-added model (Goe, *et al.*, 2008). Any measure of teacher effectiveness should also take into consideration the teachers' background characteristics (such as her beliefs, expectations, experience, pedagogical and content knowledge, certification and licensure, and educational attainment) and her classroom processes, along with any measure of students' learning outcomes. The purpose of such evaluation should also be determined before deciding on the appropriate measure to employ (*ibid.*, p. 52). Finally, while determining the validity of various means of measuring teacher effectiveness, it should also be noted that "the validity does not lie solely with the quality of the instrument or model but also with how well the instrument measures the construct and how the instrument is used in practice" (*ibid.*).

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