

NWFP's high dropout rate

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down significantly if the Early Childhood Education (ECE) initiative — also a part of the national education policy and the much-touted education sector reforms — is implemented.

The national education policy (1998-2010) gives recognition to 'kachi' class as a substitute for early childhood education and has been linked to improved health, nutrition and activity-based learning for schoolchildren. The objective of the ECE scheme is to make the school environment more attractive and friendly by providing schools with equipment such as see-saws, monkey bars, swings, plastic bats and balls, colourfully illustrated books and so on. Several countries have achieved near 100 per cent primary enrolment and completion rates but we continue to lag far behind.

The primary education system can be made more efficient if the high dropout and repetition rates, that cause the cost of educating each child to rise sharply, were brought down. To achieve this, the authorities should introduce a policy of automatically promoting a child at the elementary level. This is the practice in most countries in the world and

even in many of our private schools, especially the ones known for providing good quality education.

Coming back to the census figures, the NWFP has 600,000 children "who have not seen the inside of a school yet". Take this with the statistic that 500,000 children are added every year to the total population and you have a massive problem on your hands. It is beyond the capacity of the government to cater to the educational needs of this burgeoning population. Our governments are perennially strapped for cash and their implementation capacity is very limited. Therefore, new linkages and partnerships with other organizations have to be created and innovative methods need to be used. At the same time successful models, pre-tested in other developing countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, should be replicated here, remodelled to our own context.

One case worth emulating is that of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) which is a good example of participation by non-governmental organizations to promote basic education. BRAC has set up 35,000 non-

formal schools in the rural areas of Bangladesh. In our case, the even the government itself — with its budgetary resources, donor funding and elaborate education bureaucracy — could establish only 21,000 schools.

Two kinds of schools are operated by the scheme in Bangladesh. One is a three-year course for students between the ages of eight and ten and who have never attended a school. The other is a two-year course for students between the ages of eleven and sixteen and who have dropped out of school and are unlikely to return. The proportion of students passing class V to enter class VI is more than 90 per cent, much higher than the 69.2 per cent in the case of the NWFP. To raise literacy levels, especially among girls and to achieve the 'education-for-all' objective, the government should reactivate the idea of non-formal schools. Not only has their utility been appreciated and acknowledged all over the world, they cost much less to make than formal schools.

According to estimates put together by the now-defunct Prime Minister's Literacy Commission, it costs around Rs 800,000 to build a formal school whereas a non-formal community school costs only Rs 10,000. Similarly, a non-formal school can be opened within a month compared to a two-year wait for a formal government school. It is very unfortunate that the federal government has lost interest in this vital sector. To make matters worse, the Prime Minister's Literacy Commission has been disbanded and its unfinished job has been given to an adviser in the education ministry. The NWFP has more than 1,400 non-formal schools in which 62,000 students are enrolled. Books are provided free of cost and that is perhaps a major reason why they manage to attract students. This is something that could be replicated in the other provinces, only if the ministry of education in Islamabad bothered to look at such important issues. ■

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