

Stakeholders' Perspectives on the Gunotsav Programme in Assam

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ABSTRACT

Quality education is fundamental in realising human potential, fostering societal equity and strengthening national development. However, the current state of education in most of the schools in India falls short of delivering adequate learning experiences, resulting in dropouts at the school level (ASER Report, 2024). The Government of Assam responds to this challenge by organising the Gunotsav programme annually to improve children's learning outcomes and raise the overall quality of school education. This flagship initiative by the Department of School Education of the Government of Assam encompasses all Government, Provincialised, Tea Garden Model Schools, Tea Garden Managed Schools, Adarsha Vidyalayas, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas and Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Avasiya Vidyalayas of Elementary and Secondary levels. Hence, the study attempted to assess the initiative and its impact by exploring the perspectives of external evaluators, teachers and community members involved in implementing the Gunotsav programme. Its goal was to identify strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement. Results revealed several positive aspects of the programme that bolster the state's school education while also shedding light on its limitations. Further, it accentuates the necessity for governmental agencies to address the programme's limitations and implement remedial actions that align with the principles of research aimed at informing policy and practice.

Keywords: Quality Education, School Education, Gunotsav Programme

Introduction

Education plays a pivotal role in human development, catalysing individual empowerment and fostering societal progress (Muthaa et al., 2013). However, the essence of education lies not merely in

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its provision but in the quality; it embodies a concept that warrants careful consideration. Quality education is vital for unleashing human potential, fostering societal fairness and contributing to national development (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). Quality, within the realm of education, encompasses the facets of efficiency, effectiveness and equity, which are often intertwined (Adams, 1993).

According to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2018), every child is entitled to a quality education, which empowers them to achieve fundamental literacy and numeracy skills, fostering joyful learning. However, in most Indian classrooms, education imparted to children from the pre-primary level remains a matter of concern (Das and Biswas, 2019; Sankar, 2013) as it encourages teacher-centric activities and rote learning (Sankar, 2013). Due to this, most children become uninterested in the classroom (Garg et al., 2023; Kumar et al., 2023) and fail to develop the basic literacy skills needed for understanding texts (Sankar, 2013). Consequently, many children drop out of school without completing their education (Garg et al., 2023). The Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2023 informs that in India, about 25 per cent of students aged 14 to 18 years cannot read a Grade 2 standard text in their regional language. Further, the report highlights that a majority of students (about 57 per cent) within this age group encounter difficulties when confronted with mathematical division problems involving three-digit dividends divided by one-digit divisors. Additionally, about 57 per cent can read sentences in English (ASER Report, 2024).

The Right to Education (RTE) Act (2009) provides free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14 (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2009); however, realising its objectives, such as increased enrolment rates, improved educational accessibility and equitable opportunities holds significance only when education meets the 'desired quality'. Emphasising this, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 prioritises attaining foundational literacy and numeracy, which are essential for children's readiness for subsequent schooling and lifelong learning (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). Additionally, the policy underscores the assessment of competencies and learning outcomes aligned with curricular goals (National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2023). These assessments are vital for knowing whether the students have achieved the class-specific competencies

and learning outcomes, objectively identifying learning gaps and implementing remedial measures to foster a more effective and equitable educational environment for all students. In schools, assessment is generally done in two ways: formative and summative (Ismail et al., 2022). Teachers use assessment to offer feedback on students' learning outcomes to help them achieve planned instructional goals (Wilson and Sloane, 2000).

In Assam, alongside these traditional assessment systems, students' scholastic abilities are assessed annually through the Gunotsav Programme. Gunotsav, initially implemented by the Government of Gujarat, was later adopted by the Government of Assam to enhance the school evaluation process (Borah, 2022; Bordoloi, 2019; Government of Assam, 2024b). This particular evaluation system fosters achieving the Sustainable Development Goal 4 by emphasising the quality of school education and striving for better learning outcomes (Government of Assam, 2024a; Hazarika, 2021).

Gunotsav Programme: A Brief Overview

The Gunotsav Programme employs a comprehensive evaluation framework encompassing four primary domains: scholastic, co-scholastic, infrastructure and community participation. The grading system is structured into five categories, viz., A+, A, B, C and D. Scholastic achievement holds paramount importance within this evaluation system, imposing a significant weightage of 90 per cent, while co-scholastic and community participation domains, each carry a weightage of 5 per cent that is evenly distributed. The primary objective of this evaluative framework is to identify the learning gaps and support focused interventions so it can ensure that all students attain the learning outcomes corresponding to their respective grades.

For better comprehension of the functioning, the phases, process and assessment of the Gunotsav programme are discussed below:

Phases

The Gunotsav Programme is conducted in three phases across all 35 districts of Assam. It encompasses all Government, Provincialised, Tea Garden Model Schools, Tea Garden Managed Schools, Adarsha Vidyalayas, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas, and Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Avasiya Vidyalayas of the Elementary and

Secondary levels. In 2024, the programme covered 43,498 schools, involving 3,963,542 students from Classes I to IX. A total of 18,098 external evaluators were engaged throughout the state to carry out a thorough assessment of every school within its purview.

Process

The Gunotsav evaluation system is a unique initiative within the diverse landscape of India. It focuses on self-evaluation and external evaluation by drawing active stakeholder participation, such as VIP dignitaries, including the Chief Minister and Members of Parliament, and teachers from higher education who contribute to and celebrate this distinctive evaluation process. Owing to its dynamic and participatory nature, the process is named 'Utsav', meaning festival. Commencing the 'Utsav' marks the initiation of a multifaceted evaluation process where external evaluators play a significant role in the success of the programme as they diligently submit confidential reports of school evaluations to the Government by incorporating modifications and suggestions via a dedicated portal. Their impartial assessments contribute to the integrity of the programme and catalyse motivation, encouragement and guidance, fostering continuous improvement within school education.

Assessment

The assessment continued for two days. On the first day, the school presents a Self-Evaluation Report (SER) on three aspects: co-scholastic, infrastructure and community participation. Additionally, the school teachers assess students' L1 and L2 reading skills. The external evaluator appointed by the Government scrutinises the Self-Evaluation Report compiled by the school authority, verifying its accuracy against the current state of affairs within the institution.

On the second day, the focus is exclusively on the assessment of the scholastic domain. Students appear for exams, where they are assessed on literacy (reading and writing) skills, numeracy skills and subject knowledge. The assessment process concerning scholastic areas utilises a robust mechanism, integrating technological tools, such as OMR-based assessments. For Classes I and II, the students tick the correct response on the booklet, which a teacher transfers to the OMR sheet. From Class III onwards, students independently fill out the OMR sheets.

Conceptual Framework

Literacy and numeracy are prerequisites for all future schooling and lifelong learning (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). Children can read and comprehend texts and construct knowledge when they adequately acquire foundational literacy and numeracy. Freire (1983) posited that “reading the world precedes reading the word” (p. 5), implying that an understanding of the world around us is necessary before we can comprehend written words. Real-life experiences and observations provide the context needed to understand what we read; without this background knowledge, reading words holds little meaning.

In alignment with this perspective, the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) advocates experiential learning for all children rather than rote learning. This pedagogical approach enables children to engage with real-life situations, enhancing learning outcomes. However, to bridge the gap in achieving desired learning outcomes, competency-based learning should be emphasised, which should be assessed through “a robust system of continuous formative/adaptive assessment” (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020, p. 9). Such assessment is designed to measure the attainment of competencies and learning outcomes stage-wise (National Steering Committee for National Curriculum Frameworks, 2023), promoting children’s learning and development by assessing higher-order skills, such as analysis, critical thinking and conceptual clarity.

As mentioned above, schools under the Government of Assam are evaluated in four key domains, the most important of which is the scholastic domain. For this purpose, a scholastic test is conducted to assess reading, writing, numeracy and subject knowledge. The reading and writing skills are assessed in both L1 and L2. Here, the external evaluator’s role is crucial to ensure the smooth and efficient functioning of the evaluation process. Along with the evaluator, other stakeholders, such as teachers, community members and students, are also involved in the success of the Gunotsav programme. Studies report that the efficacy of the teaching-learning process is significantly augmented through collaborative efforts between schools, families, communities and society (Patel, 2020; Russell, 2009). All these stakeholders have a rich repository of experiences being a part of the Gunotsav programme since its implementation in 2017. Hence, documenting

their viewpoints was deemed significant in this direction. Therefore, through this study, an endeavour was made to understand the stakeholders' perspectives on the Gunotsav programme.

Rationale for the Study

'Gunotsav programme' is a flagship initiative to assess the quality of school education and augment student learning outcomes (Hazarika, 2021). The programme has made significant strides in two Indian states, Gujarat and Assam. While Gujarat has seen numerous studies examining the 'Gunotsav' programme, including research papers and doctoral theses, Assam's exploration of this initiative remains limited. In Gujarat, research has delved into various facets of the programme by focusing on themes, such as primary school teachers' perspective towards the Gunotsav programme (Maheriya, 2022), evaluation of its effectiveness (Patel, 2020; Prajapati and Jadeja, 2019) and comparative analyses between 'Gunotsav' and 'Gunotsav 2.0' (Thapa and Srivastav, 2021). The overall findings reveal that the Gunotsav programme is efficacious in improving the quality of school education. Amidst these achievements, a few concerns about the programme remain unanswered. For instance, the programme has not been able to foster closer relationships between teachers and students, nor has it been very successful in strengthening parent-teacher interactions (Maheriya, 2022). Although a study by Hazarika (2021) provides a comprehensive overview of the functioning of the programme in Assam, it is imperative to delve into the dynamics of the 'Gunotsav' programme at the grassroots level in Assam. Such research endeavours are crucial for unleashing the full potential and effectiveness of the Gunotsav programme, which can later serve as a future model for other states.

Research Objective

The stakeholders, who are the external evaluators, teachers, students and community members, hold important positions in implementing the Gunotsav programme. Since their engagement is necessary for programme evaluation (Brandon and Fukunaga, 2013), an attempt was made to explore their perspectives on the functioning of the programme in the primary school of Assam to identify its strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement.

Research Methodology

The present study is exploratory; hence, a qualitative approach was used to understand the phenomena (Denscombe, 2003). This approach allows in-depth insights, flexibility and a focus on the context and experiences of participants. It helps uncover the underlying reasons and dynamics that can inform future research and theory development. Hence, the research design selected for the study was qualitative-exploratory.

A purposive sampling technique was used to choose the samples. This technique was deemed fit because it enables researchers to intentionally choose participants who possess the specific knowledge, experience or characteristics essential to the study. This approach ensures that the sample is directly relevant to the research objective, resulting in more focused and meaningful findings (Denscombe, 2003).

The researchers visited a lower primary government school in Assam for data collection. The school was located in a rural area where most students were children of the tea tribe community. The tea tribes are ethnolinguistic tribal groups and marginalised communities (Hussain, 1993; Kar, 1999; Magar and Kar, 2016) who work as labourers in the tea estates of Assam. These communities were officially designated the term 'tea tribes' by the Government of Assam (Sharma, 2011) due to their historical association with the tea industry and their labour-intensive roles in the tea gardens.

The medium of instruction used in the school was Assamese, which was different from the home language(s) of students. Their school language acquisition primarily occurred through interaction with their peer groups. As mandated in the NEP 2020, the school focused on imparting foundational literacy and numeracy skills to enhance the quality of the school. The school consisted of classes ranging from Pre-Grade 1 (Grade 'Ko') to Grade 5.

The objective of the study was to get an in-depth understanding of the functioning of the Gunotsav programme, for which the stakeholders—external evaluators, the teachers and community members engaged in the selected school were interviewed. In due course, it was felt that including more external evaluators of the state of Assam would give a more comprehensive understanding of the programme; hence, four more external evaluators who had visited different lower primary schools recently during the Gunotsav programme were interviewed either by telephone or through personal visits to their office.

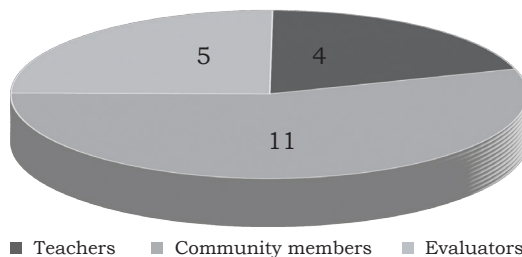


Figure 1: Sample size

Three semi-structured interview schedules were constructed and administered to the samples to gain an in-depth understanding of the functioning of the Gunotsav programme. The questions differed for each stakeholder according to the objective of the study. The main dimensions of the interview schedules constructed for each stakeholder are presented in the table (Table 1) below:

Table 1: Dimensions of the Interview Schedule

Key Stakeholders	Dimensions of the Interview Schedule
<i>External Evaluators</i>	Programme impact and effectiveness
	Collaboration among various stakeholders
	Student competency and learning outcomes
	Challenges identified during the evaluation
	Programme strengths and weaknesses
	Memorable moments and success stories
<i>Teachers</i>	Positive aspects of the Gunotsav programme
	Negative aspects of the Gunotsav programme
<i>Community Members</i>	Overall perception and attitude towards the programme

The interviews took place between January 14 and May 19, each lasting 40 to 60 minutes. Interviews were noted in Assamese and later transcribed and coded based on the themes that emerged from the data. This was done utilising the thematic analysis method. This method is widely utilised in qualitative research for its accessibility, comprehensiveness and flexibility in transcript analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). This approach effectively categorises data into themes to facilitate comparisons and efficient analysis (Attard and Coulson, 2012), enabling researchers to uncover meaningful insights and comprehend the underlying themes or patterns in participants'

responses (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The applicability of thematic analysis is independent of sample size and can be effectively employed to analyse minimal (1–2) (Cedervall and Åberg, 2010) or very large (60+) numbers of interviews (Mooney-Somers et al., 2008).

Findings and Discussion

The efficacy of the Gunotsav programme significantly depends on the stakeholders' engagement. Their first-hand information about this initiative is crucial for understanding its functional dynamics within the context of Assam. Thus, this study endeavours to document the viewpoints of key stakeholders. In the following section, thematic discussions from the perspectives of each stakeholder group, categorised as external evaluators, teachers and community members, are given.

External Evaluators' Perspective

The themes that emerged from the responses of the external evaluators were educational excellence, teacher-student relationship, community engagement, students' competence in school language, challenges identified in the evaluation process, strengths and drawbacks of the programme and notable moments experienced by the evaluators.

Ensuring Educational Excellence

The Gunotsav programme plays a critical role in ensuring excellence in the teaching-learning process (Patel, 2020; Prajapati and Jadeja, 2019; Thapa and Srivastav, 2021). The programme identifies areas for improvement through rigorous evaluation, prompting governmental support and allocating resources toward enhancing educational quality and fostering improved learning outcomes (Hazarika, 2021; Maheriya, 2022). Similar views were given by the external evaluator, who highlighted that the programme comprehensively assesses the current status of schools, enabling them to effectively address students' diverse learning needs. The evaluator further elaborated:

“The school authority and teachers are encouraged and motivated to enhance the quality of their pedagogical strategies by effectively utilising the literacy resources available in the school”.

As mentioned above, the excerpt demonstrates how the programme instils encouragement and motivation among school authorities and teachers, urging them to continuously refine their teaching methods and maximise the utilisation of available literacy resources.

Additionally, another evaluator remarked that the programme is vital in enhancing stakeholders' awareness regarding their roles, responsibilities and students' academic progress. For almost a month, the teachers prepare their students with mock drills to achieve better results in the Gunotsav programme. Even the community members are encouraged to contribute to the programme. Such a step fosters a sense of accountability and commitment towards attaining educational excellence.

Fostering Teacher-Student Relationship

During the programme, positive relationships between teachers and students were observed. One evaluator shared his experience, vividly depicting the harmonious bond between teachers and students. He narrated the incident as:

“Just as a gardener tends to a sapling with care, providing it with nourishment, support, and guidance, teachers were seen nurturing their students. Whenever the students struggled to read questions from the booklet, teachers were seen assisting them and ensuring they were not anxious during the test. They encouraged them to complete the work and even checked that they would not leave any questions. Students felt comfortable seeking assistance from their teachers while maintaining appropriate behaviour”.

From the above narration, the analogy of teachers as gardeners and students as saplings beautifully captures the essence of their relationship. The teachers were aware of the academic difficulties faced by their students. Aldrup et al. (2018) emphasise that teachers who guide and support learners academically and emotionally foster an environment where students feel secure, connected, independent, competent and motivated. Another study highlights how these interactions are pivotal in maintaining well-being and preventing emotional fatigue (Spilt et al., 2011). These attributes form the foundation for personal growth and a lifelong love for learning (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). Similarly, the Gunotsav programme exemplifies how

such positive dynamics between teachers and students can be manifested. External evaluators observed a symbiotic relationship characterised by open communication and unwavering support.

Community Engagement

The evaluators emphasise the collaborative endeavours essential for the programme's success. They stated that the participation of community members, Cluster Resource Centre Coordinators (CRCCs) from regional blocks and educational organisations, such as the Learning Links Foundation and Bharti Foundation must work in harmony. They highlighted the significant contributions of the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) in the effective implementation of the programme. Further, mothers' engagement was seen to have significantly impacted the programme. An excerpt from an evaluator's interview elucidates this stance:

“The programme has encouraged increased participation from parents, especially mothers, leading to meaningful discussions and interactions with school staff.”

This excerpt from the interview demonstrates that mothers' attitudes towards their children's education positively influence academic performance and school results. Research indicates that the involvement of community members in school activities is indispensable for ensuring educational benefits to children (Patel and Kadri, 2021; Sanders, 2003). This engagement process bridges the gap between the home environment and the school setting (Howland, 2006).

Students' Competency in School Language

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasises the use of children's “home language, mother tongue or local or regional language” as the medium of instruction whenever feasible until proficiency in the school language is attained (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020, p. 13). In the educational landscape of Assam, the formulation and implementation of language policies within government schools exhibit discernible variations contingent upon geographical considerations. This observation is particularly salient when juxtaposing the linguistic dynamics between tribal and non-tribal areas where tribal languages are spoken in tribal schools, while non-tribal areas use the state language (Assamese). However, a notable exception in the linguistic milieu of the Barak Valley was noted, where Bengali predominates (Nirmalia, 2019).

An integral facet of this inquiry was the assessment of students' linguistic adeptness within the prescribed school language, primarily Assamese, which serves as the principal linguistic medium within non-tribal area schools. Children whose home language is Sadri (a non-dominant language) learn Assamese through peer interactions at school, as Assamese is the language used in textbooks and is also a medium of instruction. Hence, the majority of students were fluent in Assamese, highlighting its acceptance and utilisation within the educational contexts. This phenomenon emphasises the role of peer interactions in developing communicative competence and highlights the adaptive capabilities of students in negotiating in multilingual classrooms. In one of the interviews, it was stated:

“Despite the fact that students speak different languages at home, they show enthusiasm to speak and learn Assamese”.

The excerpt illustrates how children assimilate school language into their linguistic repertoire with the help of their peer group. It highlights their adeptness in engaging with the school language and depicts their willingness to engage with linguistic diversity. Moreover, it highlights the effectiveness of peer interaction and immersive language learning environments in developing language proficiencies among students, thereby showing the transformative potential inherent in such pedagogical practices.

Challenges Identified during the Evaluation Process

During the evaluation of the Gunotsav programme, external evaluators were asked about the challenges. Numerous obstacles were identified, particularly difficulty in filling out the Optical Mark Recognition (OMR) sheets. One evaluator clarified this challenge, stating:

“Although students could identify the correct answers from the multiple-choice questions in the question booklet, they struggled to accurately mark their answers in the circle given on the OMR sheets, resulting in the teachers filling out the sheets.”

From the narrative, it becomes evident that students at lower primary levels encountered challenges in accurately recording their responses due to their limited familiarity with the procedure for filling the OMR sheets. Completing the OMR sheets necessitates practice, diligence and proficient psychomotor skills on the part of the students. In this regard, an anecdote is worth citing. In

Madhya Pradesh, students preparing for board exams in Classes X and XII experienced significant anxiety upon learning that the Board had introduced several changes to the exam format, notably the incorporation of OMR sheets (Times of India, 2021). Many of these students had never encountered OMR sheets in previous examinations, echoing the circumstances observed in this study. Consequently, it is important to resolve this issue, which can be done by organising dedicated sessions to instruct students on the correct and appropriate method for responding to questions on OMR sheets, thereby averting potential difficulties during assessment sessions.

Another evaluator narrated an incident involving the violation of evaluation guidelines within the Gunotsav programme, explicitly concerning the seating arrangements for students. He proceeds to narrate:

“... Perhaps the students did not receive accurate information about their seating arrangements from the school authority. As a result, students were found sitting together in their classes instead of following the seating plan”.

The narration illustrates a lack of thorough review by the school authority regarding the guidelines. According to the Gunotsav programme guidelines, during the assessment of scholastic abilities, students in Grades 1 and 2 are expected to sit together, while those in Grades 3, 4, and 5 must adhere to the specified seating protocols outlined in the instructions (Department of School Education, 2024). Therefore, it is imperative for the school authority and teachers to diligently familiarise themselves with the guidelines before the commencement of the programme. However, to uphold fairness and accuracy in the assessment process, the evaluator improvised the situation by making ad hoc adjustments.

According to feedback from external evaluators, instances of student indiscipline were observed during the evaluation day. Studies report that indiscipline is one of the most prevalent challenges teachers face globally (Kagoiya and Kagema, 2018). The issue of student indiscipline has long been a focal point, both on an international and national scale, impacting school effectiveness (Maphosa, 2011). This study revealed that evaluators encountered difficulty in maintaining discipline within large classrooms. In response, they collaborated with the school authority to address this issue, aiming to ensure the smooth operation of the

programme. These challenges highlight the intricacies of conducting comprehensive evaluations within diverse school environments.

Strengths and Drawbacks of the Programme

A systematic evaluation process is integral to any programme in ascertaining its effectiveness and implementation status, thereby taking corrective measures to improve internal efficiency (Selina and Rokeya, 2002). The Gunotsav programme, designed to assess school education, ensures a comprehensive evaluation to identify its strengths and weaknesses, further enabling appropriate remedial measures to enhance quality education. Since external evaluators are deeply involved in the Gunotsav programme and have gathered enough practical knowledge about how schools operate, this study solicited them to share insights into the strengths of the programme and shortcomings based on their first-hand encounters.

The evaluators' insights into the programme highlighted the impact Gunotsav programme has in improving the quality of the education system in Assam. According to them, the programme contributes significantly to the learning outcomes and thereby to the nation's development. One of the evaluators remarked:

“The Gunotsav programme has emerged as an important initiative by the Government of Assam that aims to improve the quality of school education and produce better learning outcomes for students.”

This statement depicts the emerging significance of the Gunotsav programme in elevating the standard of school education, thereby fostering enhanced learning outcomes. By cultivating awareness among stakeholders within the school community, the programme prompts individuals to fulfil their respective roles and responsibilities effectively. The evaluator further narrated,

“... However, the programme has not yet fully succeeded in improving the status of school education in Assam. It is making gradual progress. No programme can suddenly bring about revolutionary changes, it takes time. The improvements occur incrementally, with an initial 5–10 per cent enhancement, followed by another 10 per cent, and then an additional 10–15 per cent, advancing in this manner.”

The narration illustrates that although the Gunotsav programme has been implemented in Assam since 2017, its success rate is gradually improving. Therefore, every stakeholder

associated with the programme must perform their duties and responsibilities towards ensuring high-quality school education in the state. Additionally, another evaluator highlighted fostering a unified approach by integrating teachers, students and community members into a cohesive entity. This way, the programme can contribute significantly to developing the school infrastructure, appointing or transferring teachers in the schools where the number of teachers is not adequate and providing schools with the required teaching-learning resources so that all children get a high-quality education. This holistic approach is aimed at developing the overall school education system.

However, it was noted that the programme is not free of its shortcomings. For instance, there remains an underlying pressure on the school authorities to attain excellent grades, and because of such external pressures, the school authorities sometimes take dishonest steps during the evaluation. Here, it is imperative to indicate that the school has students belonging to the tea-tribe community who entirely depend on the school for their academic success because most of the parents are illiterate.

Furthermore, most evaluators criticised the assessment process for relying on standardised tests to gauge students' scholastic abilities. They expressed concerns regarding the validity and authenticity of assessment results, citing another instance of students copying answers from their peers during tests. All such practices undermine the integrity of the evaluation process and compromise the accuracy of assessments.

Another evaluator indicated a lack of requisite skills and experience among those external evaluators who are novices in this field. This remark necessitates rigorous training of novice evaluators associated with the programme before they embark on school evaluations. Such training would enable them to grasp the nuances of the overall school setting, thereby enhancing their effectiveness in evaluation.

Standout Moments for the Evaluators

Memory research in cognitive science suggests that individuals tend to recall only a few fleeting moments from their past experiences rather than the entirety of those experiences (Conway, 2005). Considering this aspect, external evaluators were prompted to share any standout moments they could recall. One evaluator mentioned the impressive attendance rate, discipline and craftwork

displayed during the Gunotsav programme, which left a lasting impression. He added:

“Upon visiting a lower primary school, I was warmly welcomed and presented with handcrafted items prepared by the students. Students performed morning assembly with prayers, thoughts for the day, newspaper reading, etc.”

Another evaluator praised the students for their immaculate appearance. He stated:

“Students wore neat uniforms, and the school premises were adorned with handcrafted items and fresh flowers, contributing to a pleasant ambience on our arrival.”

Another evaluator shared his experience with these notes:

“There was a handwritten magazine in the school created in collaboration with teachers and students.”

The above narrations have been supported by studies that state the importance of morning assembly (Prajapati and Jadeja, 2019) and illustrate the creative talents and collaborative efforts within the school setting (Maheriya, 2022). Research indicates that learning outcomes are enhanced by cooperative and collaborative student efforts (Han and Ellis, 2021; Sekita, 2017). Consequently, it can be inferred that the Gunotsav programme facilitates the development of children's general awareness and co-scholastic abilities, including handcraft, singing, dancing, playing and so on. It fosters unity and harmony among diverse groups of students.

Teachers' Perspective

Teachers are integral to the Gunotsav programme, contributing significantly to its implementation. Their active participation in various activities is vital for the programme's success. To gauge the programme's effectiveness, interviews with the teachers were taken, yielding insights into both positive and negative aspects of Gunotsav. The subsequent discussion delves into these findings.

Positive aspects of Gunotsav

The Gunotsav programme assesses students' scholastic abilities from Class I to IX annually (Department of School Education, 2024). It focuses on assessment, where the students are assessed on reading, writing, numeracy and subject knowledge. Praising the programme, a teacher participant stated,

“One of the things I appreciate about Gunotsav is its focus on each student’s progress. This helps me identify where each student is struggling and tailor my teaching to their specific needs.”

She further added,

“... With the assessments and focus on individual learning levels, I’m able to support students at different stages. It feels like we’re reaching more students, and they feel motivated because they see their progress.”

The excerpts above highlight that the Gunotsav programme focuses on each student’s progress and learning levels. The assessments done through this programme help teachers identify students who struggle with fundamental skills, such as reading, writing and numeracy (Maheriya, 2022). Shah et al. (2019) reported that such students are often labelled as ‘lazy’ or ‘troublemakers’ compared with other students performing well in academics. However, interventions implemented by school authorities aim to equip these students with age-appropriate skills in foundational literacy and subject-specific knowledge, facilitating learning at their own pace. Patel’s (2020) study revealed that remedial interventions for identified learning difficulties were ineffective for academically bright students, rendering them redundant and a waste of time. Therefore, interventions must be systematic, well-structured and multi-sensory and include direct teaching, learning and time for consolidation (Shah et al., 2019).

Before the Gunotsav programme was implemented, many schools faced challenges due to inadequate facilities for extracurricular activities, which hindered students’ overall development (Nath, 2024). However, with the introduction of Gunotsav, there has been a noticeable improvement in the infrastructure of these schools. One teacher participant shared her experience, saying:

“As part of the Gunotsav programme’s assessment, we have to fill out a Self-Evaluation Report (SER) for our school. In this report, apart from other aspects, we also outline various features of the school’s infrastructure, such as whether we have all the necessary facilities—things like classrooms, a library, clean sanitation, a reliable supply of electricity and water, fire safety equipment, sports and recreation areas, and staff rooms or administrative offices. If we find any discrepancy, the government steps in and provides the missing facilities after the assessment.”

The excerpt highlights the importance of infrastructure and facilities in school assessments under the Gunotsav programme. It shows that schools with inadequate infrastructure are provided with the necessary resources after the assessment, ensuring they can provide quality education for all students.

As the Gunotsav programme emphasises the co-scholastic aspects of students (Department of School Education, 2024), the teacher participants believe that the programme develops students' interests in extracurricular activities. In this context, a teacher participant narrated,

"I've noticed that with the holistic approach of Gunotsav, students are more engaged in extra-curricular activities. The focus on holistic development encourages the students to participate in extra-curricular activities, such as sports, arts, writing or cultural activities."

Another teacher added,

"I see more students actively participating in activities they wouldn't have considered before. The programme encourages holistic personality development, motivating students to explore other life skills and participate in drama, music, and other leadership roles."

Providing more input, a teacher added,

"The programme also helps in creating curiosity in students beyond academics. Students who were once shy or disengaged are now attending sports and cultural events and even volunteering for school activities. It is indeed awesome to see them developing new interests."

The information provided by teachers highlighted the positive impact of the Gunotsav programme. The programme has contributed effectively to encouraging students to engage in school activities. Teachers noted that the programme ensures holistic personality development by motivating students to explore interests beyond academics, such as sports, art and cultural activities. It encourages students to come out of their comfort zones and try engaging in drama, music and literary activities. For some students, particularly those who were previously shy or disengaged, Gunotsav has sparked a newfound curiosity, leading them to join sports events and even volunteer for school projects. Overall, the programme has helped students develop social skills and build a

stronger sense of community involvement thus, contributing to a more balanced and enriching educational experience.

Regarding the impact of the Gunotsav programme, a teacher participant informed that since its inception, the school authorities have become more proactive compared to earlier times. She remarked,

“... Tasks left unfinished previously are now being completed by the school authorities to showcase the school positively during the programme, aiming to obtain good grades in the evaluation.”

This excerpt illustrates that since the introduction of the Gunotsav programme, the school authorities have been introspective, aiming to positively present their school's image to the evaluators so that their school obtains good grades in the assessment. The finding is supported by that of Prajapati and Jadeja (2019).

Negative Aspects of Gunotsav

Illustrating the drawbacks, one teacher participant sarcastically remarked that some schools present a false image to external evaluators to secure better grades. For instance, on regular days, the morning assembly in the school conducts prayers and the oath-taking ceremony. However, when notified about the commencement of the Gunotsav programme, the school authorities added activities, such as quizzes, riddles, aphorisms, etc., which are only performed on the day when external evaluators visit their premises. The participant further recounts,

“When the programme concludes, these activities are left unperformed.”

This narrative highlights the false pretence of some schools. Such dishonest practices may have adverse implications for students and their future. The participant opines that evaluating a school based solely on one day's activities and performances is inadequate, as on that specific day, school authorities aim to present their schools in the most favourable state.

Another teacher participant, akin to the external evaluators, disclosed that a majority of lower primary-level students encounter difficulties in accurately filling out the OMR sheets. Sharing an anecdote, she narrates,

“It was observed that a few students could not fill out the OMR sheets, although they did mark the answers on the booklet. The teachers sometimes fill out the blank OMR sheet and mark the correct responses without looking into the booklet submitted by the student. In such cases, discrepancies arise between the actual performance and the one presented on the inspection day.”

The excerpt suggests that due to a lack of understanding of how to fill out OMR sheets, many students submit them blank, leading school authorities to complete them instead. Consequently, there is a chance that the authorities may put correct answers on the OMR sheets without referring to the student's responses in the question booklets, potentially resulting in higher grades in the assessment. Such occurrences could compromise the authenticity of the results of the Gunotsav programme. Therefore, these shortcomings must be addressed to enhance the programme's effectiveness.

Perspective of Community Members

The engagement of the community with a school is given the utmost importance in the Gunotsav programme (Department of School Education, 2024). Their role in the development of the school is significant and crucial. The community members selected for the study were parents of children attending the chosen school and were part of the School Management Committee (SMC). They were invited to participate in various school activities and were encouraged to be involved in the decision-making process for the school's development. A few of the parents who volunteered to participate in the study were taken into confidence. They were interviewed with the help of a semi-structured interview schedule to gain insight into the Gunotsav programme. The majority of the community members appreciated the Gunotsav programme. While praising it, one of the community members stated:

“The Gunotsav programme encourages children to attend school with enthusiasm. It aims to instil values of being a good human. It also teaches them cleanliness and hygiene, which they maintain on the school premises.”

This statement suggests that the Gunotsav programme motivates students to maintain discipline and punctuality both within and outside of school to foster their development as responsible, good (Villalobos et al., 2021) and healthy citizens (Gidengil and Wass, 2023) of the nation.

Another participant emphasised that the Gunotsav programme motivates their children to engage in productive activities, such as creating bouquets and handicrafts. This initiative aligns with Mahatma Gandhi's basic education principles, which were introduced in India in 1937 (Jena, 2020). She further elaborated,

“... During the programme, children's mothers are invited to the school to see how the programme functions.”

This statement suggests that the Gunotsav programme effectively encourages the active involvement of mothers in school activities, highlighting their significant role in their children's education and overall development. Research indicates that children whose mothers actively support their education tend to achieve better academic progress in their careers (Cooper et al., 2000; Grolnick et al., 2002; Zhao and Wang, 2014). Hence, the programme places adequate emphasis on bridging the gap between home and school by engaging community members in activities related to the development of school education. However, community members also expressed concern about the attitude of school authorities. One of the members lamented,

“How our children are cared for during the Gunotsav programme differs from the treatment they receive on regular school days.”

The findings of the study highlight that students receive exceptional academic support during the Gunotsav programme, which would not otherwise be provided during regular school days. For optimal learning outcomes, students should consistently receive sufficient care and academic assistance. This will enhance their academic productivity to its fullest potential.

Conclusion

The Gunotsav programme ensures educational excellence through comprehensive assessments, Government support and resource allocation. This process motivates school authorities and teachers to enhance their pedagogical strategies (Patel, 2020; Prajapati and Jadeja; 2019; Thapa and Srivastav, 2021). In addition to this, healthy teacher-student relationships, which are essential for emotional and academic growth (Aldrup et al., 2018; Spilt et al., 2011), were reported by external evaluators. Peer interaction and language immersion improved proficiency in the school language, Assamese.

Data from teacher interviews revealed that the Gunotsav programme significantly improved educational quality through individualised assessment, infrastructure improvements and holistic development of students. Teachers acknowledged the value of its assessment structure that enabled targeted support for students, particularly those struggling with foundational skills (Maheriya, 2022; Shah et al., 2019). Accordingly, teaching methods can be customised to foster each student's academic progress and aid in improved educational outcomes. Furthermore, the component of infrastructure assessment highlighted the basic requirements of resources, which are essential for a conducive learning environment. Teachers also reported that the holistic approach emphasised in the programme had enriched students' engagement in extracurricular activities. This balanced development fosters students' social skills, confidence and sense of community (Christison, 2013). Additionally, the programme motivated school authorities to improve standards proactively by reflecting a commitment to quality education. These insights highlight the positive impact of the Gunotsav programme on the learning outcomes of the students and the accountability of the institution.

Community members viewed the Gunotsav programme positively for its role in motivating school attendance, promoting discipline, instilling hygiene and nurturing productive activities in learners. Mother's involvement was also seen as a positive aspect.

Although the Gunotsav programme has been widely appreciated for its focus on comprehensive assessments, a few challenges impede its effectiveness to some extent. These challenges include issues with Optical Mark Recognition (OMR) sheets, seating arrangements, student indiscipline and pressure on school authorities to obtain good grades. It is also found that there remains a need to train novice evaluators and address dishonest practices in certain schools. Concerns are also raised about the inconsistent treatment of students during evaluations compared to regular school days.

A few specific improvements could enhance the effectiveness of the Gunotsav programme. First, addressing the difficulties with Optical Mark Recognition (OMR) sheets is essential. Ensuring students understand how to use these sheets correctly can reduce errors and streamline the process. For this, training for teachers and workshops for students can be organised.

Another important factor to consider is the seating arrangement during the evaluation. Sufficient space between the students can prevent overcrowding and discomfort.

Parent-teacher meetings can be held frequently to address issues, such as student absenteeism. Schools can organise programmes and workshops to help students understand the importance of discipline and cleanliness and offer rewards for positive behaviour to foster a sense of self-motivation.

The pressure on school authorities to achieve high grades can be reduced by adopting a more flexible system that does not just emphasise academic achievement based on scores and other co-curricular activities that prepare children for a better life.

Thus, while the Gunotsav programme is making meaningful strides in advancing school education in Assam, it is clear that certain areas require attention to fully realise its goals. Therefore, addressing the identified shortcomings and implementing appropriate measures at the grassroots level is crucial. Once the challenges are resolved, the programme will not only support a transformative shift in Assam's educational landscape but will also potentially serve as a model for schools in other regions where children from marginalised backgrounds enroll.

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