



## Teacher Quality and Effectiveness under the RTE Act

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### Abstract

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009) has expanded access to primary education in India, yet learning outcomes in rural schools remain suboptimal. This study examines the role of teacher quality and effectiveness in influencing student achievement under the RTE framework. Using a mixed-method approach, the paper combines secondary quantitative data from ASER reports (2010–2022) and Government of India education statistics with qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews with teachers and headmasters in rural districts. Findings indicate that teacher absenteeism, inadequate pedagogical training, and limited accountability significantly constrain learning outcomes. The study emphasizes the need for continuous professional development, performance-based incentives, technology integration, and decentralized governance to enhance teacher effectiveness. Policy recommendations focus on bridging the gap between access and learning, ensuring that legislative provisions translate into substantive educational outcomes.

### Introduction

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE, 2009) represents one of the most significant legislative milestones in India's educational history, marking a paradigmatic shift from access-focused schooling policies to a rights-based framework. By constitutionally guaranteeing primary education for all children aged 6 to 14 years, the Act not only sought to increase enrollment but also aimed to promote equity, reduce social exclusion, and uphold the principle of inclusive education (Banerjee et al., 2010). Over the past decade, the RTE Act has led to substantial gains in enrollment, particularly among marginalized groups, and has contributed to reducing gender disparities in rural and urban settings. Despite these achievements, persistent evidence indicates that mere access to schools does not necessarily translate into improved learning outcomes, particularly in rural India where infrastructural deficits, socio-economic constraints, and pedagogical limitations remain prevalent (ASER Centre, 2020). Research on educational effectiveness highlights teacher quality as a central determinant of student learning. Teachers are not merely transmitters of content; they shape classroom climate, facilitate student engagement, and implement instructional strategies that directly influence learning trajectories (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Rockoff, 2004). In rural Indian schools, challenges such as multi-grade classrooms, inadequate training, limited teaching resources, and high pupil-teacher ratios often constrain teacher effectiveness, thereby undermining the potential impact of RTE interventions. Empirical studies further reveal that teacher absenteeism, low motivation, and a lack of continuous professional development exacerbate these challenges, creating systemic barriers to the achievement of learning outcomes (Muralidharan & Sundararaman, 2011; Duflo, Hanna, & Ryan, 2012). From a theoretical perspective, the effectiveness of teachers can be conceptualized through a capability-based lens, which emphasizes not only the presence of schooling infrastructure but also the actual functioning of educational institutions in enabling children to develop cognitive, social, and critical thinking capabilities (Sen, 1999). Applying this lens to RTE implementation underscores that access alone is insufficient; the quality and efficacy of teaching processes play a crucial role in transforming educational opportunities into meaningful learning experiences. This study therefore seeks to investigate the multiple dimensions of teacher quality under the RTE Act, including attendance, pedagogical competence, professional development, and accountability mechanisms, and to examine how these factors affect learning outcomes in rural schools. By integrating quantitative data from ASER and government reports with qualitative insights from field interviews, the paper aims to provide a holistic assessment of teacher effectiveness, identify systemic barriers, and suggest strategies to enhance instructional quality. Addressing these teacher-related constraints is critical for ensuring that legislative provisions under the RTE translate into substantive educational gains, particularly in regions where socio-economic and institutional challenges intersect to limit the potential of rural learners.



Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader discourse on education policy in India by emphasizing the centrality of teacher effectiveness in achieving the twin objectives of equity and quality. In doing so, it provides evidence-based insights for policymakers, administrators, and educational practitioners seeking to align RTE implementation with the goal of improving learning outcomes for all children.

### Literature Review

**Allen (2011)** schools can systematically improve teacher quality and effectiveness. The study emphasizes that teacher effectiveness does not solely depend on formal qualifications but is strongly influenced by institutional support, continuous professional development, mentorship programs, and collaborative practices. Allen's findings indicate that schools implementing structured induction programs and peer collaboration initiatives experience significant improvements in instructional quality and student engagement. The research also highlights that enhancing teacher quality requires a combination of top-down mandates and bottom-up initiatives, including giving teachers autonomy in classroom decisions and opportunities for reflective practice. The study suggests that a holistic approach, integrating pedagogy, motivation, and ongoing skill development, can sustainably enhance learning outcomes. These insights are particularly relevant in the context of the RTE framework, as improving teacher quality in rural schools depends not only on legislative provisions but also on practical interventions and school-level support mechanisms.

**Anders et al. (2012)** relationship between early childhood education (ECE) quality and teacher training, highlighting that teacher preparation directly impacts the developmental and cognitive outcomes of young learners. Their study demonstrates that teachers who receive structured training in child-centered pedagogical approaches, classroom management, and developmental assessment are more effective in fostering learning, engagement, and socio-emotional development. The research emphasizes that the quality of teacher training programs—both in terms of duration and content relevance—is critical for ensuring that teachers can implement developmentally appropriate practices in diverse classroom contexts. Anders et al. argue that continuous professional development and practical, hands-on training are more effective than purely theoretical instruction, as they enhance teachers' capacity to translate knowledge into actionable teaching strategies. These findings are particularly relevant in the context of India's RTE framework, as the quality of early teacher training in rural and underserved areas can significantly influence long-term learning outcomes, ensuring that access to education translates into meaningful cognitive development.

**Barro and Lee (2013)** dataset on global educational attainment, providing a critical foundation for analyzing the relationship between education levels and socio-economic development. Their work highlights that teacher quality and learning outcomes are closely linked to overall educational attainment in a country, with higher levels of qualified teachers correlating with improved student performance and literacy rates. The dataset allows for cross-country and longitudinal comparisons, illustrating how disparities in access to quality education—particularly in developing regions—can affect long-term economic growth and human capital formation. Importantly, Barro and Lee emphasize that quantitative measures of attainment must be complemented with qualitative assessments, such as classroom instruction and teacher effectiveness, to fully understand education outcomes. In the context of India's RTE framework, these insights underscore that increasing enrollment alone is insufficient; enhancing teacher training, instructional quality, and classroom effectiveness is essential for raising educational attainment and achieving meaningful learning outcomes in rural and underserved areas.

**Duflo, Hanna, and Ryan (2012)** impact of performance-based incentives on teacher attendance in Indian public schools, providing empirical evidence that financial incentives can significantly reduce absenteeism and improve instructional delivery. Their study, conducted as a randomized field experiment, demonstrates that teachers respond positively when compensation is directly linked to verified attendance, leading to increased classroom



engagement and student exposure to learning opportunities. The research also highlights the broader implications of accountability mechanisms, showing that incentives alone are most effective when coupled with proper monitoring and administrative oversight. These findings are particularly relevant under the RTE framework, as teacher absenteeism remains a persistent challenge in rural India, limiting the effectiveness of legislative mandates aimed at universal education. By emphasizing incentive structures and performance monitoring, the study provides actionable strategies for policymakers seeking to enhance teacher effectiveness and, consequently, student learning outcomes.

**Glewwe and Muralidharan (2016)** provide a comprehensive review of interventions aimed at improving education outcomes in developing countries, with a particular focus on teacher quality, instructional methods, and policy mechanisms. Their study emphasizes that teacher effectiveness is among the most critical determinants of student learning, surpassing factors such as school infrastructure or basic access in many contexts. The authors highlight that targeted interventions, including performance incentives, remedial teaching programs, and professional development, can substantially enhance learning outcomes when implemented effectively. They also note that simply increasing enrollment or resources does not guarantee improved learning, especially in low-income and rural settings, where pedagogical capacity and teacher engagement are often limited. In the context of India's RTE Act, the findings underscore the importance of focusing on teacher quality and instructional practices rather than solely expanding access, as improvements in these areas are essential to translating legislative rights into meaningful educational gains for students.

### Methodology

#### Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively assess teacher effectiveness under the RTE framework in rural India. The mixed-methods approach allows for triangulation of data, combining numerical analysis of learning outcomes with in-depth contextual understanding from field insights. Quantitative methods capture systemic trends, relationships, and statistical patterns in student achievement and teacher characteristics, while qualitative methods provide rich, contextualized narratives about classroom practices, institutional constraints, and motivational factors affecting teachers. This design is particularly suitable for education policy research, where complex phenomena such as teacher quality, instructional behavior, and rural schooling contexts cannot be fully understood through a single method (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The study focuses on rural primary schools, where challenges in teacher effectiveness are often most pronounced due to limited resources, multi-grade teaching, and socio-economic disparities. By examining these contexts, the research seeks to identify actionable insights for improving teacher performance, thereby linking legislative access under RTE with actual learning outcomes.

#### Data Sources

The research draws on multiple complementary data sources to ensure robustness and validity:

1. **ASER Reports (2010–2022):** Annual Status of Education Reports provide state- and district-level data on student learning outcomes, particularly literacy and numeracy skills. These data allow longitudinal analysis of trends in student performance and comparison across rural regions.
2. **Government of India Education Statistics:** Official records provide detailed information on teacher qualifications, experience, pupil-teacher ratios, attendance, and school infrastructure. These data enable quantitative modeling of how teacher-related factors correlate with student outcomes.
3. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Field interviews were conducted with 60 teachers, 30 headmasters, and 10 education officials across five rural districts selected based on socio-economic diversity and school performance indicators. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to share their experiences, challenges, and strategies, providing qualitative



insight into **classroom practices, professional development opportunities, and motivational dynamics.**

4. **Policy Documents and Program Reports:** Relevant government circulars, RTE implementation guidelines, and district-level educational program reports were also reviewed to contextualize findings and identify policy-level enablers and constraints.

### Analytical Approach

The analysis combines rigorous quantitative modeling with qualitative thematic analysis to provide a holistic understanding of teacher effectiveness:

#### 1. Quantitative Analysis:

- **Regression Modeling:** Linear and multilevel regression models are used to examine the relationship between teacher characteristics (attendance, professional training, years of experience, and pupil-teacher ratios) and student performance in literacy and numeracy.
- **Trend Analysis:** Longitudinal data from ASER and government reports are analyzed to track changes in teacher performance indicators and student learning outcomes over time.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Rural-urban comparisons are performed to contextualize disparities and identify region-specific teacher effectiveness challenges.

#### 2. Qualitative Analysis:

- **Thematic Coding:** Interview transcripts are coded thematically to identify recurring patterns related to teaching practices, institutional support, challenges in multi-grade classrooms, and motivational factors.
- **Triangulation:** Qualitative insights are triangulated with quantitative findings to provide deeper explanatory power, particularly in understanding **why certain teacher characteristics have stronger effects on learning outcomes in rural contexts.**
- **Policy-Relevant Interpretation:** Themes are interpreted in light of RTE implementation guidelines, identifying gaps between policy intentions and on-ground realities.

### Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to strict ethical standards, including informed consent from all participants, confidentiality of responses, and voluntary participation. Data were anonymized to protect teachers and students, and the research protocol was approved by an institutional review board.

### Teacher Absenteeism

Teacher absenteeism continues to be a major challenge in rural Indian schools, with reported rates ranging from **20% to 35%**, particularly in geographically remote or socio-economically disadvantaged areas (Duflo, Hanna, & Ryan, 2012; Muralidharan & Sundararaman, 2011). Absenteeism is influenced by multiple factors, including low accountability mechanisms, lack of monitoring, and limited incentives for regular attendance. Quantitative analysis from ASER and government education statistics shows a strong negative correlation between teacher presence and student learning outcomes, particularly in literacy and numeracy for Grades 3–5. Schools with high absenteeism often exhibit lower student achievement, indicating that increased enrollment under the RTE Act does not automatically translate into effective instructional exposure. Interviews with headmasters suggest that absenteeism is exacerbated by inadequate administrative oversight and insufficient engagement of local communities in monitoring school operations.

### Pedagogical Training and Professional Development

The study finds significant variation in in-service teacher training and professional development across rural districts. While some schools provide structured training programs on learner-centered pedagogy, multi-grade teaching strategies, and classroom management, many teachers report irregular, short-duration, and largely theoretical workshops. Teachers who participate in comprehensive professional development demonstrate higher classroom engagement, improved instructional strategies, and better student outcomes, as measured by literacy and numeracy scores. Qualitative interviews indicate that teachers value hands-on and context-specific training, which enables them to adapt teaching methods to heterogeneous classrooms. Conversely, lack of structured professional development is linked to continued



reliance on rote learning and limited adoption of interactive teaching practices, underscoring the critical role of sustained, high-quality teacher training in improving learning outcomes under the RTE framework (Anders et al., 2012; Allen, 2011).

### **Instructional Practices**

Classroom observations reveal that traditional lecture-style instruction dominates, with minimal use of learner-centered or differentiated pedagogical approaches. In many rural schools, multi-grade teaching is prevalent, requiring teachers to instruct students at different learning levels simultaneously. This complexity often reduces individual attention for students, particularly those lagging behind grade-level expectations. The data indicate that such instructional practices are associated with stagnating literacy and numeracy skills, despite improvements in enrollment. Interviews suggest that teachers often feel underprepared for multi-grade instruction and lack the resources to implement interactive or activity-based learning. The findings highlight the disconnect between RTE-mandated access and the quality of teaching, pointing to the need for pedagogical reforms that equip teachers with practical classroom strategies and adaptive teaching skills.

### **Accountability and Motivation**

Teacher motivation and accountability emerge as key determinants of instructional effectiveness. Schools with active supervision, regular performance feedback, and functional School Management Committees (SMCs) exhibit higher teacher attendance, engagement, and classroom effectiveness. Performance monitoring—through both district-level officials and local governance structures—has a demonstrable impact on reducing absenteeism and improving instructional practices. Qualitative evidence from interviews shows that teachers in schools with strong accountability mechanisms feel more responsible for student outcomes and are more likely to adopt innovative teaching strategies. Conversely, weak oversight and inactive SMCs correlate with lower engagement, minimal instructional variation, and persistent reliance on rote teaching methods. These findings suggest that structural accountability mechanisms and motivational incentives are essential to bridge the gap between RTE-mandated access and actual learning outcomes in rural contexts.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study underscore that teacher effectiveness is a central determinant of the RTE Act's impact on learning outcomes in rural India. While the RTE framework has succeeded in expanding enrollment and improving gender parity, mere access to schooling does not guarantee meaningful learning. As observed, teacher absenteeism, inconsistent professional development, reliance on rote instruction, and inadequate accountability mechanisms collectively limit the effectiveness of classroom teaching. These factors reinforce the broader "learning crisis" identified in rural contexts, where students may attend school regularly but still fail to achieve grade-appropriate literacy and numeracy skills (Glewwe & Muralidharan, 2016; Duflo, Hanna, & Ryan, 2012). From a capability perspective, the RTE Act creates opportunities for children to access education, yet the transformation of these opportunities into tangible capabilities depends on the quality of teaching (Sen, 1999). Teachers function as the primary agents through which educational rights are realized; their presence, pedagogical competence, motivation, and engagement directly influence whether students can acquire cognitive, social, and critical thinking skills. The persistence of low learning outcomes despite universal enrollment highlights a structural disconnect between legislative mandates and classroom realities, pointing to the need for policy interventions that extend beyond infrastructure and access. Professional development and pedagogical support emerge as critical levers for enhancing teacher effectiveness. Structured in-service training, ongoing mentorship, and opportunities for reflective practice enable teachers to adopt learner-centered strategies, manage multi-grade classrooms, and differentiate instruction according to students' diverse learning needs. The qualitative evidence from this study emphasizes that teachers in rural schools respond positively to context-specific training, which equips them with practical strategies rather than purely theoretical knowledge. This aligns with global



research indicating that continuous, practice-oriented professional development is one of the most effective interventions for improving student learning outcomes (Anders et al., 2012; Allen, 2011).

Accountability and motivation mechanisms are equally important. The study demonstrates that schools with active supervision, performance feedback, and functional School Management Committees achieve higher teacher attendance, engagement, and instructional quality. Coupling these accountability structures with performance-linked incentives, as evidenced in randomized field experiments (Duflo, Hanna, & Ryan, 2012), can further reinforce teacher motivation and reduce absenteeism. By linking professional incentives to measurable outcomes, policymakers can create conditions that encourage teachers to remain present, actively engaged, and responsive to students' learning needs.

Integrating technology provides another promising pathway for strengthening teacher effectiveness, particularly in rural and multi-grade settings. Adaptive learning tools, digital lesson plans, and interactive teaching resources can support differentiated instruction, enable real-time tracking of student progress, and reduce the instructional burden on teachers managing heterogeneous classrooms. Technology, when combined with targeted professional development and structured accountability mechanisms, can amplify the capacity of teachers to deliver high-quality instruction, even in resource-constrained rural schools (Glewwe & Muralidharan, 2016).

Finally, the discussion highlights a broader policy implication: achieving meaningful learning under the RTE framework requires shifting from an access-centric paradigm to a learning-centric approach. Legislative guarantees alone are insufficient; policymakers must focus on teacher quality, classroom practices, and institutional support mechanisms. Rural education programs that integrate professional development, performance incentives, robust accountability, and technology-mediated instructional support are most likely to bridge the gap between formal enrollment and substantive learning outcomes. In essence, the transformative potential of RTE is contingent not only on universal access but also on the quality, motivation, and capability of teachers, who remain the linchpin in translating educational rights into tangible student learning.

### Policy Recommendations

1. **Continuous Professional Development:** Structured in-service training with classroom mentoring and practical pedagogical modules.
2. **Attendance and Accountability Systems:** Digital tracking and community oversight to reduce absenteeism.
3. **Performance-Based Incentives:** Link teacher appraisal to student learning outcomes.
4. **Technology Integration:** Use adaptive learning platforms to support individualized instruction.
5. **Decentralized Governance:** Empower School Management Committees to participate in teacher evaluation and support.

### Conclusion

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE, 2009) represents a landmark legislative effort to ensure universal access to primary education in India. Over the past decade, the Act has significantly improved enrollment rates, reduced gender disparities, and increased the inclusivity of rural schools. However, this study demonstrates that access alone is insufficient to guarantee meaningful learning outcomes. Persistent challenges related to teacher effectiveness—including absenteeism, insufficient professional development, limited pedagogical skills, and weak accountability mechanisms—continue to constrain student achievement, particularly in literacy and numeracy. These findings underscore that the transformative potential of RTE depends not only on the formal provision of schooling but also on the quality of instructional delivery within classrooms. From a capability perspective, education is not merely about physical access or enrollment; it is about enabling children to acquire cognitive, social, and problem-solving competencies that empower them to participate



fully in society (Sen, 1999). The study highlights that teacher-related factors are the critical link between legislative mandates and actual learning. Rural schools facing high teacher absenteeism and reliance on rote-based instruction fail to convert increased access into tangible educational gains. Conversely, schools with structured professional development, robust accountability mechanisms, and supportive school management practices exhibit higher teacher engagement, improved instructional quality, and better student outcomes. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive, multi-dimensional strategy. First, continuous professional development that emphasizes learner-centered and multi-grade instructional strategies can strengthen teacher pedagogical capacity. Second, performance-linked incentives and effective monitoring systems can improve teacher motivation and attendance. Third, technology integration, such as adaptive learning tools and digital resources, can support individualized instruction and mitigate the challenges of heterogeneous classrooms. Finally, decentralized governance, empowering local School Management Committees and community oversight, ensures that accountability mechanisms are context-sensitive and responsive to local educational needs. While the RTE Act has laid the foundation for equitable access to education, its success in fostering meaningful learning is contingent upon enhancing teacher effectiveness. Legislative guarantees must be complemented with targeted interventions aimed at professional development, motivational incentives, pedagogical support, and school-level governance reforms. By prioritizing teacher quality as the central lever of educational improvement, India can transform the promise of universal schooling under RTE into realized capabilities, cognitive development, and sustainable learning outcomes for all children, particularly those in underserved rural regions.

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