The Students Expectation of a Good School: An Essay Writing Approach

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Abstract

The students occupy the focal point in the entire educational enterprise. No doubt, teachers form the impressions about their students, but it is the students' opinions, impressions and feelings, which play a crucial role in teaching- learning arena of the classroom. Their opinions stand as an important source for reforming and improving the school conditions. In the present study an attempt has been made to study the perceptions of the students regarding the kind of school they want. A total of 150 students of class VIII constituted the sample of the study. Students were asked to write essay on 'My School'. The essays were then analyzed qualitatively and results were tabulated. The findings of the study revealed that for 88% of the students the availability of a big playground and play-related material was most important. After playground, sufficient and good condition of school furniture and fans and tube lights, clean and hygienic toilets, drinking water facility, clean and green surroundings and rooms for different co-curricular activities were some other facilities considered important by the students in a school. About 40% of the students have also asked for facilities like school bus, canteen, lockers, almirah etc.

Key Words: School, Infrastructural facility, Perception, Physical environment, Students

Introduction

Children perceive their world through multiple senses, especially the tactile and visual senses. A three- dimensional space can offer a unique setting for a child to learn because it can contributr a multiple sensory experience to accompany the textbook, or blackboard. Spatial dimensions, textures, shapes, angles, movements and spatial attributes like inside-outside, symmetry, up- down, can be used to communicate some basic concepts of language, science, mathematics and the environment.

An individual's perception may be unique and subjective. On the other hand, there is also a likelihood of commonality of perceptions among individuals within school situations: what Woods (1976) calls the 'group perspective'. An understanding of students' perceptions of the school infrastructural facilities must therefore explore individual students' perceptions for their commonality in order to identify constructs by which students understand and define the school infrastructure. Differences in this definition, however, will exist based on students' different experiences.

"By using students as informants, it also makes use of an important but often neglected source of information about classrooms." (Weinstein, 1981)

A school is called a "miniature society". It is a result of a complex network of human interaction and at the heart of this interaction is the student. So, students' perception of a school influences several aspects of their educational experience.

A school might be simply an outdoor meeting spot where one teacher comes to instruct few students or alternatively a large building/s and hundreds of students and teachers. In both

cases, the basic unit of a school is classroom, where the act of instruction takes place. But still, it is the overall infrastructure of the school that makes it 'inviting' for the students. Schools are institutional spaces for the community of learners, including both teachers and students. 'On an average, teachers and students spend around 6 hours a day, and over 1,000 hours a year in school. The physical environment in which they go about their tasks must be congenial, providing a level of comfort, and offering a pleasant space to work in. For this, the school must have the minimum facilities that include essential furniture, basic amenities (toilet, drinking water) and so on...' (National Curriculum Framework, 2005)

Presence of schools does not mean that all of them have minimum essential facilities required for smooth functioning and also for effective teaching-learning transaction. To this effect, a set of indicators, such as average number of classrooms per school, condition of classrooms, type of buildings and single classroom schools, etc are usually taken up. Adequate facilities create an environment in which interest and creative thinking develops and many types of processes may be tried out.

Physical resource by themselves cannot be regarded as an indicator of quality; yet, the extreme and chronic shortage of physical resources, including the basic infrastructural amenities in schools does present a serious quality constraint.

'School infrastructure isn't only about the physical inventory available to the teacher to impart education but also to the environment conducive to learning. A clean and pleasant atmosphere goes a long way in encouraging student participation'. (India Infrastructural Report- 2006, Urban Infrastructure, Oxford University Press) Good infrastructural facilities create an optimal environment for effective learning that bridges theory and practice.

The Fifth Educational Survey of 1986 showed that nearly 95 percent of population was served by a primary school within a 1km radius. However, the large-scale expansion of schooling resulted in the creation of educational facilities of varying quality in terms of institutional infrastructure, teaching-learning processes as well as the quality of students passing out of these institutions.

In the 'National Policy on Education' (NPE, 1986) teaching-learning facilities for schools are outlined as follows: "provision for essential facilities required for effective transaction of the curriculum in all schools needs to be articulated effectively in all the plans and programmes for educational development. It is necessary to ensure that all schools have the minimum essential facilities in terms of classrooms, teachers, teaching aids, etc."

In pursuance of NPE (1986), "operation blackboard" was launched in 1987-88 with the aim of improving the human and physical resources available in the primary schools of the country. It is, perhaps, the largest project initiated on All- India basis for improving school infrastructure. The most important feature of OB scheme was its specification of the basic norms of school facilities at the national level. The scheme aimed at eliminating disparities in educational facilities and to bring about qualitative improvement in elementary education.

However, it should be recognized that the availability of facilities by itself does not represent supportive learning conditions. Actual utilization of facilities is the real indicator of the qualitative aspect of schooling. The effectiveness of teaching and learning materials depends on teachers' ability and willingness to use them (Askerud, 1997, Rosenberg, 1998).

The aims and objectives of education as envisaged by the curriculum require a certain minimum infrastructure for their meaningful implementation. Every school must have basic facilities like a good building with adequate number of rooms, a playground, drinking water and toilet facilities. The expansion of enrolments in India hasn't matched by a comparable expansion of educational facilities. There are still many schools in India which do not even

have potable water and toilets, let alone other facilities. Although the overall condition has improved but still it is far below the acceptable standards. (Report on Elementary Education in India, Progress towards UEE, DISE 2006-07, NUEPA).

A study conducted by Delhi RTE forum in 207 government schools of east and south Delhi in 2011 found that 95.2% of schools in Delhi are not complaint with the complete set of RTE infra structural indicators. It was found that only 5% schools had provision for clean drinking water and as many as 30% of the schools did not have proper toilets and playgrounds. Also, 22% of the schools were without fencing and boundary wall.

Creating basic school infrastructure is an important part of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. 35% of the total funds invested in the district are provided for the purpose during the programme period to create a supporting environment for learning in schools. Innovation in terms of qualitative design, technology, functionality as well as implementation has been carried out to make schools student friendly. Construction of school buildings, classrooms, toilets, drinking water facility, boundary walls, rain water harvesting techniques, etc. is carried out through local bodies. (Department of School Education and Literacy and Department of Higher Education, MHRD, GOI, 2007)

Good school infrastructure is important to effective teaching and learning, as a World Bank Evaluation on Ghana indicates (World Bank, 2004a). Achieving Universalisation of Primary Education will require unprecedented development and refurbishment of classrooms in many countries. A priority in remote and rural areas, it is also important in many cities, to avoid overcrowding. School buildings should also be accessible to the disabled people. Clean water and sanitation facilities for boys and girls are basic elements of a healthy, safe and secure learning environment. A school system should be designed in such a way that every school will have material, pedagogical and other resources to provide education of the same quality and standard to every pupil.

The role of infrastructure is to support good infrastructural programs by providing a safe and inviting physical environment for learning- a role that often has taken backseat. It is clear that best reforms will fail if the physical environment impedes learning. The role of infrastructure was also captured by AASA (American Association of School Administration) when it stated:
"The most exciting curriculum innovations in the world have trouble succeeding in cold, dark, deteriorating classrooms. If the work environment is unattractive, uncomfortable and unsafe, school districts will have difficulty competing with other sectors of the economy……students know the difference too!"

Building a school is different from building an office building. The school building not only has to be functional and economical, it has to give a sense of self-worth to students. It has to show the community's commitment to education. Indeed, schools send an important message: we value our children. Or it may say: you are vital part of our community. We want you to feel safe, comfortable, challenged, inspired and proud- we believe in you and your future.
Even elementary school-age children are aware of the physical attributes of a setting. One study showed that children aged nine to eleven are more likely to identify untidy classrooms, dirty bathrooms and school walls painted in one colour as physical attributes that make their school not welcoming. A student may assume that authority in a poorly maintained school will accept or expect a lower standard of behaviour and scholastic effort.

Almost a half-century ago, the famous psychologist Abraham Maslow investigated the behaviour of subjects in three different rooms: a "neutral" control room, a "beautiful" room, and an "ugly" room. Observations revealed that the subjects in the "ugly" room performed

in different ways from others. Maslow concluded that the "ugly" environment produced feelings of discontent, fatigue and a desire to escape.

Buildings and other infrastructural aspects influence the perception of those attending that school. For example, in a study of all of the primary schools in Georgia, 4th grade students in non-modernized building recorded poorer results in basic skills assessment than those in modernized or new buildings (Plumley, 1978). A further study demonstrated an improvement in student achievement scores in newer facilities especially in sixth grade mathematics (Phillips, 1997).

However, Stricherz (2000) noted that student achievement lags in inadequate school buildings but suggested that there is no hard evidence to prove that student performance rises when facilities improve well beyond the norm. "Research shows that student achievement lags in shabby school buildings- those with no science labs, inadequate labs and faulty heating systems" Stricherz said. "But it does not show that student performance rises when facilities go from the equivalent of a Ford to a Ferrari- from decent buildings to those equipped with fancy classrooms, swimming pools and the like."

So, students' opinions stand as an important source for reforming the school conditions, which ultimately increase their achievement. Because they occupy the focal point, they can provide much information and insight about the nature of the elementary school.

Need of the Study

Children are constantly interacting with the physical environment of their schools during structured or unstructured time, consciously or unconsciously. Yet not enough attention is paid to the importance of physical environment for learning. Often classrooms are overcrowded, with no alternative spaces to learn, nor are they attractive, inviting or sensitive towards children's needs. Inappropriate school design may drastically affect the teacher's productive output and classroom management.

School infrastructure is the most expensive physical asset. Maximum educational value should be drawn from them. Uneven distribution of infrastructure facilities in schools creates a large divide between them compromising the basic tenet of equality of opportunity enshrined in our constitution. Lack of facilities has had another negative consequence. It has exerted pressure on curriculum designers and textbook writers to suit their work to the poor scenario of facilities and motivation.

The structuring if infrastructural facilities is essential for paving the way for creating a learner- friendly and activity- centric context. Setting norms and standards, especially relating to space, building and furniture would help in fostering a discerning sense of quality.

The enhancement of physical environment can bring not just a cosmetic change but also an inherent transformation in the way that it connects with the pedagogy and the child. So, the focus should be on ensuring that the minimum requirements of infrastructure and materials are available that will help in achieving curricular aims.

Objective

To study the students' perception regarding their expectations of infrastructural facilities required in a school.

Sample

For the purpose of study around 150 subjects were selected from 5 government schools of Delhi. The schools were selected on convenience basis. One section of class VIII was selected randomly from each school.

Tools and Techniques

Essay writing

Students were asked to write essays on 'My School'. No word limit was prescribed. To avoid focusing on a particular teacher, teacher- gender or on a particular school, students were asked to write the essays in general. This technique helped them to communicate their thoughts effectively.

The relevance of writing the essay of 'A poor teacher' was that the qualities of a good teacher can be established only in relative terms, which make it necessary to enumerate the qualities of successful teacher as compared to those of the ineffective ones.

The reason for using the essay writing technique is that it is an interpretive method Cohen and Manion (1981) pointed out that studies concerning pupil perceptions can either be normative or interpretive.

Normative studies identify preset criteria, as defined by others, for pupils to affectively rate. Interpretive studies allow pupils to express knowledge of a good teacher based upon their own classroom experience. The methodology of interpretive studies draws upon pupils' perceptions of classroom events which provide both relevant and valid constructs at the levels of the individual and the group as compared to the methodology of normative studies which delimits the investigation to preset criteria and may not account for all constructs of a good teacher. So, the perceptions of students obtained through interpretive study will be valid because they specifically unearthed in the research and are not derived from what others outside the immediate pupil experience.

An essay writing strategy assumes, however, that the child can effectively communicate his/her thoughts, feelings and ideas using this medium. One study conducted by Payne (1987) using essay approach shows that pupils can communicate well through essays and provide a useful backdrop, popularity and unpopularity of teachers.

Results and Discussion

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On the basis of the analysis of the essays obtained from the students by the invigilator, a bar chart was prepared. It depicts the school infrastructural facilities perceived important for a school by the students.

FIGURE 1: School Infrastructural Facilities As Perceived Important for a School by the Students.
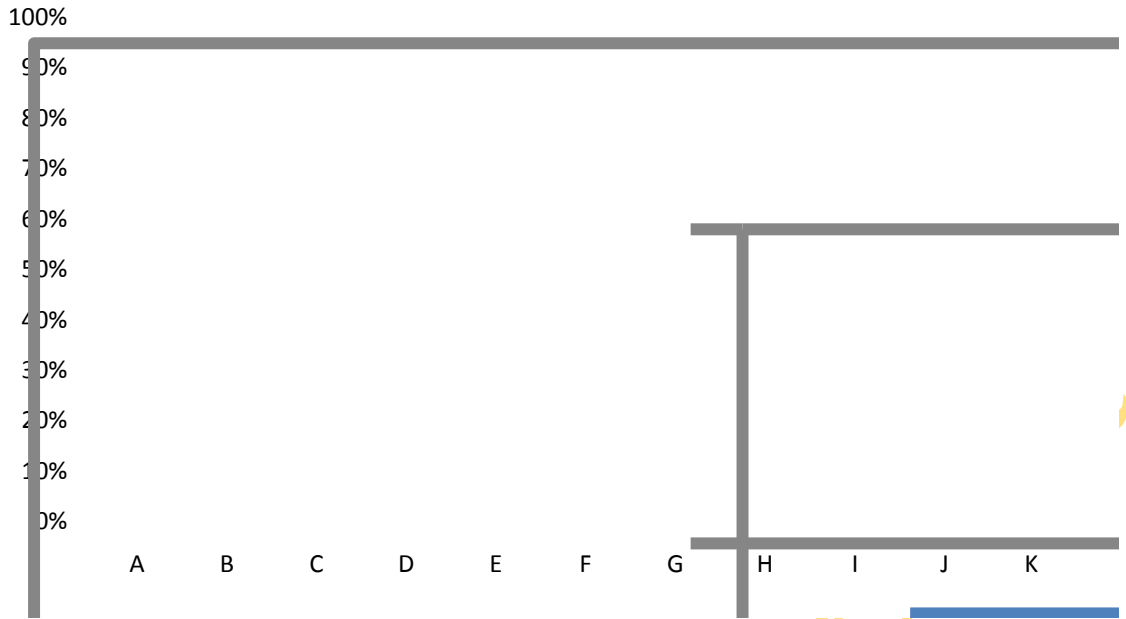
The infrastructural facility is marked on x-axis and the percentage of students   avouring that particular infrastructural facility is marked on y-axis. The variables on x-axis denote Big Playground and Play-Related Material, Sufficient and Good Condition of school Furniture and Fans and Tube lights, Clean and Hygienic Toilets, Drinking Water Facility, Clean and Green Surroundings, Computer Facility, Good Library, Teaching- Learning Material, Rooms for Different Co-curricular Activities, Medical Room, Other Facilities like school bus, canteen, lockers, almirah etc.

"The core facility of the learning environment should be so-called classroom." (Gardener, 2005) It is the setting where children spend a large amount of their time and experience learning. The modern classroom must be responsive to multiple delivery methods and varied ways of learning. It must be flexible and adaptable to accommodate multiple learning styles.

The present study revealed that at for most of the students the availability of a big playground and play-related material was most important. 88% of the students considered it an important resource for a school. The students had demanded for more games periods. Some students suggested that one period a day should be assigned for games in the time table. The investigator also suggests that each day in the school should start with the games period as this energizes the children and rejuvenates them.

Students do need some play material while playing in the playground. Students of all the sample schools agreed that a variety of play- related material like football, volleyball, badminton, rope, cricket kit etc should be available in the school and it should also be given to the students during the games period.

After playground facility, 84% students gave preference to the sufficient and good condition of school furniture and fans and tube lights as their inadequacy also affects the teaching-learning process indirectly. It is generally seen that these facilities are present in the schools but inadequately. Some students reported that due to shortage of desks, three students had to sit on one desk. The investigator herself observed that in one of the school, there were two tube lights and two bulbs, out of which only one bulb was working.

The results indicate that 80% of the students have asked for clean and hygienic toilets. A provision of separate toilet facility for boys and girls has also been listed in the Operation

Blackboard scheme. But, mere availability of the toilets is not sufficient; they should also be maintained properly so that they do not become a de-motivating factor for students to come to school. Many students in the school complained of non- availability of soap and water in toilets. Even research indicates that non- availability of separate girls' toilets in schools acts as an obstacle in bringing the girls to the school. (UNESCO –Global Monitoring Report, 2005)

76% students considered drinking water facility as important. The students also asserted that the drinking water should be available throughout the school hours and should be clean and pure.

It is good that 74% students have demanded clean and green surroundings. It is appreciable that they are aware of the importance of trees and cleanliness in our lives. Many of them remarked that there should be lot of trees in the school as they also add to its beauty.

A perusal of above figure shows that 72% of the students wanted computer facility in the schools. They wanted more computer periods and felt that they should always go to computer room during the computer period. Also, they asserted that the number of computers in the school should be sufficient so that all the students get the chance to operate the computer every time they visit the lab.

A good library is like a resource room where students can go and expand their horizons of knowledge. The basic purpose of a library is to help students explore the new knowledge and strengthen the old one.

The above figure shows that only 62% of students considered a good library an important infrastructure in the schools. All the students agreed that books should be issued to the students whenever they visit the library and all the books in the library were not accessible to them Students even expressed their desire to read the books of higher standards, those related to science and technology, encyclopaedias etc.

Almost 60% of the students that teaching- learning material should be used in schools as it make learning more interesting. It also helps the students in better understanding. Students emphasized on the use of flashcards, props, charts, models and even computer CDs while teaching.

Only 52% students considered rooms for different co-curricular activities as important. This could be because that these activities are not favoured much by the school as they are considered to be distracters in the teaching- learning process. They also asserted that the teacher should not just make them sit idle in these rooms during their respective periods and do their own work or ask the students to complete their pending work; these rooms should be used appropriately for the activity purposes.

Results indicate that 42% of the students considered that a medical room should be there in the school to help students in case of injury. Some students suggested the idea of having a first-aid box in each class.

As indicated in the figure above, only 40% of the students have asked for facilities like school bus, canteen, lockers, almirah etc. It was noted that these 40% students belong mostly to the schools where basic facilities are being provided satisfactorily i.e. why these students are able to think beyond them.

It was observed that students in schools with adequate infrastructural facilities demanded more advanced facilities whereas demands of the students from schools with inadequate

facilities were limited to the fulfilment of the basic facilities itself. For example, schools where computer facility was already present, students there demanded for computers in their classrooms. However, schools where it was not present, students demanded for the same.

Conclusion

School infrastructural facilities provide the fertile ground for the interaction process between the teacher and the students. Every school needs attractive environment and adequate infrastructural facilities to create a conducive academic atmosphere. Although, in the past, various educationists like Rabindranath Tagore have stressed on learning in natural surroundings but at the same time, they have also emphasized on presence of good infrastructural facilities in the school. An ideal school, according to Tagore, should be a self-governing institution, has a dairy farm, post office, hospital and workshops. There should be a well-equipped library.....etc. Today in the world of ICT, the schools should be fully equipped with computers and other multimedia equipments to make the students competent at the global level.

In keeping with the new "learning with fun" mantra, schools are now on their way to replace blackboards with laptops and LCD projectors. And the approach is colourful. Multihued fans, pastel walls, floor tiles with colourful numbers embedded in them and desks with painted on measurement scales are all set to add to the innovative learning experience. Directorate of education recently introduced the BaLa (Building as Learning Aid) concept in its 917 schools to bring about a change in the school environment. . But there is still a long way to go.

Students; responses reveal a great deal about the situation of the schools in Delhi. It was found that students wanted certain changes in the school infrastructure with changing times. Some schools do not have adequate facilities. Also, the schools where facilities are adequate, they are not utilized properly by the school authorities for the benefit of the students.

Implications for Further Research

The following suggestions for further research can be given:

The present study has been conducted on a limited sample of only class VIII. A comparative study including a large sample of the students of various elementary school classes can also be carried out.

Various factors like socio-cultural background, gender etc. may influence the perception of students. So, a study including these variables can also be carried out.

Researches may be conducted to study the interrelationship of the school infrastructural facilities with the students' academic outcomes.

A comparative study of the government and private schools can be carried out to study the perception of students regarding the adequacy of school infrastructural facilities.

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