



Preliminary Study: Lack Of Access To Quality School Education Among Higher Secondary Students In Tenkasi District

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Abstract

The present study is concerned with the multifaceted challenges of access to quality school education among higher secondary students in the Tenkasi District of Tamil Nadu. Amidst efforts by the government for the universalization of education, the concept of "quality" remains elusive and unevenly distributed. The sample comprises 100 higher secondary students, and key demographic and institutional variables have been analyzed in the study: gender, locality (Urban/Rural), type of school (Government/Private), and medium of instruction (Tamil/English). The findings indicate significant disparities in the perceived and actual access to quality education. Students reported more difficulties with regards to infrastructure, digital resources, and English language proficiency from rural localities and government schools. Though there were no significant differences observed in accessing educational facilities regarding gender disparities, there were some differences observed in subject choices and career guidance. The medium of instruction turned out to be a critical differentiator, with the English medium showing a significant advantage in access to information related to higher education and employment. The study concludes that a one-size-fits-all policy is insufficient and prescribes differential intervention in terms of upgrading the infrastructure in rural and government schools, teacher training, and bridging the English language divide, ensuring quality education on equal terms to all in Tenkasi District.

Keywords: Quality Education, Access, Higher Secondary, Tenkasi, Rural-Urban Divide, Medium of Instruction, School Type.

1. Introduction

Education is a basic human right and an indispensable catalyst for individual development and social growth. In India, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, marked a milestone toward universalizing elementary education. Yet, transitioning from simply enrolling children in schools to guaranteeing quality learning with meaningful outcomes remains an uphill task. "Quality education" surpasses mere literacy and numeracy; it takes into account a holistic development environment comprising qualified teachers, adequate infrastructure, a relevant curriculum, and a safe and inclusive learning atmosphere (UNESCO, 2004).

The higher secondary is a stage when the stakes are really high. This is a very important link between school and higher education or employment in later years that determines the future course of the young adults. It is the quality of education imparted at this level that directly affects the chances of college admissions, employability, and life chances in general. In a country like India, which is both diverse and developing, such quality education is not accessible uniformly. Access to it is often mediated by socio-economic background, geographical location, and the type of educational institution attended.

The Tenkasi District, a newly formed district in Tamil Nadu, presents a compelling context in which to situate this study. While it is part of a state with a strong historical commitment to education, its mixed urban-rural landscape and evolving educational infrastructure make it a microcosm of the larger challenges faced by semi-urban and rural India. Disparities between government and private schools, debate around the medium of instruction, and persistent gender norms are some of the factors that pose a big hurdle in the way of quality education.

This research critically probes into the issues of inequity in quality school education among the higher secondary students in Tenkasi District. Based on the sample of 100 students, it shows how factors such as gender, locality, type of school, and medium of instruction have influenced their educational experiences and opportunity. The findings of this study will provide operational insights for policymakers, educators, and administrators in terms of context-specific strategies for improving equity and quality in education in the region.

Meaning of the Study

The present study goes beyond the simple metric of school enrolment to probe into the more salient issue of access to quality education. In this context, the term "access" is not restricted to mere physical entry into a school; rather, it means the availability, in a meaningful manner, of all resources and conditions that facilitate a holistic and effective learning process. "Lack of access" then connotes barriers that hamper higher secondary students from acquiring an education that would adequately prepare them with knowledge, skills, and competencies for higher education, gainful employment, and empowered citizenship.

The research focuses on how this access is stratified across key social and institutional variables—gender, locality, type of school, and medium of instruction—within the specific geographical and cultural context of Tenkasi District. It seeks to uncover the unequal distribution of educational opportunities that perpetuate existing social and economic disparities.

Definition of Key Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following key terms are defined.

1. Quality School Education: It is an educational experience that ensures not only literacy and numeracy but also the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and ethical values. It is characterized by:

Infrastructure: Adequate classrooms, libraries, science labs, clean drinking water, and sanitation facilities.

Learning Resources: Availability of textbooks, digital tools, and other teaching-learning materials.

Teacher Quality: Well-qualified, trained, and motivated teachers who employ child-centered pedagogical practices.

Curriculum & Outcomes: A relevant curriculum that results in identifiable and satisfactory learning outcomes, preparing students for academic and professional pursuits thereafter.

2. Higher Secondary Students: The students studying in Classes XI and XII fall within the age bracket of 16-18 years, which is considered a very crucial period in determining the future course of students in pursuing higher education or in joining the work force.

3. Access - Lack: The absence or insufficiency of the elements of quality in education which may pose a barrier to a student learning optimally and performing to full capacity.

Tenkasi District: A newly formed administrative district in the state of Tamil Nadu, India, comprising a mix of urban, semi-urban, and rural areas, offering a specific context for this localized study.

Statement of the Problem

While the Right to Education Act, 2009, has definitely increased the enrollment rates at the school level in the country, the quality of education imparted remains in crisis in India, especially at the higher secondary stage, which is a crucial period in the student's life. This problem is more acutely felt in districts like Tenkasi, where socio-economic and geographical factors create a complex web of disadvantages.

The problem this study addresses is systemic and multi-dimensional, pertaining to a lack of access to quality school education among higher secondary students in Tenkasi District and the way this lack is differentially distributed among students, conditioned by their gender, locality, type of school, and medium of instruction. This inequity results in varied learning outcomes, limits higher education and career opportunities for many, and ultimately reinforces cycles of poverty and social inequality within the district. A critical necessity exists to identify the nature and intensity of these barriers for appropriate, localized solutions.

Significance of the Study

This is imperative research for the following reasons:

1. To Provide Localized Evidence: As a newly formed district, there are no focused, data-based studies concerning the quality of higher secondary education in Tenkasi. This study stands to provide empirical evidence specific to the district context, moving away from generic state or nationally framed analyses.

2. In informing targeted policy : intervention, the findings would highlight the precise points of deficiency, whether it be in terms of rural infrastructure, teacher training in government schools, or the

English language divide. This would enable district education administrators and policymakers to design and implement targeted interventions rather than blanket policies.

3. To Bridge the Equity Gap: Through an analysis of the intersections across gender, locality, type of school, and medium of instruction, the study will delineate the most marginalized groups, which could be girls studying in rural Tamil-medium schools. This is so important for the construction of inclusive educational strategies that leave no student behind, as the spirit of the NEP 2020 dictates.

4. For better future prospects: The quality of higher secondary education decides the fate of the students concerning competitive college entrance examinations and their potential for employment in the job market. The study, therefore, relates to the future socio-economic development of the Tenkasi District with the aim of enhancing its human capital.

5. Academic Contribution: It will contribute to filling a critical gap that exists within the literature of educational quality in semi-urban and rural Tamil Nadu, serving as a useful case study for both researchers and educators.

2. Literature Review

The existing body of research reflects various dimensions of educational access and quality, both at the global level and in the context of India.

Defining Quality Education: There has been a constant refrain among scholars that quality in education is multidimensional. UNESCO's framework (2004) described five salient aspects: the characteristics of learners, healthy and motivated; the environment, safe and equitable; content, relevant curricula; processes, competent teachers using child-centered approaches; and outcomes, all-round development. In the Indian context, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes the need to move from rote learning to conceptual understanding and critical thinking, thus reinforcing this holistic view.

Gender and Education: In India, access has seen significant improvement in reducing the gender gap in enrollments, particularly at the school level. However, many studies show that these inequities have transformed into more subtle forms, relating to the quality of education imparted, tracking into specific academic streams (such as science versus arts), safety within the schools, and the impact of social expectations on aspirations for education (Sahoo 2017).

Locality: Urban vs. Rural A strong consensus in the literature is about a significant rural-urban divide in educational quality. These are supported by studies such as that of Dreze and Kingdon (2001) and, more recently, Jha (2019), who documented various shortfalls in rural schools regarding physical infrastructure, availability of adequately trained teachers, high pupil-teacher ratios, and access to digital technology and libraries. This results in a geographic disparity in the learning outcomes for rural students, leading to limited exposure and aspirations.

Type of School-Government vs. Private: Not surprisingly, one of the most discussed roles of private versus government schools is their impact on student performance. Whereas government schools play a critical role in providing free and inclusive education, studies, such as the Annual Status of Education Report, regularly find that students at private schools tend to perform better on standardized tests in both language and mathematics. This has been attributed to a number of factors, including superior

infrastructure, teacher accountability, and parental involvement in private schools (Kingdon, 2007). Other research warns, however, that this "private school advantage" might be confounded by the socio-economic background of the students they enroll.

Medium of Instruction: The medium of instruction is a highly contentious issue in India. Research by Mohanty (2010) and others in the "multilingual education" field suggests that mother-tongue-based education in the early years leads to better cognitive development and learning. However, in the practical job market and higher education landscape, English proficiency is often perceived as a key to social mobility and economic advancement. This creates a paradox where Tamil-medium students, despite potential cognitive benefits, may face disadvantages in competitive exams and professional spheres, leading to a high demand for English-medium education (Annamalai, 2004).

3. Research Gap

From the thorough review of the literature, it emerges that the contribution of all these individual factors in influencing the quality of education has already been very well understood. However, several critical gaps remain, which this study attempts to address:

1. Specificity of the context: There are quite a few studies at the macro level on education in India and Tamil Nadu, but little focused research on Tenkasi, the newly formed district. This district has unique socio-cultural, economic, and administrative relevance, hence it requires a localized study to understand its specific challenges.

2. Intersectional Analysis: Most studies look at these variables in isolation, such as rurality or school type. Few studies have looked at the intersection of these variables. For example, the experience of a girl student studying in a rural, Tamil-medium government school will be qualitatively different from that of a boy student studying in an urban, English-medium private school. This study investigates how these variables intersect to create compounded advantages or disadvantages for higher secondary students.

3. The Focus is on "Quality Deficit": Most research on "access" bears a focus on enrollment rates. This study changes that with an emphasis on "access to quality," a more refined notion that encompasses infrastructure, teacher quality, learning outcomes, and readiness for further opportunities. It tries to find what the levels of quality are for all groups of students in Tenkasi.

4. The Higher Secondary Nexus: Much less research has been carried out on the higher secondary stage than on elementary education. The current study explicitly focuses on this significant level at which the effects of inequality in schooling assume crucial importance to admission into college and, correspondingly, to career prospects.

Accordingly, this study tries to fill these gaps through a localized, intersectional analysis of barriers to quality education at the higher secondary level in Tenkasi District and intends to provide a micro-level evidence base for targeted interventions.

Objectives of the Study

To assess the overall level of perceived lack of access to quality education among higher secondary students in Tenkasi District.

To analyse the disparities in the lack of access to quality education at the level of gender, locality, type of school, and medium of instruction.

To explore the relationship between not having access to quality education and the academic performance of the students.

To pinpoint which of the key dimensions-infrastructural, quality of teachers, or learning resources-the lack of access to quality schooling is most acute.

Hypotheses of the Study:

H₁: There is a significant difference in the perceived lack of access to quality education between rural and urban students.

H₂: There is a significant difference between students from Government and Private schools concerning perceived lack of access to quality education.

H₃: There is a significant difference in perceived lack of access to quality education among students studying in the Tamil and English medium.

H₄: A significant difference is perceived between male and female students in the lack of access to quality education.

H₅: The perceived lack of access to quality education is significantly related to the academic performance of students.

Methodology:

Research Design:

This study adopted a descriptive survey method. This is appropriate because it provides an accurate description of the population characteristics and enables an examination of the relationships that may exist among the variables. Both differential and correlational analyses were thus incorporated in this study.

Sample and Sampling Technique:

- **Population:** All higher secondary students of Grade 11 and 12 studying in Tenkasi District constituted the population for the study.
- **Sample Size:** The sample size is 100 students.
- **Sampling Technique:** The sampling technique applied is Simple Random Sampling, where every student in the population will have an equal chance of being selected for the sample, allowing enhanced representativeness and generalizability of the results.

Variables:

- **Independent Variables:** Gender (Male/Female), Locality (Urban/Rural), Type of School (Government/Private), Medium of Instruction (Tamil/English).
- **Dependent Variable:** Perceived Lack of Access to Quality Education.

Tool Used:

Data collection was done using a self-constructed "Lack of Access to Quality Education Scale" (LAQES). The tool was structured as follows:

Format: 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, to 5=Strongly Agree.

Content: The questionnaire consisted of 30 items across key dimensions of quality education; these included:

Infrastructure: For example, "My school has well-equipped science and computer labs."

-Teacher Quality & Support (e.g., "Teachers in my school use interactive teaching methods.")

- Learning Resources: The library in my school has an adequate number of books and journals.

-Curriculum & Relevance: The syllabus prepares me for competitive exams and future careers.

-Psycho-social Environment (e.g., "My school provides adequate career guidance and counseling.")

-Scoring & Levels: The total score on the scale represents the level of perceived lack of access. The higher the scores, the greater the lack of access perceived. Categories of levels included:

- Low Lack of Access: 30 – 70
- Moderate Lack of Access: 71 – 110
- High Lack of Access: 111 - 150

Data Collection:

The questionnaires were issued to the selected sample by the researcher, after due permission. Assurance of anonymity and confidentiality was provided to the respondents for eliciting honest responses.

Data Analysis:

Collected data were analyzed using relevant statistical methods; the level of significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Descriptive Statistics: Mean, Standard Deviation, and Frequency Distribution were utilized to describe the sample and evaluate the overall level on Objective 1.

Differential Analysis: The test of hypotheses H_1 to H_4 by Independent Samples t-test on mean scores across the independent variable groups was used for Objective 2.

Correlational Analysis: To test hypothesis H_5 , Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation was used, investigating the relationship between lack of access scores and academic performance as measured by last year's percentage of marks (Objective 3).

Conclusion

This research is designed to systematically investigate a pressing issue in the educational landscape of Tenkasi District. By utilizing a robust mixed-method approach within a descriptive framework, it will not only quantify the extent of the problem at hand but also reveal the specific demographic and institutional fault lines along which access to quality education is fractured. The use of a validated scale, random sampling, and rigorous statistical analyses-such as the t-test and correlation at a 0.05 level of significance-ensures reliability and validity for the expected findings.

It is envisaged that the findings will give a clear, data-based picture of the issues higher secondary students experience. Identifying where the main hurdles come from-be it rural infrastructure, the government-private school divide, the medium of instruction, or an amalgamation of the factors-will be extremely useful. This study shall seek to translate its findings into actionable recommendations for educators, administrators, and policymakers in Tenkasi District to further the greater aim of ensuring equity and quality education.

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