

Potential of Educational Volunteers under Special Education Zones

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Abstract

Education remains inaccessible for millions of children in different pockets of the world. Such pockets could be declared as Special Education Zones (SEZ), where volunteers could play complementary and supplementary roles. Voluntary service in education has been an underutilised domain, particularly for educationally disadvantaged groups. In the post COVID-19 era, this could be a potential tool to bridge the large learning gap which was created due to the lost time of pandemic. Exploratory content analysis method was used to examine the volunteers. Indian Civil Service aspirants were taken as the study group, since they seem to be one of the highly motivated individuals to serve the community. This paper found that almost 97 per cent of them were interested in volunteering for education. Education has the ability to shape the next generation and bring a silent revolution for the nation's development. And, volunteering could become a tool in bringing such revolution at SEZs.

INTRODUCTION

5th December is mandated for celebrating International Volunteer Day by the United Nations General Assembly (United Nations, 1985). The day provides yet another

occasion to highlight the importance of volunteerism and the potential of volunteers. India's National Education Policy 2020 also aspired to involve community and alumni to volunteer efforts for enhanced

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learning. Education empowers a person and creates choices which are necessary for human development. But, still there are many pockets in the world where people are deprived of education.

Those areas could be termed as Special Education Zones (SEZ) with the sole aim of improving the educational outcomes. But in such zones, only the governmental effort would not suffice, it would also require the services of educational volunteers. However, the service of such volunteers has not been utilised up to its potential in India. The demographic dividend of a nation is an added advantage in this regard. The healthy and educated citizens could be motivated to provide voluntary services in education. Voluntary activity is beneficial in two ways. It does not only help the receiver, but also aids in building the personality of the volunteer and provides motivation to other members of the society. So, such volunteers could play a critical role in reducing the learning gap that was created during COVID-19 era. But, there are a few challenges in utilising the potential of volunteers. Holman, Body and Hogg (2016) identified three barriers in engaging volunteers— (i) internal pressures in terms of managing, training and safeguarding issues, (ii) the skill and commitment of volunteers and (iii) the struggle to ensure volunteers work in synchronisation with the ongoing policy and curriculum shifts.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

‘Even before COVID-19 hit, the world was experiencing a learning crisis. 258 million children of primary level and secondary school level were out of school, and the learning poverty rate in low- and middle-income countries was 53 per cent, suggesting that over half of all the 10 year old children could not read and understand a simple text. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the figure was closer to 90 per cent’ (World Bank, 2021). The COVID-19, pandemic led to further deterioration of this situation. Hence, SEZs hold a special significance.

SEZs are those regions where educational outcome is much poor compared to other regions. The concept of SEZ was coined to bring equity in education. India’s National Education Policy 2020 recommended for identifying those areas, which have large population of educationally-disadvantaged, socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) and termed those area as SEZ. In such regions, all the schemes and policies related to education were to be implemented in a more focused way and specific interventions are to be made as per the local needs. Additional resources in terms of infrastructure, teachers, finances and other educators, are to be provided.

The geographical boundary of SEZ could be few hamlets in difficult terrains to a block or subdivision or may be a district, depending on the need. These areas are to be earmarked

based on low performance in various educational indicators like enrolment rate, learning outcome, fundamental literacy and numeracy, etc. Such zones needed special treatment in terms of efforts finance, and assistance of educational volunteers.

Volunteering is any activity, formal or informal, which is conducted by choice without setting paid to benefit another (Wilson, 2000). Voluntary means something done on free will without any payment and without being asked for it. It is done based on one's own motivation for providing service to the society and nation. So, voluntary services would mean performing some task or giving self-service for a specified function, without any form of compulsion, legal obligation or emolument. In fact, volunteers are the heart of community services. Through their rich experience and knowledge, they can become a pillar of socio-political development and for the upliftment of disadvantaged group. Their role in educational services becomes more important, particularly for the advancement of educationally backward regions like SEZ. The additional resources, time or energy contributed by them can be a great help in achieving the aim of universal and quality education for all.

Who Could be Educational Volunteers?

The college going students, civil services aspirants, any healthy and educated citizen including old age

literate persons, highly motivated government or private employees, retired personnel among others could provide voluntary education services. The community members should be encouraged to become volunteers for academic or non-academic works. National Education Policy 2020 suggested that it will be far easier for trained volunteers, from both the local community and beyond, to participate in voluntary services. 'Every literate member of the community could commit to teaching one student/person how to read and it would change the country's landscape very quickly' (National Education Policy, 2020, p. 9).

LITERATURE REVIEW

College going students often enjoy doing voluntary activities. University students in Hungary were increasingly involved in voluntary works for financial reasons, due to their passion or for gaining experience (Fényes and Pusztai, 2012). Altruism, social integration, enhancing leadership skills and value addition of curriculum vitae were among other reasons of their participation (McCabe, et al., 2007). Volunteerism in education enhances employee's competencies, productivity and motivation. And for employers, promotion of voluntary activities leads to increased loyalty of volunteers towards employers and also increases their profit (Percy and Rogers, 2021). Volunteerism provides rich learning experiences and brings innovative solutions to

societal challenges (McFadden and Smeaton, 2017). 70 per cent of public schools in West utilised volunteer teacher services totalling to around 1.3 million in number. Apart from academic activities, many were engaged in non-academic activities like monitoring school lunch breaks, playgrounds and even relieving teachers from paper work (National Research Council, 1990). Voluntary activity is beneficial in two ways that it develops social cohesion. It also motivates volunteers to engage in community works (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). Voluntary action provides schools additional skills and resources, and foster community engagement and philanthropic activities (Holman, et al., 2016). Educate a Child Programme (2020) highlighted the role of volunteers in enhancing quality primary education for most marginalised out-of-school students. The need of volunteerism could also be understood from the literacy figures. There are only 73 per cent literates in India. The corresponding figure for rural India is even lower at 67.8 per cent and a mere 58 per cent for rural female (Census, 2011). This literacy level in India was when a literate person was simply defined as any person aged seven or above and having the ability to read and write with understanding. Also, a large proportion of students currently in elementary schools, estimated to be over 50 million in number, have not attained foundational literacy and numeracy. So, peer tutoring as

a voluntary and joyful activity with due safety measures was suggested (National Education Policy 2020). There are 9.4 million teachers, teaching 250 million students in 15.5 lakh schools in India (UDISE+, 2021). The pupil teacher ratio is 28 for primary and 20 for upper primary level. But these numbers of teachers are also burdened with many non-academic works. This would need the help of educational volunteers in bridging the learning gap.

RESEARCH GAPS

‘Desh Ke Mentor’ programme in Delhi aimed at mentorship of senior secondary students by volunteers of age group 18–35 years for 10–15 minutes daily on issues like career choices and teenage concerns (Government of Delhi, 2021). Similarly, the Government of Haryana (2021) launched ‘Samarpan portal’ as a platform to offer voluntary services in the field of education, skill development, sports and agriculture. But, such a formal platform to aware and register the educational volunteers at country level is missing. At the same time, there is also a lack of understanding about the potential volunteer groups and their expectation in terms of remuneration or ways flexibility in timelines, and carrier and future prospects.

METHODOLOGY

Quantitative method with exploratory research design was used to investigate the problem. Exploration means ‘to

examine a thing or idea for diagnostic purposes, to search it systematically for something' (Stebbins, 2001, p.2). Due to its open ended nature, the author has chosen this method to build a strong foundation for this research and for better understanding of the research problem. Although, at times, there is a limitation of using exploratory research, i.e., choosing a small sample for a large generalised population, nevertheless, it is an effective way under limited time and resources.

Research Questions

- What is the possibility of finding volunteers for education services?
- What is the potential of volunteers for the upliftment of educationally disadvantaged groups?
- What are the expectations of educational volunteers?

Research Context

The approximately two years of COVID-19 era have increased the learning gap by more than two academic years. The students in these years moved two grades up but their learning level moved down by more than two grades due to disconnect and discontinuity in the teaching-learning process. This holds more relevance for the students belonging to disadvantaged groups and from the rural settings. Now, the recovery demands extended hours of teaching where regular teachers would not suffice; rather volunteerism in education would be required. The

volunteers could contribute their time and efforts to accelerate the learning of school children. National Education Policy 2020; also emphasised on volunteering activity for learning. The role of volunteers particularly becomes important especially for SEZs.

Rationale for Selecting Civil Services Aspirants as Sample

India's civil services aspirants were chosen as the sample group, since they could be transformed into of the most eligible and possible groups of potential volunteers for providing education services under SEZ. They seem to be one of the highly motivated individuals for providing services to the community. Most of them put their extreme efforts to join the services. In 2018, out of total 1.06 million who applied for civil services exam, 759 were finally recommended (UPSC 2020). So, only a few hundred among millions succeed while hundreds of thousand only remain to be an educate. Both during the preparation and after the completion of this long process, they could be utilised as potential volunteers for providing education services.

Research Tool and Development Procedure

Web based survey tool was used to collect primary data through Google form. The online survey provided advantage and flexibility, particularly during pandemic times in terms of designing, developing and obtaining responses from the sample population. Semi-structured questionnaire was

disseminated through email to the sample population. Questions were carefully framed in sync with the research demand and pertained to respondents educational qualification, their present status, their interest in voluntary education services, time which they could devote in this pursuit and their expectations. It comprised 16 questions including a few open ended questions.

Sampling Procedure and Size

Heterogeneous purposive sampling was used for this research paper, due to its time and cost effectiveness. COVID-19 restrictions also led the author to choose this method after thoroughly filtering the suitable sample group. The maximum variation sampling also allowed the author to examine diverse range of cases relevant to this research. A total of 57 responses were collected between the period of 30th May 2021 and 3rd July 2021.

Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data was collected directly from the subject through semi-structured questionnaire. Mails were

sent to administrative heads of selected civil services coaching institutes in Delhi, requesting them to forward the mail to civil services aspirants. Then Union Public Service Commission also publishes the data of civil services aspirants who have appeared for interview. Responses were also collected from them. Data analysis was carried using SPSS software. First, these responses were filtered and organised through a spreadsheet. Google form also allowed the data analysis and its graphical representation. Cross tabulations were created to understand the common theme and responses of the sample towards voluntary services.

FINDINGS

In terms of academic qualification, nearly 40 per cent of sample population was post graduate and less than 2 per cent possessed doctorate degree. Almost half of the sampled group belonged to science/maths/engineering field, which could aid in bridging the foundational literacy and numeracy. The lack of post graduation degree is an impediment to entry into teaching field.

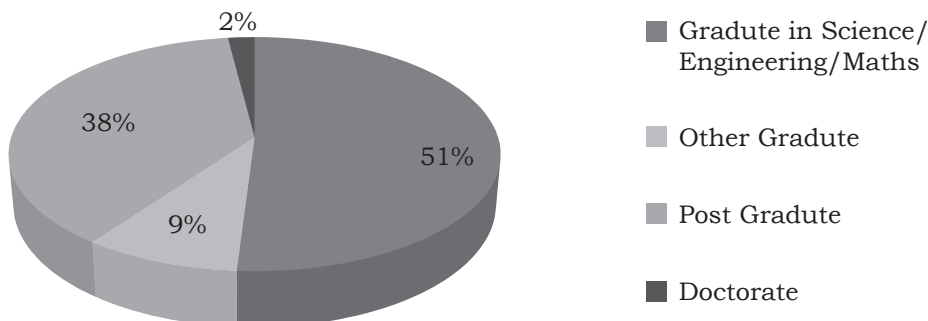


Fig. 1: Qualification of the participants

Source: Primary data

More than two-third of the sample population, who had exhausted their attempts where unemployed at the time of collection of data. Then, less than 10 per cent of them possessed the degree of Bachelors or Masters in Education, which is mandatory for entering the profession of teaching in school education. Nearly 66 per cent of the sample population did not aspire to get this degree in future even.

The teaching profession at college level often mandates the qualification

of NET/JRF. But even this qualification was attained by less than one-fourth of the sample population. Rather, only one-fifth of those who possessed a bachelor and master degree in education while having their attempts exhausted for Civil Services appear for NET/JRF certification. Also, merely 13 per cent of them were further interested in acquiring such degrees. So the question arises, if they should be allowed to enter in teaching profession without Bachelor or Master degree in Education or not.

Table 1
Respondents' employment status, professional degree and remaining attempts for Civil Services exam (data in %, N=57)

		Exhausted Attempt of Civil Services Exam or Crossed the Age Limit	
		No	Yes
Presently employed in government or private job	No	71.4	60
	Yes	28.6	40
Teaching Degree	Possess B.Ed.	9.5	0
	Possess M.Ed.	2.4	0
	Not Interested	59.5	86.7
	Wish to get it in future	28.6	13.3
NET/JRF (eligibility for Assistant Professor)	No	76.2	80
	Yes	23.8	20

Source: Primary data

Table 2
Number of respondents who were interested in teaching and development of online study material (N=57)

		*Interested in teaching to students of different grade						#Study material dev.		
		N	P	UP/S	SS	C	O	N	Y	M
Qualification	Graduate in Science/ Maths/Engineering	2	0	5	4	8	10	2	13	14
	Other graduate	0	0	0	3	1	1	1	0	4
	Post graduate	0	0	10	2	5	5	0	15	7
	Doctorate	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0

Teaching Degree	Possess B.Ed.	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	3	1
	Possess M.Ed.	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0
	Not Interested	2	0	8	4	12	12	2	16	20
	Wish to get it in future	0	0	3	4	3	4	1	9	4
Finished Attempts	No	1	0	10	6	11	14	2	19	21
	Yes	1	0	5	3	4	2	1	10	4
Qualified PT	Not yet	1	0	9	1	4	3	0	11	7
	Once	0	0	1	4	2	1	1	4	3
	Twice	0	0	1	2	4	3	0	7	3
	More than Twice	1	0	4	2	5	9	2	7	12

Source: Primary Data

* Not Interested (N), Primary (P)/Upper Primary (UP), Secondary (S), Senior Secondary (SS), College (C), Online only (O);

Not interested (N), Interested (Y), May be (M)

And when it came to their interest in sharing their subject knowledge with school or college going students, only 3.5 per cent of the sample group said they were not interested at all in such a pursuit. Around 30 per cent said that they could share knowledge only through online mode. None of them had shown interest in

engaging with the primary students. But, some of the aspirants, around one-fourth in number, had been interested in engaging with the upper primary/secondary and college going students. Then, 16 per cent of them were interested in sharing knowledge with the students of senior secondary level.

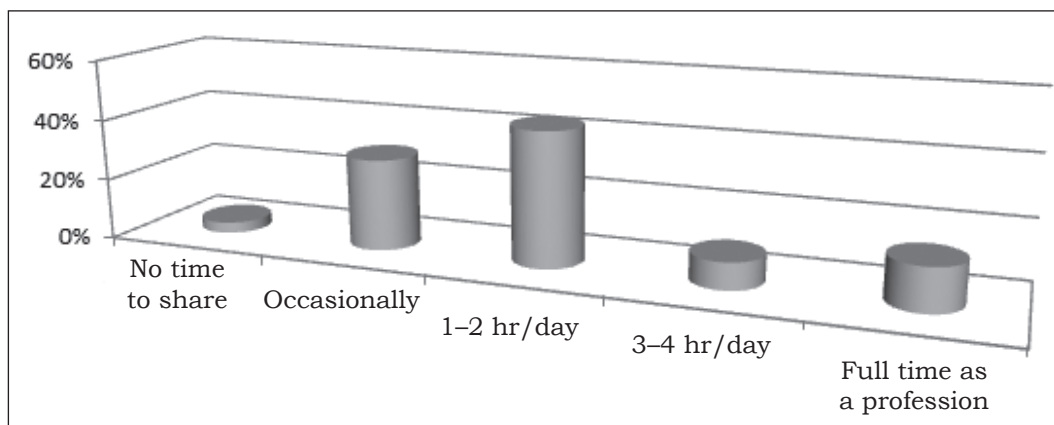


Fig. 2: Respondents' distribution in terms of time which they could spend as an educational volunteer

Source: Primary data

Also, only 3.5 per cent of the sample population had believed that they could not find enough time to contribute in knowledge sharing with junior students. Almost half of them had responded that they can contribute part time (1 to 4 hours daily) in sharing their knowledge. 14 per cent of the respondents wanted to consider it as a full time profession. Possessing multidisciplinary knowledge by them is an asset which could be tapped by different school/colleges on voluntary basis.

DISCUSSION

Possibility of Finding Volunteers for Education Services

The outcome of the findings reflected the possibility of utilising Civil and Defence Services aspirants as educational volunteers. India has millions of aspirants who prepare for such exams. During the year 2019–20, Union Public Service Commission of India received 3.04 million applications for its Civil and Defence Services exams. Out of them, almost 0.8 million appeared in each exam, of which 4351 candidates were finally recommended for the post. Even if we consider only Indian civil services exam, then in 2018, out of total 1.06 million who applied for the post, 0.5 million appeared and 759 were finally recommended (UPSC, 2020).

So, out of millions of aspirants, a few thousands get selected. During this journey and post-journey, these aspirants could be transformed

as educational volunteers for educationally disadvantaged students studying in lower class grades in schools or colleges. At the same time, irrespective of whether the sampled group had exhausted their attempts for appearing in civil services exam or not, most of them were ready to share their knowledge with the students of lower grades. Further, 95 per cent of them were ready to contribute in the development of online resource material of their subject. It could be of great help in digital learning of youth, particularly for students belonging to disadvantaged groups. Then, although three-fourth of the sample group had their attempts still available, but even then, they were ready to contribute in the development of online study material.

There could be one time mandatory volunteerism among students to inculcate the value of voluntary services for the whole life. In fact, a few hours of voluntary service provides exposure to society and community services and aids to the personality development of volunteer. But, voluntary services in education have been under-utilised in India, although volunteerism as a concept is well rooted in its culture. Mahatma Gandhi believed voluntarism and decentralisation as the organising principles of ideal an society (IGNOU, 2021). Indian thinker Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Vivekananda had given the idea: service to *Jiva* is service to Shiva Ideology Belur Math, 2019. It meant that service to mankind

is service to the God. In the recent times, National Education Policy 2020 also mentioned the necessity of volunteerism and suggested for high-quality capacity building of educators and volunteers. It mentioned about the National Literacy Mission 1988 based on the voluntary involvement of people, which resulted in a significant increase in national literacy during the period 1991–2011.

It was found that 96 per cent of the sample population was interested in providing voluntary services in education. But, less than 10 per cent of sample population possessed the degree in education (B.Ed./M.Ed.). And moreover, two-third of the sample group were not even interested in acquiring such degrees in future. So, some short-term training might be provided to turn them into educational volunteers. National Education Policy 2020 mentioned that qualified local community members including from higher educational institutions would be encouraged to take a short training course and volunteer, as adult literacy instructors and will be recognised for their critical service to the nation. So, the civil services aspirants and other such students, who are either undergoing preparation process or have already moved out of this process, could become the potential volunteers for education services.

The Potential as Educational Volunteers

Thus, educational volunteers have a special role in improving the overall

educational attainment, particularly under SEZ, since these are the areas where a large proportion of educationally disadvantaged students lies. These areas are much behind in terms of educational indicators in comparison to the other areas in their proximity. So here, the service of regular teachers would not suffice; rather additional help from volunteers would be required. The educational volunteers have a large potential to bring such educationally disadvantaged groups into mainstream. The youths are full of energy and motivation to contribute back to the society. They are in constant search of opportunities to work which would not only uplift them but also the society. Their energy must be channelised through voluntary services.

The findings showed that most of the sample group had qualified the preliminary exam of Union Public Service Commission, which could be taken as an evidence of possessing the subject knowledge or their capability in the development of online resource material. They belong to a variety of streams from humanity, science and engineering to medical stream. Their knowledge base could be tapped to fill the learning gap in the country and the world. The data showed that around 70 per cent of the sampled population had appeared in Civil Services mains exam at least once and almost 97 per cent of them were very much interested in sharing their knowledge with the school or college going students.

In general, it was found that those aspirants who have exhausted their limits for appearing in the exam (in terms of age or number of attempts), they mostly end up in not much productive or suitable livelihood ventures. They no longer remain eligible for other government services due to crossing age limit. At the same time, private jobs either no longer match their academic profile or simply remain uneventful for them. It often leads to the wastage of talent, their academic experience and non-utilisation of demographic dividend.

Access to teaching profession also becomes distant to them often due to lack of a postgraduate or doctorate degree. Most civil service aspirants had rarely pursued B.Ed. or M.Ed. degree, which becomes a barrier for their entry into formal teaching field. Now at near 30s (age), they lacked the interest for pursuing Masters or B.Ed. degree, since earning money seemed to be the immediate need and challenge. But one thing that they earn in this process is their knowledge of the subject and about the day to day events in the country and around the world. So, if in any way, their knowledge base could be tapped in education, it could increase the availability, affordability and accessibility of learning, particularly for students belonging to Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) and students under SEZ.

There is also a dire need for the promotion of digital education under the SEZ. UGC (2021) proposed that

all the higher educational institutions (HEIs) should be allowed to teach 40 per cent of any course online and the rest 60 per cent offline. Here also, these volunteers could be utilised for providing online learning. From Table 2, it was evident that a majority of the sample population were interested in contributing to digital learning. This could be a great boon to the educationally disadvantaged students. Also, National Education Policy 2020 encouraged every district to establish 'Bal Bhavan' as a special day time boarding school where students could participate in art, career and play related activities. Here, also voluntary services could be utilised for the progress of the society and the nation. Then, almost half of the sample belonged to science/maths/engineering graduates, which was an added advantage in improving the foundational literacy and numeracy.

Academic pedagogy in India should introduce mandatory voluntary services in education to foster civic responsibilities. The Government could create a platform where such volunteers could share their knowledge and experience with the school or college going students. Some authentication and accountability, mechanism should be created for keeping a check on such activities. These aspirants could also become the mentor of school and college going students in guiding them on career related issues. They could also come forward to

aware the citizens on various socio-political environmental issues. Even the volunteers could become the ambassadors for various government schemes related to education, particularly in SEZs.

Expectations of Educational Volunteers

What would be the incentive for providing voluntary services in education? Respondents were asked about their expectations in return for providing educational services. 16 per cent of respondents expected no incentive in return; rather they considered it as their duty towards nation building.

One-fifth of them expected just a certificate of recognition from the government for their endeavour. 35 per cent of them wished for some financial incentives. Only 28 per cent of the respondents demanded proper remuneration as per the profession. It meant that around three-fourth of the respondents expected either some financial incentive or non-monetary

incentives. So, these civil service aspirants could well be tapped as volunteers for education services. Even some funds could be earmarked by the government for such volunteers for their motivation and effective utilisation of the voluntary education services.

Limitations or Challenges

Due to the limited time and space, the present study could not collect the views of the other possible group of volunteers like working people, old age literate and healthy people, college going students, retired persons and others. Also, volunteerism involves inherent challenges like training and administrative barriers, safety and accountability issues, the need of teaching ability and skills of volunteers, the sustained motivation and continued commitment of volunteers to engage in routine works, among others. These challenges could be overcome with proper training, continuous engagement, motivation and giving incentives to them.

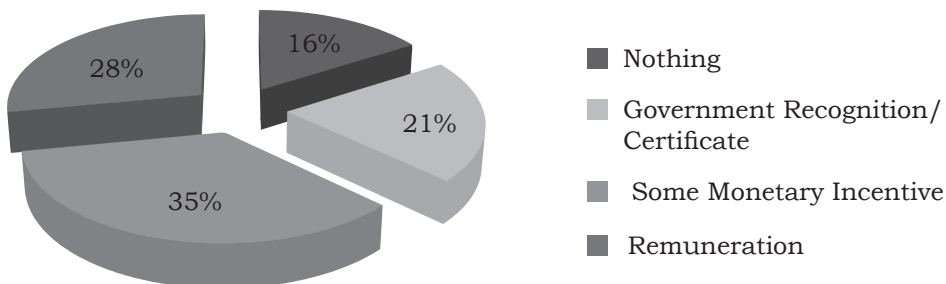


Fig. 3: Incentives expected by participants to act as educational volunteers

Source: Primary data

CONCLUSION

Education has the ability to shape the next generation and bring a silent revolution for the nation's development. Here, educational volunteers could become a potential tool in bringing this revolution. Through their rich experience and knowledge, they could become a pillar of socio-political development and upliftment of educationally disadvantaged groups under SEZ. The additional resources, time and energy contributed by them could complement and supplement educators in achieving the target of providing universal and quality education for all. On the closure of international year of volunteers 2001, United Nations asked the people to get more engaged in volunteer action (United Nations, 2001). It highlighted the potential of volunteerism at global level. Even India's National Policy on the Voluntary Sector 2007, envisaged a creative and effective voluntary sector with diverse functions which could contribute in socio-cultural and economic development (Government of India, 2007). Rather, the role of educational volunteers becomes even more important under SEZ, where students could get ample opportunities to interact one-to-one with them and seek their help in improving their educational outcomes. The collaborative effort of educational volunteers and teachers has a potential to turn the population SEZ from liability accountability to an asset.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- There is a need for awareness towards volunteerism in society. It should be encouraged as a fundamental duty of the citizens.
- A dedicated centre for registering educational volunteers needs to be created at country level. To bridge the learning gap in education, the support of volunteers is the need of the hour.
- Multidisciplinary knowledge of the Indian civil and defences service's aspirants qualifies them as the potential volunteers. The plethora of expertise and experiences of these volunteers would help in reducing learning poverty in the country.
- Volunteers could be trained for one-to-one focus on students from educationally disadvantaged groups. They could be engaged in academic or non-academic activities. Non-academic activities may be organising students, trips, fund-raising activities for the school, general maintenance of the school, monitoring of government educational schemes and other such things.
- Dedicating some time in voluntary service in education could be made compulsory for receiving academic degrees. Extra weightage of voluntary services could be assigned in the recruitment for government as well as private jobs.

- Additional funds could be earmarked to address the learning crisis in the post COVID-19 era. The volunteers could be paid monetary or non-monetary incentives for their motivation. Public donation and international assistance from the World Bank, charitable organisations and other such groups could be sought.
- Further studies should be done to generate more insights on the channelisation of volunteers for education services.

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