**Ensuring appropriately qualified teachers for the Primary/Preparatory State of school.**

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In August 2023, the Hon’ble Supreme Court endorsed the Hon’ble High Court of Rajasthan in ruling that the BEd degree cannot be considered appropriate for primary school teaching; the relevant degree for this level of school is the DEd or DElEd or BElEd. Effectively this nullified an earlier NCTE notification that BEd can be accepted for primary school teaching. This may seem like a minor point with regards to a profession that is largely not believed to be very aspirational and with regards to professional education which stands largely discredited on grounds of quality and corruption. But this decision stands to have large implications not only for recruitment and policy, and rightly so.

Teaching young students in primary grades is quite different in its requirements compared to being a subject teacher for middle and high school. Understanding Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), and being able to design and involve all students in a manner that ensures that they grasp these basic and foundational competencies is a very non-trivial task. Almost all of us have forgotten how we learned to read or manipulate the number system. Hence teaching these competencies has to be learnt by prospective primary school teachers, through specialised teacher education for this stage: the DEd, or DElEd or BElEd. It cannot be reconstructed through autobiographical memory; love for children and good communication skills are not enough, and by no means does the BEd degree, with its focus on teaching subjects to students in middle school upwards, prepare teachers for this. The Right to Education Act (2009), therefore, not only emphasised the need for professional qualification, but also the appropriate qualification to teach. Yet, even fifteen years afterwards, we find that graduates with BEd qualification continue to be employed for this stage of school.

The overall extent of professionally qualified teachers in the system looks good. The ‘State of Teachers, Teaching and Teacher Education Report 2023 (SoTTTER-23)’ shows that 90 % of teachers have some form of professional qualification. Of the 10% who do not have professional qualifications, 61% are in the private sector; 61% of this group are in rural areas. However, the matter of appropriate qualification shows a different picture. Overall only 46% of teachers teaching primary grades have the DElEd (and equivalent) qualification. 30% of teachers in this stage have the BEd degree, and 10% have no professional qualifications. The proportion of DElEd qualified teachers in the government and aided sectors is between 60-68%, as government recruitment norms, by and large, have regulated recruitment. However, in the primary school level of the private unaided sector, a mere 22% have the DElEd or Equivalent; 43% of primary school teachers in private schools have BEd degrees, and another 17% do not have any professional qualification. In the relatively elite English medium schools run by government societies, which include the KVs, the Army, Sainik, and Railway schools, the proportion of DElEd or equivalent holders at the primary school level is only 24%, with about 56% being BEd degree holders.

Following the Supreme Court ruling, considerable attention will need to be paid to set right these anomalies that have crept into the system. Firstly, greater attention will need to be paid to increasing the supply of good quality DEd/DElEd/BElEd programmes in the country. Analysis of Teachers Eligibility Test (TET) data from one state shows that quality in this sector is coming only from the government funded institutions (DIETs and aided colleges), while the self financed sector is doing very poorly: 59% of students from DIETs etc passed with a mean score of 86/150 in comparison with only 31% of students from the self-financed sector passing with a mean score of 77/150. All DIETs were able to succeed in achieving at least 50% of their students qualifying. Only 7% of the self financed sector were able to ensure that at least 50% of their students qualified. This suggests not only that better students seem to prefer government funded institutions, but also that these institutions are probably functioning more effectively, more regularly and less corruption. However, there are qualifying concerns for the sector as a whole: only 14% of qualifying candidates had a mean score of 60% or above. The low mean scores in mathematics at 46% are a concern. More attention will need to be paid to ensuring higher quality and pedagogical content knowledge of candidates. TET also may need to include section-wise qualifying cut off marks in addition to overall qualification cut off mark, to ensure that primary school teacher competence in mathematics.

There is an urgent need to strengthen government support and innovation in this sector. Programmes such as BElEd offered by Delhi University have demonstrated successful curriculum to strengthen knowledge, understanding and practice for this level/stage, long neglected in the University space. The recently announced Integrated Teacher Education Programme (ITEP) holds out the possibility of extending the successful model of bringing primary school teacher preparation into the University/Higher Education. It is therefore disappointing to note that the bulk of the new ITEP programmes approved in 2023 are for BEd (about 4000 seats), and only about 10% for the Preparatory and Foundational Stage.

Additionally, there is value in crafting innovative programmes which can provide pathways for BEd holders to receive professional development and gain credible certification for primary school teaching, without having to re-enrol for the entire degree/diploma programme. The State of Teacher Teaching and Teacher Education (SOTTTER 2023) Survey finds that 4% of students enrolled in DElEd already have a BEd. Most developed countries offer multiple pathways into the teaching profession, recognising that the decision to become a teacher can also occur at different stages and the value of having teachers with different life experiences in the system. The two year BEd holds attraction for mature and older students looking to shift careers; the SOTTTER 23 survey shows about 22% of BEd students (and 26% women students) are married. Offering the two-year BEd with specialisation for the preparatory/primary level could also be an option to consider, rather than requiring these students to join under graduate programmes. The 2023 union budget announcement included commitment to continue the Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya Scheme which had been launched first in 2014 to strengthen teacher education in the country. The scheme unveiled on September 5th however focussed on only the part of faculty development in higher education, neglecting school teacher preparation and innovation in the University space. A recent Ministry of Education initiative to strengthen DIETs is welcome. With the Government of India gearing up to announce a new budget in two months' time, one hopes that it will respond comprehensively to these issues, and provide allocation to strengthen primary/preparatory stage teacher education through greater government support and incentives for innovation in this sector.

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