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Inside:
Perspectives
From the Field

Silver Jubilee Issue

PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM IN INDIA

Editorial Team
Chandrika Muralidhar
Indumathi S
Madhumita Sudhakar
Prema Raghunath

Advisors
Ramgopal Vallath
S Giridhar
Umashanker Periodi

Designed by
Banyan Tree
98458 64765

Cover photo by
Dilipkumar Rathod
District Institute, Yadgir
Azim Premji Foundation

Printed by
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Bangalore - 560 062
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+ 91 98450 42233
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"Learning Curve is a publication on education from Azim Premji University. It aims to reach out to teachers, teacher educators, school heads, education functionaries, parents and NGOs, on contextual and thematic issues that have an enduring relevance and value to help practitioners. It provides a platform for the expression of varied opinions, perspectives, encourages new and informed positions, thought-provoking points of view and stories of innovation. The approach is a balance between being an 'academic' and 'practitioner' oriented magazine."

FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to the 25th issue of the Learning Curve – we have reached that significant milestone and in order to celebrate the achievement, it was agreed that the theme should highlight the focus of the Azim Premji Foundation, which is Public Education, not only as a right to be made available to each and every child in India but also as an instrument to facilitate a democratic and equitable society. Society, being undeniably and inextricably connected with education, has to work towards a system of education which ensures that this objective will be met.

The essential ingredient in achieving this is a strong public education system for which there are some vital requirements that have to be met. These include an adequate budget for improved infrastructure and learning resources, the recruitment of high quality teachers which presupposes high calibre teacher training. In addition, the government has to ensure total access is made available at all levels of school education, starting with early childhood. Finally, the participation of the local community in the running of the school through a vigorous managing committee has to be ensured. The Indian social fabric has redesigned itself inalterably in the last 25 years: thus, our expectations from our educational system and what it must deliver in order to keep pace with the changed profile of a changed India have also undergone transformation.

The theme of public education is one that affects every society across the globe. All over, there has been fundamental dissatisfaction with the systems, though the idea itself is intimately linked with a democratic society: one in which the individual is taught her place in the larger society. In India there has been disaffection with both public and private schooling, especially in urban centres, where private schooling flourishes at exorbitant cost, many times with inadequate space, facilities and less than adequate teaching.

How might our public systems – not just schools, but for example medical care - become more popular and better used? Perhaps by many more people using them, so that a larger number who expect the best education or treatment start demanding better and better standards of teaching and care. Which is why the best thing about the many ways in which this vital, yet much debated, subject is examined in this particular issue shows that all of us – every single person in the country - is crucially involved in what form education takes, since it matters to us what the future of our society is going to be. It reveals too the tremendous hope that we all have that there are solutions, elusive perhaps, but they exist and it is for us, and others who follow, to find these solutions. This hope is all the more attenuated when we hear stories, as we do, of our public schools in the remotest of places, where teachers are doing a wonderful jobs, coming to braving the weather, working under very challenging circumstances, their enthusiasm unabated.

This issue has significant articles on a variety of topics. Here are a few of these. One of the focus articles examines the very close relationship of rising incomes, better child care and schooling. Another is an exposition of the kind of society we want to build through education, while yet another considers the social consequences of privatisation of education. It raises questions of far-reaching importance. For example: should education be paid for by individuals, so that it becomes part of a private society, thus discouraging the individual from thinking of himself as part of a larger scheme of things. Another examines the ongoing debate between private and public schooling and goes on to prove that contrary to popular belief, private schooling does not always offer additional value. Another writer has analysed how, despite the challenges of the public school system, it was the natural choice for the Azim Premji Foundation to enter the space as it could effect the greatest societal change. The significance of the RtE Act has found a place and the writer's analysis reveals how the Act is about the children, not about schools, whether public or private. There is a warm, moving and path breaking account of a long -lasting engagement with teaching and education, an affair that started many decades ago. The role of teachers not only within a school but also outside it as agents of change finds place in another article. There are personal experiences in the field of public education, insights gained from their writers' own observations and experiences show how richly

rewarding these have been. The common thread running through this diverse spread is the total and complete involvement of the writers who speak from personal engagement, lending the narratives enormous richness, depth, context and relevance.

As ever, this is a joint effort and I would like to thank the editorial committee for their expert help and support in putting together this momentous issue.

We look forward to readers' reaction, opinions and experiences on this a-encompassing topic, which is bound up with our lives both individually and collectively. Please write to us at the email id given below.

Prema Raghunath
Editor, Learning Curve
prema.raghunath@azimpremjifoundation.org

Looking back – S. Giridhar in conversation with the Editor

1. How did the Learning Curve come about?

In Nov 2004, when the Foundation had been in operation for over two years and its initial programs and pilot projects too, it was felt that the Foundation should be in a position to share its work and its plans in a simple manner with all its well-wishers, partner organizations and interested public. That is how the Newsletter started.

2. How big was the original newsletter? Who were the original readers? Who was it meant for? Who were the contributors?

We planned it as a once in four months, 8 to 12 page newsletter, with an update of our work/ programs, an article around some key issues in public education etc. The audience for this was all stakeholders interested in seeing improvement in quality of school education, concerned about the need for equity and quality in public education, all education functionaries, organizations – both governmental and NGO – working in the domain of school education.

3. When and how did the idea of theme-based issues come about?

Around 2008, we felt that a general Newsletter that merely informed people about Foundation's work etc. had very limited utility and that the Learning Curve could actually fulfil a much more substantive and much needed requirement. There was a clear paucity of accessible, good, in-depth material, reading and resources in subjects that teachers, teacher educators could use. We wanted to bring out a resource that could be a keep sake, long term reference material that could be used by teachers and teacher educators for discussion, in class room, in training and development, in thinking about curriculum and material etc. So that is how we felt that Learning Curve must now move forward from being a newsletter to 'publication with a focussed theme' for each issue. It meant that from a mere 12 page read and throw issue it would become a publication of around 15 to 25 solid articles by some of the most knowledgeable practitioners and academics engaged in school education. It meant each issue would now be anywhere from 64 to 100 pages. We began this 'new avatar' of Learning Curve with a special issue on Science Education. It was a huge learning experience for each one of us who were engaged in bringing out Learning Curve. We followed this up with issues on Language, Math, Social Science, School Leadership, Sports in education, Arts in education and so on.

4. How do you as the founder/pioneer feel about the magazine as it is now?

Any publication must constantly and continuously evolve and improve to keep up its relevance. There is no way, we can say, oh we have now moved to becoming a good publication. That is a sure way to deteriorate. One must always have a core requirement to see how it can be made better and more useful. Feedback from readers and users must be evaluated and acted upon. We must get more and more people to contribute articles. We must be aware of which of the issues and which of the articles have been found most useful on the ground. Which issue was translated and distributed the most? Why? Having said this, one also must express some satisfaction that Learning Curve fulfils a crucial requirement, is widely appreciated and its articles are considered very accessible while treating the subject with depth.

5. What do you see as the way forward?

Publications that now come out from the University must be even better. So, the Math publication, Science publication etc. must set benchmarks that are better than the ones that Learning Curve set for itself. When the publications are translated and used in great volumes across the country and as reference material and ready- reckoners we will get a reaffirmation of its service and utility.

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SECTION A

Perspectives

What is Public Education

Anurag Behar

What is public about Public Education? Before we go to that question, we can safely reaffirm that there is a wide and growing agreement now on the usage of language, that what were called Public Schools in UK and India, are private schools, mostly for the economically well-off and not included in the ambit of Public Education in any way.

Schools that are funded by tax revenues generated by the State and administered ('managed', 'run') by the State are called Public Schools. Here I use schools in a broad sense, to include educational institutions from pre-primary levels to college. The word 'State' includes its various organs, even those which may have a fairly autonomous nature, but are eventually part of the State system. The funding may have some element of resources that are raised by the school itself, through fees and other sources, but is substantially provided by the state from its tax revenues. Such a system of Public Schools is what constitutes Public Education.

This is certainly the commonly shared understanding when the phrase Public Education is used. This commonly shared understanding is on sound grounds and under most circumstances quite adequate. However, the adequacy of this notion is worth a closer look, especially under the circumstances that face us today. There is wide dissatisfaction with the state of affairs of our education, while the expectations from education continue to soar. The fiscal pressures on the State find convenient solutions from market based private sources of service delivery, often turning a blind eye to the short and long term deleterious impact of such actions. These circumstances vary in their detail, but in their basics are common across many countries and not limited to India.

A hint of the limitation of this particular notion of Public Education comes from our natural tendency to use that phrase rather than State Education (or State Schools). If the aforementioned notion of Public Education had been adequate and complete, one could use the phrase State Education, without any loss of meaning or intent. It appears that this natural tendency arises from the valid notion that the State is the institutional mechanism for this kind of education to happen, but is not the same thing as this kind of education i.e. in itself it's not Public Education.

Which takes us back to: what is this public in Public Education? It appears that the most basic notion is that of it being equally available to all; that is why it is public. There is another equally important notion embedded, and that is about people coming together for something. In this case, since it's in the context of education, it's about people coming together to further public good through education. So the word public has two basic aspects: for-whom (equally for all) and for-what/why (for public good).

Seen like this, i.e. being equally available to all and with the aim of furthering public good, it becomes apparent that the State may be well suited to conduct such education under most circumstances. Nevertheless, State Education is a mechanism and not necessarily the same thing as Public Education. Let's consider an extreme situation where this point becomes clearer. In a (imaginary) totalitarian State, the state school system indoctrinates students to support the State and its grip. This is State Education, but it's not Public Education. Of course, such a State may claim that this is Public Education, but then that would be based on their notions of good society, which certainly wouldn't include (e.g.) freedom, liberty, autonomy, equality.

For furthering public good, education must have appropriate aims. Such aims are at the core of the notion of Public Education. These aims are achieved through (and manifested in) various educational processes and arrangements and centrally in the curriculum. For now, let's just briefly touch upon these aims, which would further public good. On one hand it's about the development of autonomous, thinking and engaged individuals, with knowledge of the world, and capacities to pursue a meaningful life. On the other, the aims also include the development of a just, compassionate, humane and sustainable society. These two threads of the aims together further the public good. In this context the necessity of such an education being equally available to all becomes even clearer,

because only if it's equally available to all, can it achieve its aims.

Once we look at the Public Education from this perspective, it starts becoming clear that it is immensely important to any society. In a democratic society, where education is the most (perhaps the only) organized and directed process for developing its people and the society, Public Education becomes foundational to the society and democracy.

Since we have looked at the importance of appropriate aims of education and its implication on curriculum, let's look at one kind of attack on (or gnawing away of) Public Education, through aims and curriculum. If curricular goals or its content were to change to suit idiosyncratic needs of certain groups, or to serve the whims of a particular ideology, Public Education will no longer remain public, undermining its central role in the society and democracy. Such efforts for change would perhaps be obvious and would be contested.

However one kind of shift advocated for by a large cross section of people today, often goes in adequately contested. This starts with statements that are at the level of aims of education and get translated to curricular matters. This is about 'education must make our economy more dynamic', 'education must drive employability' and so on. These statements in themselves are not problematic. The issue is the oft explicitly (and almost always implicit) stated intent to give primacy to the economic aims of education over all else.

Economic aims are integral to Public Education. Since, for example, helping people lead a meaningful life is an aim of education, economic well-being must be adequately weighed. But narrowing the aims and curriculum, by the continuous emphasis on economic aims, thus diluting other aims, gnaws away at Public Education. It makes education serve the market (and its dominant groups) not the public good. This is as insidious as the other kinds of attacks, which though may be more obvious.

Let's now go to the matter that is more often discussed, the matter of Public and Private Education and whether private schools can deliver Public Education.

In theory, a public spirited private school can deliver (or be a part of) Public Education as long as the two basic conditions are met. One, it follows the curriculum that is designed for the public good. Two, it is equally available to all, irrespective of their socio-economic status.

The second condition cannot be met by private schools if they intend to recover their costs from the students, it would immediately exclude the economically disadvantaged. This has led to the notion of publicly funded private schools, which can then purportedly deliver on Public Education.

There is no doubt that when we look across our country (or outside) we can find a number of public spirited private schools. Some of these may have state funding, some are philanthropically funded. They do (or try their best to) meet the two conditions, which then qualify them as being a part of Public Education. However these schools are a minority.

The majority of private schools are not public but profit spirited. They narrow their curriculum to directly serve the dynamics of their market, rather than the Public Good, while paying lip service to good education and the regulatory mandated curriculum. They do not provide equal access to all. Aside from the economic barriers, they have significant social (often in the form of 'academic standards') barriers to access. They see this exclusivity as a critical part of their reputation, which feeds their 'business' success. Many such schools have little or no interest in education, let alone Public Education.

Only if one were to deliberately close ones' eyes and ears can one deny this reality of private schools in India. Even on the matter of 'learning levels', it's clear that the private schools do not do any better than government schools[1]. This situation is not unique to India, but is the same across countries. Increasing number of (including through state funding) private schools, have led to no improvement in learning at the education system level, but have led to greater inequity and stratification[1,2].

This should not be surprising at all and can be completely anticipated if one sticks to the fundamentals, without getting waylaid by ideology of market-fundamentalism[2,3,4]. And those fundamentals are that private entities establish and run schools for (with few notable exceptions) private purposes e.g. profit, prestige, political influence. Few would admit to these purposes, they will always wear a veil of commitment to public good. But that is all it is – a veil. Entities that are neither established nor run for public good cannot

miraculously produce public good, against their basic intent. Private schools cannot deliver Public Education.

So, a Public Education system can only be on the basis of a system of State schools. While a State schooling system may not always be Public Education, but Public Education cannot happen without a sound State schooling system. And Public Education is central to our efforts to develop a good society and is foundational to democracy.

In India we need to invigorate and improve the State schooling system; there are no short-cuts available for that. But then there are no short-cuts available for the attempts to develop a good society, the kind that we have promised ourselves in our Constitution.

Notes: All notes refer to columns (and references therein) written by the author for the newspaper Mint, available on its website Livemint (http://www.livemint.com/).

1. 'Cost of Privatized Education', April 17, 2013
2. 'Ideology of Education', October 30, 2013
3. 'Myths of Priavtopia', December 25, 2013
4. 'Market no fix for Education', October 28, 2015

Anurag is CEO, Azim Premji Foundation and Vice-Chancellor, Azim Premji University. He is also closely involved with Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiatives and Wipro's corporate social responsibility work. Anurag has been engaged with efforts to improve education in India for the past thirteen years. He has been a vocal advocate for the critical importance of public systems, in particular the public education system. His many years earlier in business, have given him an insider's view in to both the possibilities and limits of markets. For the past few years he has also been engaged with environmental and ecological issues. He writes a fortnightly column for the newspaper Mint, on Education and Ecology, available on www.livemint.com. He has an MBA from XLRI, Jamshedpur and a BE in Electrical & Electronics Engineering from National Institute of Technology, Trichy. He enjoys long distance running. He may be contacted at anurag.behar@azimpremjifoundation.org

Brand: Government School

Dileep Ranjekar

When Azim Premji Foundation made a fundamental decision to work with rural Government schools and focus on Government School Education System (as opposed to individual geographies or schools) it was fully aware of the several challenges that exist in the Government schooling system. In many ways, it was a natural decision for the Foundation.

Among the various ways that we evaluated to contribute to social change, we found education as the most powerful way. Within the education domain, we had several options such as higher education, technical education, management education etc. We realized that school education is where it all begins therefore it was a natural decision to work with school education as a priority.

In 1998, available census data revealed that over 84% children in our country (and over 88% in rural India) were studying in Government schools. Probably the biggest challenge was that close to 59 million children were out of school. The PROBE report revealed several reasons for children either remaining outside school or being pushed out of the school.

We also found that the middle class onwards part of the society had vacated the Government schools – in fact they have vacated most public services such as health, public distribution system, transportation etc. Therefore what was left in the public school were largely the children of those who did not have voice and did not have choice. Quite naturally, this significantly reduced the pressure on the Government system to deliver better quality public services including education.

Over a period of time, we realized the vastness of the canvass. There were over 1.3 mlllion schools, 250 mlllion children, 70 million teachers and another one mlllion people supporting the schools from outside. Any person who understands managing large systems would know the implications of making things happen in such a system – primarily due to its size itself. The complexity of implementation is further compounded with education being administered by 30 different states to suit their conditions, cultures and socio-economic conditions.

After the year 2000, with the advent of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, several positive steps were initiated by the Government resulting in dramatic increase in the number of schools, number of classrooms, provision of toilets, drinking water facilities, appointing number of teachers etc. But quality and equity in education has eluded for the vast majority of schools. After 68 years of independence and 30 years of National Policy for Education, the statistics for girls and boys, for urban and rural has a gap of close to twenty five percentage points.

There are several disconcerting issues – adherence to the RtE by the Government school is abysmal, school-wise teacher pupil ratio is grossly inadequate, the critical institutions created to provide academic support to the schools are inadequately resourced – both in terms of quantity and quality, resources provided to the school are grossly inadequate etc.

Some of the most critical issues at a systemic level are (a) the curriculum, design, duration and quality of delivery of Teacher Education in the country, (b) highly rote memory based examination system (c) practically no schools of education that develop all-round professionals for education – with necessary education perspective, deeper understanding of subjects, pedagogy, education management, assessment, technology in education, early childhood education, education for specially abled children, etc. leading to severe lack of high quality people in the education system. This is the single most significant reason for the shortage of people in cluster, block, district and state level academic institutions. And yet there is no determination to create Indian Education Services recommended by the National Policy for Education.

All the above and, in addition, the severe shortage of Government funds have significantly eroded the image and reputation of Government schools.

The execution / implementation problems that the Government education system encounters are also the problems that most large organizations face. It is therefore rather unjustified to discuss these issues only in the context of Government. I personally do not find much difference in the way many

large organizations function and the Government functions. Some of the most common issues are – ensuring implementation of decision, recruiting – retaining and motivating talent, managing performance and ensuring quality. The private / corporate organizations have one advantage – most people in the organization have one rallying point – profits or money, whereas different stakeholders have a divergent view about education.

The additional difficulties in the Government system are – political interference, uncertain tenures of people in the given role and absence of accountability due to lack of performance management culture and any kind of risk-reward system.

However despite all the above, my colleagues and I – who spend significant time in the field - visiting Government schools and offices are constantly motivated with what we see in these schools and offices. While the constraints are similar, there are enough people in all roles – teachers, school principals, cluster-block-district functionaries and parent communities who create huge respect in our minds in the way they are focussed on their responsibilities.

Their determination keeps alive our hope that the system will eventually develop a critical mass of people who will create that change in the classroom which has been envisaged in our constitution, our education policy and our curricular framework. There are principals of District Institutes of Education Training (DIETs) who are trying to stay on course to provide some meaningful academic inputs to the schools despite being denied the agreed resources in terms of infrastructure, number of people and quality of people. The average strength of faculty available in DIETs across the country is merely 10 (against the approved number of 20+) and that too with a skewed subject spread. There are DIETs where only two faculty members have been appointed. However, the principal has not allowed her morale to be adversely affected.

A few months ago, in a discussion with a Block Education Officer (BEO) I asked him – 'How do you manage with over 45% single teacher schools in your block?'

He smiled and told me 'Forget the single teacher schools, I have 127 'no teacher' schools in my block.' He is managing the schools by temporarily shifting the teachers from one school to another, without permanently transferring them. He is cheerful, working with great spirits and has a tremendous sense of responsibility.

There are several principals of schools in remote areas that are working hard to ensure their children learn despite being single teacher schools and in some cases, 'no teacher' schools. Despite the crunch on resources and general neglect by the larger system, they make every effort to ensure that their schools are clean, have a proper assembly, teachers teach something sincerely, disadvantaged children are taken care of, school management committee meetings are held regularly (and meaningfully) and proper mid-day meals are served to attending children. They ensure that the science kits supplied under the Government programmes are opened and utilized. I met one such principal just two weeks ago and it was a fulfilling experience. It was a school with five classes and just two teachers in addition to the principal. You could see her care and presence everywhere – including for a teacher whose family met with an accident during which the teacher lost her husband and son. The teacher herself was seriously hurt and since then gets unpredictable seizures……she got one when we were present in the school. The alacrity and concern with which the Principal acted was remarkable. Later I learnt that the Principal had recently received the Governor's award for her performance.

And finally, there are teachers who regularly brave weather and distance to reach the schools, care for their children in the class, try their best to understand the newer things around them and ensure that the children, too, get the experience of their environment. These are the teachers who are very keen to learn. These are the teachers who attend the voluntary teacher forums of Azim Premji Foundation with keenness – on time beyond the school hours – including Sundays and other holidays. They want to give a new meaning to their profession. We at Azim Premji Foundation have never understood why this tribe of teacher is so maligned by the general public – especially by people who have never visited the Government schools.

There have been occasions where in our meetings with larger groups of Government education functionaries, these members raise apprehensions and concern about the migration of children from Government schools to private schools. They all agree that the Government schools, by and large,

have better infrastructure, more qualified and higher paid teachers, better academic support, larger component of in-service training and larger per child -spend levels. At the same time, most of them admit their children in the private school and they are unable to explain why. After much discussion and probing, it emerges that it is largely the reputation of the Government schools and the brand that has suffered over a period of time. Somehow, private schools have managed to create a perception that the quality of education is better in their schools. This is not supported by any research findings . In fact, all major research in the past 12 years have pointed that either there is no difference in the quality of education between public and private schools or if at all, the quality in public schools is marginally higher.

Consider some additional factors:

Government schools have a legal and social responsibility of admitting every child that seeks admission. They cannot discriminate on the basis of socio-economic class, caste, religion or so called assessment of the academic performance of the child. In short, they cannot pick and choose children the way the private schools can and do.

Since the children in Government schools come largely from socio-economically weaker sections, they have very little or no exposure to early childhood education. Their parents are often illiterate or first generation literates, fully engaged in their efforts to earn a livelihood and therefore unable to offer educational support to their children. As such the children are rather under-prepared for being in the first standard. In comparison, most of their counterparts in the private schools have exposure to pre-school education, hail from stronger socio-economic class where the parents are able to engage with their development.

Government schools are required to deal with this massive disadvantage – which is never factored in by the general public. Unlike in most private schools, the focus in the Government schools is not on merely preparing the children to perform better in the 10th standard examinations.

Indian Government school system is the largest in the world and has the unique reach of having a primary school within a kilometre of each village. In a nation where infrastructure development (roads, electricity, and water supply) have lagged behind terribly, this reach of education to all sections of society was a tremendous achievement.

If this achievement has to be leveraged, we must actively promote 'Brand, Government School'. Not through hollow slogans but by actively and urgently addressing the inadequacies that are becoming a barrier to such a brand. We believe it is possible and the nation like India has no alternative but to develop its public education system and promote the brand through delivery of quality education for all its children.

Dileep Ranjekar is the founding Chief Executive Officer of Azim Premji Foundation. Dileep is a science Graduate and has a Post Graduate Diploma of Business Management as well as Master's degree in Personnel Management and Industrial Relations from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. He joined Wipro from campus in 1976. He was one of the core team members of Wipro that contributed to setting the tone, the culture, the management processes and people development processes in the organization. Dileep has been associated with the Foundation right from its ideation. He may be contacted at dkr@azimpremjifoundation.org

Understanding Human Development in India

Amarjeet Sinha

1986-87. The year of the National Policy of Education. The year of the 42nd round National Sample Survey. The damning NSSO indictment – 69.23% females in rural areas six plus never enrolled in schools in rural India. Drop-out rate for SC girls in Bihar and ST girls in Andhra Pradesh at primary education level in rural areas 100%!!

Clearly, the first four decades of independent India seems to have failed miserably in improving school participation more so in rural areas and among girls.

2014. NSSO 71st round. It also marks a decade and a half of implementation of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan for Universal Elementary Education. No difference in Net Attendance Ratio of girls and boys up to elementary school level (Class- VIII) in rural and urban areas, 99% children enrolled in schools, primary school within two kilometres of 99% households and upper primary schools within two kilometres for 86% households in rural or urban areas. Universal school participation has become a reality. The challenge of quality and learning remains daunting as a large number of those who enrol and attend schools are not able to attain learning and writing competencies commensurate with their schooling years. The late thrust on primary education and literacy shows up in the large number of households without any literate member above age 25 in the Socio Economic Census 2011. It also reflects in rising but still low number of graduates and higher secondary pass in rural areas as per SECC.

The last decade and a half has been a significant one for human development. Besides Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan(2001), the National Rural Health Mission(2005) and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme (2005 onwards) was rolled out, besides a concerted thrust on rural roads under the Prime Minister's Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY). This 15 year period also coincides with a phase of high economic growth and relatively faster increase in per capita incomes in rural areas as compared to urban areas (ICE 360 study 2013-14). Increases in per capita incomes of poor households leads to some disposable incomes with households, so necessary for better participation in schools or access to health services.

The improved participation of girls in elementary schooling, the increase in incomes, besides the strengthening of the primary health care system under the National Rural Health Mission and the role of the demand generating Community Health Worker, the ASHA, shows improvement in a large number of health and nutrition indicators. Infant Mortality Rate that was stagnating around 60 for a few years (2003-05) is down to 40 in 2013. Total Fertility Rate is significantly down from 2.9 in 2005 to 2.3 in 2013. Underweight children are down from 42.1% in 2004-5 to 29.1% in 2013-14. While these improvements are not significant globally, compared to where we were only a few years ago, the declines mark a significant improvement from where we were on primary education in 1986-87 or in health at the turn of the century. The financing for elementary education improved a little with SSA though funding under NRHM was only a marginal improvement in GDP terms in the public expenditure on health. Clearly, even a modest increase in public expenditure for education and health has significant consequences for improvement in gender equality in schools and in health indicators. Quality challenges require even greater thrust on removal of governance deficits and deficits in institutional development and the professional development of teachers and health workers.

The last one and a half decades have also been the period of women's reservation in Panchayats. Slowly but surely, women's empowerment is visible in many rural areas in the collectives of women under the Mahila Samakhya or the Self Help Groups under the National Rural Livelihood Mission. Literacy among women has grown at a faster pace during this period. Since the gap was large, there is still a long way to go. Many elected women Sarpanches are shedding their dependence on their husbands. There is a major social transformation taking place in rural areas with regard to women's role in society.

What needs to be done to improve the global human development rank of India? How can the process

be speeded up? While India is too diverse a country for any one common solution for all regions, there are a few priorities that need to be addressed in all States and UTs.

Firstly, credible public systems ought to be the focus of attention. This calls for reforms in public recruitment and public management. We need more managers than magistrates. There has to be a zero tolerance to interference in public systems. Schools cannot be seen only as election booths, and teachers and health workers as election agents. We need to devise transparent ways of selecting the ideal teacher and health worker. In fact, there is a case for incrementally developing a teacher or a health worker in remote rural areas.

Secondly, convergence in all the initiatives at the gram panchayat level with the institutional involvement of organizations of the poor, such as self-help groups and village organizations, is needed as human development does not lend itself to narrow departmentalism. Education, literacy, health, skills, livelihoods, sanitation, water, housing, nutrition, farm and non-farm livelihoods, women's empowerment, social justice, etc. has to be part of a common action for Mission Manav Vikas – human well-being has to be the end all of all initiatives for sustainable development.

Thirdly, there has to be a time-bound commitment towards adequate financial provisioning by Central, State and Local Governments for human wellbeing. Financing has to be timely to be effective and efficient. Health and education sectors require the countervailing presence of good functional systems. Public health challenges require public systems of institutional support and care.

Fourthly, accountability among elected representatives can come through a countervailing institutional role for community organizations like the women's self – help groups. This will also create the countervailing presence of organizations of the poor like SHGs/VOs that can challenge the monopoly exercise of authority by the elected *sarpanch*.

Fifthly, partnership with people and professionals are necessary for any public service. The use of information technology provides a rare opportunity for accountability and transparency. The private sector can actually engage with public systems to make schools, health facilities, skill initiatives, farm and non – farm livelihood efforts give better outcomes.

Sixthly, stateservices for management of human development programmes have to be adequately strengthened with new skill sets. Public management reforms for human development need crafting of institutions for development and regulation. We have to develop better teachers and health workers and skill them more effectively. Teacher training institutions and health workers/ nurses skill development institutions have to become centres of excellence that facilitate the learning of skills for quality. Building institutional capacity for good teachers and health workers will help meet not only our domestic needs but also the insatiable global need for such workers. Education and health workers have unlimited global demand in spite of the role of IT and the internet. Thrust on these two sets of institutions (teacher training and health workers/nursing) has to be more central to our global eminence quest.

Seventhly, it goes without saying we will need to ensure very high rates of economic growth to be able to do all that we have outlined above. Growth in incomes of households improves their ability to participate in the schooling process and in seeking health care services.

Higher Education – Meeting the Challenge

Gross enrolment in Higher Education is a function of Secondary-Higher Secondary completion. It is also an aspiration of households struggling to get out of poverty. Democracy raises aspirations of the poorest households as access to learning is not barred by accidents of birth – at least in theory! Gross enrolment in higher education captures the gaps of gender and social inequalities in India. Participation of women, tribals, dalits in higher education continues to lag behind the other more privileged sections, in spite of all the initiatives for positive discrimination and affirmative action for the under privileged.

The question of quality is the single most challenge of higher education as the phenomena of educated but not employable is beginning to question the growing rates of gross enrolment in higher education. The very significant expansion of the private sector over the last few decades has increased the opportunities for access, especially for those who could afford. However, challenges of quality, equity and employability remain as relevant for these institutions as for the publicly funded institutions.

As India enters the phase of 'massification' of higher

education, with GER crossing 20 percent, clarity on a few policy issues is necessary. First, there is a need to understand the higher education, skill, employment linkage better as further expansion and improvement must address the skill issue. The massification phase across the world has focused more on the skills challenge. This calls for a well-defined credit framework for skills as part of the higher education system. Second, higher education will have to address the challenge of choices for students. This calls for a teacher led movement for choice based credit framework. Teacher led so that the concerns of academics are discussed and deliberated at the institutional level, faculty found to meet the emerging needs, and flexibility accepted as a principle of engagement with students over an agreed framework. Choice-based credit framework has to be driven by the academic world and it cannot be a prescription for unity where diversity will actually be the strength.

Third, expansion must factor the fact that there is a sense of elitism about higher education and it may be easier and preferable to strengthen many existing public institutions rather than try to start new ones. An institution takes decades to flourish. China's Project 985 where 39 universities were given the funds and flexibility to become world class, is a lesson to emulate.

The quality of leadership makes or mars a higher education institution. There is no going away from a rigorous search-cum-selection process for leaders of higher education institutions. Along with responsible autonomy, professional and academic led selection of University leaders holds the key to excellence with equity.

The challenge of quality requires a framework based on a continuum of accreditation, quality assurance and regulation. A 'standalone' system of regulation becomes arbitrary and unpredictable unless the regulation is backed with the evidence of quality and excellence, captured through a well-defined process of accreditation. The same parameters ought to apply to public and private institutions when it comes to setting minimum standards. Minimum setting of standards based on objective accreditation processes is the finest way to clear the crisis of fair regulation.

Higher education requires academic freedom to experiment and innovate. Universities must have the freedom to frame what they teach and how they plan for their curriculum and courses. Conformism must be skeletal, with academics having the freedom to add meat to the courses. Duration of courses may also be a function of flexibility as long as minimum standards are prescribed. Regulatory bodies like the UGC and AICTE need to respect academic and institutional freedom in curricular matters. There is a case for these regulators to learn from the best practices across the world.

Mainstreaming skills requires engagement with the school system and setting up of Community Colleges that provide a bridge for vertical mobility of those with skills. Graduate and Post graduate courses in skills are a way of encouraging the emergence of Ph.D Plumbers and Carpenters. India needs them to respect skills and to develop the notion of learning beyond just the white collar thrust. The faculty profile of Tamil Nadu is a very interesting insight to its development. It is the only State where a range of vocational skills providing institutions (Teacher education, para medics, polytechnics, medicine, nursing, etc.) have replaced simply the pursuit of general BA, BCom, B.Sc. courses. This is needed in our Central Indian region where skill based expansion with excellence holds the key to reaping the demographic dividend. Skills in the higher education space are not only about Make in India. It is equally about the needs of the services sector, the teachers, the health workers, the nurses, etc.

Public investments must also go up as there are a large number of public institutions with excellence whose replication, setting up of new campuses, demand based expansion in States and abroad, will go a long way in taking the excellence issue forward. Just as we facilitate the setting up of Private Universities, we ought to find ways of encouraging institutions like the Shri Ram College of Commerce, Lady Shri Ram College, St. Stephen's College, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, AIIMS, IITs, NITs, IIMs, etc. to set up branches in many States. Similarly, public investments to remove gaps in physical infrastructure, faculty, governance deficits, ought to be attempted in reviving public universities in the State sector. There is no going away from a zero tolerance to corruption in the selection of educational leaders like Vice Chancellors and Principals through a Search Committee system that is transparent and competent. Leaders will make a difference if their excellence, integrity and academic contribution are widely acknowledged. Individuals do matter. Financing of State Universities must necessarily be accompanied by the much needed removal of governance deficits. An organic

relationship should be developed between Central Universities and Institutions (IITs, AIIMS, etc.) and State Universities and institutions. Central institutions must play a pace setting role and should be organically linked to State Universities and institutions. State Universities have land as a resource and it is indeed a big resource. Adequate investments in infrastructure, human resources, equipments, and management can transform them into thriving learning centres of excellence if accompanied by institutional governance reforms.

While simplifying the processes of setting up Private Universities and institutions, we need to change the management structure of educational institutions from mandatorily being not for profit registered societies to even being institutions registered under the Companies Act, with provision for reinvesting profits into the education sector. This would require a new law to answer issues decided in the Unnikrishnan case. Schools and Colleges are being bought and sold at high premium, but unfortunately, they are all not- for- profit registered societies generating surpluses but not making profits. This leads to fudging of accounts. Also, banks do not lend money for setting up educational institutions as they are set up on a not for profit framework. This leads to investors in education bringing in either their own/company's surpluses (Azim Premji, Shiv Nadar) or arranging funds through donations. It also leads to underhand capitation money, black money and corruption based savings getting invested in education as educational expansion is not bank funded. Encouraging educational entrepreneurs requires a shift to permitting educational institutions under the Companies Act so that they can actually make a profit and the enterprise becomes financially viable in the eyes of banking institutions. We need many more educationist entrepreneurs who can create institutions of excellence. We can always insist on the profits being ploughed back in education sector for some years.

Developing skills and school finishing life skills and competencies are indeed our biggest challenge, given the large youth population that is unemployed, under-employed, or employed with lower order skills and competence. This requires a societal effort to provide opportunities as flexibly as possible, in the private or the public system, to acquire skills that can be tested and certified and that industry or the service sector recognizes for purposes of employability. A framework of well-crafted autonomous institutions on the same principles as outlined above will need to be set up for accreditation of vocational training providers, setting up of curriculum, testing acquisition of skills and competencies, interfacing with industry and trade, engaging in manpower planning and forecasting, multi-skilling, etc. Developing robust institutions is India's greatest challenge.

Good national educational institutions should be encouraged to develop twinning arrangements and partnerships with provincial educational institutions, to handhold and support, to build capacities and professionalism. Similarly, partnerships with foreign universities ought to be within an evidence based framework with a strong nucleus of national institution and faculty, engaging with a globally renowned institution. In addition there must be a thrust on getting good faculty from these global institutions as otherwise partnerships will have limited value. The architecture of regulation of universities ought to be reformed to allow greater evidence based innovations that promote expansion with excellence and equity.

It is time we thought through ways of retaining good human resource in the teaching profession. We need to see the evidence and develop frameworks that encourage the best minds to go back to teaching. Flexibility in eligibility conditions for teachers as Adjunct faculty, without compromising quality, can enable an interchange from industry to teaching and vice versa. Tamilnadu does that with its public health cadre very effectively. Besides higher emoluments, housing, an enabling environment, research support, will all encourage individuals to go for a 'reverse sabbatical' to educational institutions. A liberal policy for Adjunct Faculty that promtes industry-academia movements and generates inter – disciplinary thought processes, ought to be encouraged. Practitioner insights in educational institutions are of immense value. There is also an urgent need to weed out the incompetent, who got in through connections and takeovers, and not merit. Public systems need this major reform in public recruitment and service condition to enable a weeding out of deadwood. This will require new laws as otherwise they will attract the provisions of security of service enshrined in case laws. It is time we re-visited the right of individuals to survive at the cost of public exchequer with non-performance. Society gets adversely affected if we let it be. If we want

educational reforms to transform India, let us not put governance deficits on the back-burner. They are at the core of public systems, their perceived inefficiency and their development failure. We need to craft credible public systems and for this, we must go by the evidence to reforms public recruitments and public management.

Education reforms are the most sustainable way to transform India and to translate the large young population into a demographic dividend. With a commitment to raise public expenditure to six percent GDP and by facilitating large scale private sector investments in expansion with excellence and equity, India can overtake China's rates of educational expansion over a ten year time frame. It is the best opportunity for a young India, an India that can provide the largest workforce to the world. High rates of sustainable economic growth and human well-being hinge on our ability to use education as the vehicle of national transformation. It is the only route to an inclusive India.

Amarjeet Sinha is a civil servant with a deep interest in human development. He was a part of the team that designed Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the National Rural Health Mission. He also has the distinction of visiting 576 of India's 643 districts and of conducting a social sector module for IAS Officer Trainees for over 15 years. He may be contacted at amarjeetsinha@hotmail.com

I Want My Freedom: Don't Give Me a Route Map

Rohit Dhankar

Often one hears a challenge disguised as a query: what use is a National Curriculum Framework (NCF)? The challenges that emerge in the further dialogue depend on how reasonable, concerned or radical the challenger wants to pose himself/ herself to be. Some of them are: Our country is so vast and varied in cultural and natural environment that no single scheme of education can ever hope to be suitable for all. A supposed to be fundamental principle is often quoted in this regard is 'one size does not fit all'. Or, that the curriculum binds the teacher and the learner both; their interests are ignored, their creativity stifled and their curiosity killed; the child should be left free. Or, that NCFs are so idealistic that they have no use in the practical business of education, everyone completely ignores them.

These people often sound to me like a sailor declaring 'I want my freedom, please don't foist a route map on me'. The sailor will, of course, be lost in his long sea voyage without a map and so are these innovative people in the choppy sea of education. To properly respond to these challenges let us have a brief look at the uses and abuses of NCFs.

National System of Education

Education was a state subject before 1976, when it was included in the concurrent list through 42nd amendment in the Constitution, which technically means that there could not have been any 'national' curriculum frameworks before that. NCF 2005 states that 'for the first time in 1986 the country as a whole had a uniform National Policy on Education.' (NCF 2005, p4). We did have a national policy on education adopted by the Parliament in 1968. The phrase 'first time' in NCF 2005 indicates the fact that, though we did have NPE 1968, it was approved by the Parliament at a time when education was a state subject which 'allowed the state governments to take decisions on all matters pertaining to school education, including curriculum, within their jurisdiction.' (NCF 2005, p3) And the 'Centre could only provide guidance to the States on policy issues.' (ibid)

However, the ideal of national education is much older than that. There was a nationwide debate in the first two decades of the last century in which many people noted the ill effects of colonial education on the national consciousness of Indians and wanted to replace it with the national system of education. Aurobindo wanted education to be rooted in the Indian—largely based on Sankhya and Yoga—understanding of human mind[1]. Lala Har Dayal criticized colonial education with fervent nationalism and advocated a national system based on Indian culture and love for the nation[2]. Tagore argued that a university fit for a country could emerge only from the national cultural resources[3]; this argument for the university for him held for school education as well.

Lala Lajpat Rai[4] systematically analysed many attempts at nationalizing education and rejected some of them as sectarian. Without mincing words he states that the 'Dayanand Anglo Vedic College, …. the Mohammedan College at Aligarh, the Arya College at Lahore, the Hindu College at Benares, all embodied the 'national' ideals of their founders, limited and sectarian as they were at the time.' He argues that none of this can be a model of national education. 'The only effort of this kind which was, in my judgment, truly national, was that made by the National Council of Education in Bengal, … . The scheme of the National Council was **free from the sectarian tinge** of the Upper India movements.' (p. 24, emphasis added) This formulates and argues for perhaps the most important principle for national education: it has to be non-sectarian.

This brief, and limited in more than one way, excursion into the history of idea of national education is aimed at capturing a few principles

[1]Aurobindo Gosh, A system of national education, Tagore & CO., Madras, 1921.
[2] Har Dayal, Our Educational Problem, Tagore & Co., Madras, 1922.
[3] Rabindranath Tagore, The Centre of Indian Culture, a lecture delivered in Madras in 1919.
[4] Lajpat Rai, The problem of national education in India, Gorge Allen & Unwin, London, 1920.

that played a role in shaping the ideal of national education and, thereby, the national curriculum framework. One such principle in the minds of many Indians was non-sectarian education for all. Another one, is education that builds national consciousness, national spirit. A third ideal has been contribution to national cultural, political and economic life and the last but not the least has been development of an independent individual.

Coming back to the actual formulation of NCFs, we must note that all documents since NPE 1968 (perhaps since Radhakrishnan Commission in 1950) emphasize what they call National System of Education (NSE, for short).

Some key aspects of NSE in documents after the NPE 1968 are taking a clearer shape. It would be worthwhile to make an attempt to understand them.

Purposes and aims of education

To understand this aspect properly we should note: one, perhaps the issue of purposes and aims, unsurprisingly, is the oldest concern in the discourse of national system of education and figures very prominently in the debate mentioned above in the early years of 20th century. Two, we should make a conceptual distinction between 'societal purposes of education' and 'aims of education'.

In this article I will refer to 'societal purposes' simply as 'purposes'. Purpose of education then relate to the kind of society we want to build through education and the social changes we want to effect through it. For example, when Kothari Commission wants education to be 'an instrument of social change' or when NPE 1968 wants education to 'play its vital role in promoting national progress, creating a sense of common citizenship and culture, and strengthening the national integration' it is talking of purposes of education. They relate to the kind of society we want.

Aims of education on the other hand directly recommend the kind of understanding, abilities, values, skills, etc. that are to be developed in the individual members of the society. Taking an example from the same document (NPE 1968), when it states 'The educational system must produce young- men and women of character and ability committed to national service and development' it is talking of aims of education. The qualities mentioned here to be developed in individuals are **aims of education which in turn will serve to fulfil the societal purposes of education**. Of course, they are closely related. Also, they have significant overlap: therefore, in a discussion continuously flow into each other without distinction.

Right from the nationalistic debates on education some purposes have been constant in education: building a politically strong, cohesive, economically prosperous, and democratic nation. With minor variations these purposes are visible in all documents right to the NCF 2005. As we came closer to independence, democracy became an even more important national goal and therefore educational purpose too.

Educational aims, in terms of qualities of individuals are derived from these purposes: the logic being 'if this is the kind of society and nation we want, what capabilities its citizens need to create and sustain such a society?' Educational aims, as a result, have some capabilities of individuals which remain persistent now for over a century. Among them capability to think independently and clearly, being rooted in Indian culture, commitment to justice and equality, being secular in attitude and capacity to contribute to economic productivity are quite prominent.

Actually, the need for a NSE is justified on the basis of these purposes and aims of education only. Therefore, one important aspect of NSE is **the purposes and aims of education** which are supposed to be guiding education throughout the country.

It so happens that the challenges—misguided to my mind—posed to the need of NCF criticise the purposes and aims of education most vociferously. It is often declared that aims of education are patently useless and impotent in guiding education and purposes of education are decided by the parents under economic and social aspirations. In this short article I cannot go into a detailed refutation of these claims. However, I would like to quote two philosophers of education as food for thought, and not to be taken on authority, for those who consider aims of education as useless.

Dewey in his famous book Democracy and Education states: *'The net conclusion is that acting with an aim is all one with acting intelligently. To foresee a terminus of an act is to have a basis upon which to observe, to select, and to order objects and our own capacities. To do these things means to have a mind ... … if it is really a mind to do the thing and*

not a vague aspiration—it is to have a plan which takes account of resources and difficulties. Mind is capacity to refer present conditions to future results, and future consequences to present conditions. ***And these traits are just what is meant by having an aim or a purpose. A man is stupid or blind or unintelligent—lacking in mind—just in the degree in which in any activity he does not know what he is about, namely,*** *the probable consequences of his acts.'*[5] (p.120-21, emphasis added)

Professor Christopher Winch while discussing aims of education states *'[W]hen the major aims of education are not clearly agreed upon, there is a danger that covert aims may become the most influential in determining the operation of a public education system. It is likely that these aims will be set by the most influential groups operating both within and outside the system.* ***Because there will have been little or no public debate about aims, it is likely that the interests of some will receive scant attention and may even be harmed.*** *If a society does not have clear and agreed aims for its education system, there will be a danger that not only will it fail to have a healthy system that is respected and functions well, but there will also be widespread and damaging discontent among those groups whose interests are not well served.'*[6] (p. 33, emphasis added)

Structure of National System of Education

The suggestion regarding the common structure of education across the country seems to have been made first time by the Kothari Commission Report. On its basis NPE 1986 recommends 'It will be advantageous to have a broadly uniform educational structure in all parts of the country. The ultimate objective should be to adopt the 10+2+3 pattern, the higher secondary stage of two years being located in schools, colleges or both according to local conditions.'[7] (p. 44)

The clearly suggestive nature of the recommendation seems to be related to education being a state subject. The NPE '86 is not tentative regarding the structure and further wants to have a uniform division of elementary education as 5+3 and acceptance of +2 in the school education throughout the country (p 5).

All NCFs (including The Curriculum for Ten-Year School, 1975) emphasise a common structure of NSE across the country. Further, these documents often specifically state it as an important goal of the NCF.

NSE and language policy

Another important aspect of the NSE is emphasis on development of languages. NPE '68 recognises the importance of development of Indian languages and comes to the conclusion that without this the 'creative energies of the people will not be released, standards of education will not improve, knowledge will not spread to the people and the gulf between the intelligentsia and masses will remain if not widen further.' (p39) The suggested three language formula is seen as a way of finding balance between the aims of development of regional languages, development of a link language and knowledge of English.

This is the accepted language policy in education and every policy document and NCF after NPE '68 reiterates it, even if governments and schools often flout or adhere to it only in the letter devoid of its spirit.

Common Scheme of Studies

The National Education System also envisages the common scheme of studies at school level. National Curriculum for Elementary and Secondary Education—A framework 1988 (NCF 1988, for short) lays down a common scheme of studies from pre-primary to secondary education. At the primary level it prises one language (mother tongue/ regional language), mathematics, environmental studies, work experience, art education and health and physical education. At upper primary and secondary level the children have to study three languages and environmental studies is replaced with science and social studies, the rest remains the same as primary level. This scheme, though is not articulated exactly in the same terms in NCF 2000 and NCF 2005; still remains prevalent throughout the nation. The common scheme of studies, however, does not mean that the syllabus in each curricular subject has to be exactly the same across the country. A great deal of flexibility is envisaged for aligning the syllabus to local context. However,

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[5] *John Dewey, Democracy and Education, Macmillan Company, New York, 1916.*
[6] *Christopher Winch, Quality of Education, Journal of Philosophy of Education, Vol. 30. No. 1. 1996.*
[7] *National Policy on Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, New Delhi, 1998.*

in the interest of common standards there has to be reasonable similarities in the structures of the subjects. Common scheme of studies allows the possibility of formulating common standards of achievement across the nation.

Common Core Curriculum

NPE 1986 states that 'The National System of Education will be based on a national curricular framework which contains a common core along with other components that are flexible. The common core will include the history of India's freedom movement, the constitutional obligations and other content essential to nurture national identity. These elements will cut across subject areas and will be designed to promote values such as India's common cultural heritage, egalitarianism, democracy and secularism, equality of the sexes, protection of the environment, removal of social barriers, observance of the small family norm and inculcation of the scientific temper. All educational programmes will be carried on in strict conformity with secular values.' (p 5)

This defines what all Indian children are supposed to know as well as gives ample freedom for the contextualisation of the curriculum.

To summarise the discussion so far:

- The makers of modern India came to a conclusion that it shall be a democratic nation with equal rights for all. This conclusion emerged through painful process in the freedom movement.
- But India was, and is, a land of diversity; the idea of equality for all as well as the idea of nationhood were neither understood by all in a similar manner nor accepted with equal commitment.
- In addition, the economic development of the country was urgently needed (still is) for dignified life for all.
- Therefore, to develop peoples' capabilities in various areas of life and to develop a national consciousness with democratic values became an imperative. Education is the only means available to develop the required capabilities, values, knowledge and skills.
- Since we are talking of one nation in which peoples' movement from one place to another is guaranteed, equality of opportunity is guaranteed, there has to be a commonality in the system of education. Therefore, the National System of Education.
- The characteristics of the NSE as we understand it today include common purposes and aims of education, structure of school education, core components and scheme of studies.
- Without this ensuring equal educational opportunity to all is not possible.

National Curriculum Framework

The necessity of a common education system is a result of having a democratic constitution and polity. This need is articulated and justified in the National Policy on Education. The NCF is the instrument through which the ideals of NSE can be actualised. National Curriculum Framework, therefore, becomes a plan of education which derives its justification from the constitution of India and NPE. But its job is to device a framework of principles of what can guide actual teaching in the classrooms as per those basic principles.

Therefore, guidelines for developing syllabi, textbooks, teaching method and assessment have all to find a place in the NCF document, as this is the link between the national education ideals and the action in the classroom to realise those ideals. In other words, it is a route map from where we are to the national educational ideals. Working out such a framework of principles which gives clear directions as well as leave room for flexibility, is a difficult task, though necessary to keep the NSE on the envisaged course. A serious understanding of the socio-political philosophy of the country, of desired society and the human beings in it, of pedagogical principles and actual context and current need of the nation all have to contribute to such a framework of principles.

NCF, therefore, is to a school system as a route map is to a sea voyager. A sea voyager will lose his way without a map and a school system will never know whether it is helping, or hindering, the achievement of national ideals without NCF.

Rohit Dhankar is Professor and Director of School of Education at Azim Premji University, Bangalore. He has been working in education since 1978, and has been part of many initiatives at State and National levels - education reforms, curriculum development, and teacher education and professional development. He trained as a teacher under David Horsburgh in the Neelbagh School, and taught at the elementary level for about 15 years. Rohit is the founder secretary of Digantar, a voluntary organization in Jaipur engaged in providing alternative education to rural children, and continues to work with Digantar as Academic Advisor. He may be contacted at rohit.dhankar@apu.edu.in

Commitment to Education: Are We Failing?

Hridaykant Dewan

The Promises in the Constitution of India

The idea of a democratic state has its basis and its goals in freedom, equality of opportunity, agency and justice which requires the participation of all its citizens. There are various ways in which this idea has been expressed, the most remarkable being the preamble to the Constitution of India. It is a declaration by the people of India of forming themselves into a group that would give each individual certain equal rights and equitable opportunities.

The key terms in the preamble to the Constitution are justice, liberty, equality of status and opportunity, and fraternity. As is clear, each demands from the citizen concern for other citizens underpinned by an understanding of the meaning of these terms. It also expects the governance system to respond to the challenge of making each of us aware, knowledgeable and capable of striving for these goals. We have committed to social, economic and political justice and equality of status and of opportunity in our preamble. This promise in a caste-ridden, extremely gendered, culturally diverse, economically highly stratified, politically divided unequal society showed far-sighted vision. To understand the perspective, meaning and implication of the ideas enshrined in the preamble, as well as for citizens to have the capabilities to make it possible, education is the central tool.

The way to this appreciation of equitability and respect for the others, apart from the possibilities of punishment on the areas enforceable by law, is to build in all citizens an understanding of these terms and inspire the confidence to become aspirational. So, this clearly first requires the knowledge of possibilities, followed by the belief that anyone can actually aspire to be whatever she chooses. This is in line with the rights or the capability approach, articulated by Amartya Sen and others, who postulate that the real freedom consists in choice-making resulting in the freedom to grow requiring, in turn, growth in capabilities, which gives rise to the sense of equality and agency. Both for understanding **how far we have come.**

The commitments in the Constitution were and are divided into the category of fundamental rights and policy directive principles. While, the progress on both these dimensions has been stunted, education was not made a fundamental right. It is of course also important to recognise that we have not yet even achieved what were provided as Fundamental Rights. There is no equality in terms of caste, creed and gender. There is also no guarantee of freedom from exploitation or even of equal freedom to choose religion yet. The discourse in today's scenario is periodically laden with strife and categories of citizens are discriminated in ordinary situations.

Underprivileged people – a number which includes many categories such as those from castes that are considered untouchable, minorities particularly Muslims and tribals - are marginalised and discriminated against in different ways with basic liberties such as living, occupation and diet being restricted. Some can be punished if their shadow falls on another person; many cannot sit, leave alone eat and be friends with, others and some have even been told to go and live in some other country. Families have been attacked, assaulted and thrown out from their homes when a member from the community makes the mistake of forming a friendship or a relationship with a person from so called higher, privileged castes.

Another issue of gross inequality is gender, with women earning less than men, not having rights to property or for children to bear their names. Prescribed styles of dressing ensure that there is an acceptance of these norms which, if flaunted, could result in unwanted sexual advances and even attacks. It is clear that no law enforcing agency can ensure these, or other, rights. Although we have moved forward, we are far from making this possible at this moment for all citizens. The right to Constitutional remedies (leave alone push for making directive principles operative) demands that the citizens must first understand the rights to be able to formulate a petition or case to be placed before the courts.

The arguments to place education in the Fundamental Rights could not be made acceptable to constituent assembly and hence education was placed in the Directive Principles. It is unfortunate that equitable education, which is the cornerstone of democracy, did not gain acceptance. Efforts at making education universally available, despite many commitments has never become top priority, losing out to, among other things, economic development and internal security and external defence.

However, educational opportunities for all is the first step towards building equal opportunities. The enrolment figures show that perhaps most children enter school, but they also show a large number of children dropping out fairly quickly and by secondary school most have left. It is also unclear if some of the dropouts are in reality non-entrants. So even the first steps towards universalization of education and opportunity with equity seem to be unsuccessful. We need to think about the reasons for this and the implications of the term equal opportunity.

In a stratified society, organized education, in order to be equitable, has to compensate for the differential support and opportunity available outside the formal structure, with additional investments in those who lack support and inputs at home. It also has to ensure that all those who arrive at the school gates feel welcome and reasonably comfortable. It has to be thus aligned to their experiences and needs. The question that forces itself in this scenario is – are we doing this? If we recognise equitable education as the cornerstone of movement towards democracy, we have to look at the education system as it has functioned and the policy statements it has brought out.

One factor in making education inequitable is the expense involved in educating each child. The spectrum ranges from privileged children with support and resources to children for whom even coming to school means a big parental investment. The gap remains wide, because of a stratified government system.

Schools are rated on the basis of entries to merit lists and high scores in public exams and development of a sense of fraternity and self-worth is undervalued. No mechanism tracks if schools add these values, In addition, there is a clamour for greater competition, and filtering, a tenet that works contrary to the principles of inclusion and retention. The emphasis on high scores and comparative performances, ignoring differences in background and opportunity, ensures that those in need of most support are squeezed out of the system even more rapidly. Those among the underprivileged, and thus unentitled, who manage to breach the wall face even more starkly prejudice and antagonism, as has been demonstrated by events in the past in connection with IIT and IAS entrants.

Another losing battle has been the one fought for increased resources for underprivileged children. The recent cut of Rs.11000 crores in the education budget has to be seen in this context.

Even though the expenditure per child has moved up from as low as 1500/- annually to the current figure around 12200/- as the median[1], it is miniscule in comparison to the figure of 12-13 lakhs per annum per child spent in the elite private schools[6] of the country.

There is a lot written about the humiliating exclusion and the way school comes across to underprivileged children. It is well recognized that most children moving out from schools are actually those who are pushed out because of the unfriendliness of the schools. The dominant belief in the school system, indeed in society, is that children from underprivileged backgrounds cannot learn and that there is not much any one can do about it. There is a reluctance to accept the Constitutional commitment to provide everyone equal opportunity and ensure that all children are capable of aspiring to any position. There is an unspoken agreement that prized the positions in education, in the economy, and even in governance or the executive, considered to be prized can only be accessible to the dominant middle classes and the elite. The prevailing attitude is that the underprivileged are intellectually and attitudinally inferior. In his recent book, 'Looking Away', Harsh Mandar describes eloquently some of these beliefs and notions. Studies reveal the absolute disdain and disrespect those responsible for the future of underprivileged children have for their learning abilities. In a sense, the responsibility of the crime of inequitable education is placed on the victims themselves.

The symbols and the practices in schools arise from the beliefs and rituals of the upper caste Hindu traditions and neither recognize nor accommodate the diversity of students. Extracts from textbooks

indicate that the reader is assumed to be an upper caste, economically comfortable Hindu student. Eid is described as the festival of our Muslim brothers, Diwali is the festival of the nation, statements like *'he was poor yet he was honest,' 'Rita's father was poor, they only had a scooter and no car', or 'Tribals live in jungles'*, abound. These symbols, rituals and descriptions exclude most children. Since teachers are untrained in the principles enshrined in the Constitution, they are unable to counter these signals.

It is interesting to recognize that contrary to what we hear people saying in boardroom conversations or in elite homes about the impertinence of the poor and of the minorities, in reality their voices are rarely raised or heard. It is not surprising that schools that attempted to have an inclusive student population have had to face a rapid exodus of the privileged and middle class children as soon as some underprivileged children are included. They leave citing arguments that these children are different and do not have same values, they do not have any aspirations or purposes and their beliefs are different; therefore, our children will be 'spoiled' by being with them. This pressure is faced not just by the private schools but also by government schools. Since ordinary government schools cannot exclude any children from admission, now even the lower middle class avoid them. It is not surprising, therefore, for the schools to feel a pressure to exclude the underprivileged children from participation. Private schools with fee structures based on their clientele, are even more stratified. The only way to challenge this extreme stratification of educational opportunity seems to be to have a common school system a move which may have been easier to make when India became a republic. The challenge of making the upper classes believe in a common system seems impossible at this stage because of the lop-sided social and political strength. We are already seeing the pressure of international comparative testing on even rural schools, resulting in government schools becoming ghettos of children of underprivileged and excluded communities, attracting less and less resources and attention, moving towards less aspirational education thereby condemning these children to continued inequity.

Another issue of importance is the attitude of the system to the learning of children and the way it analyses the stratified and the so-called inadequate learning. The larger belief system that operates is of those people whose role is to facilitate and support schools in their work and who have the notion that all those who are close to the school and the children, including the teachers, are incompetent and do not want to work. As a result, new directions are constantly given and imposed on the teachers, leaving them with no freedom or agency, hence, initiative for independent functioning. Diversity is ignored, with teachers and children merely following homogenized instructions. Thus, while there is no space available for the teacher or the school to choose their path, the administrators and governors of the education system place the responsibility of not learning at the door of the teacher, the parent and, finally, the child. The push to ensure that everyone learns within the same time frame without being provided additional support or means, leads to the teacher and the children not being able to cope. In any case, in general teachers' own attitudes and beliefs are also not very sympathetic to children's ability to learn. As well, it is likely that some teachers are not committed to the notion of equality that is a constitutional right of every child.

There is then the aspect of purposes of education as felt by different communities The Preamble describes the purpose being towards equal opportunity and to develop the understanding of democracy and hence of justice, liberty and fraternity, so that citizens can both demand justice and respect the rights of others to do the same. The nature of education that emerges from the Preamble is a universal, inclusive and adaptable programme. It is important to recognize this, as otherwise priorities are likely to get skewed.

Some of the ways in which the purposes of education could be viewed are

a) for maintaining and preserving the system

b) for individual economic well-being and proper use of resources

c) to build a strong nation and vibrant economy which encourages good citizenry

d) to build a just and humane society

Each of these need deep reflection and different focus and analysis.

In the late nineties and the first five years of the 21st century, there was a lot of talk about revamping the government school system to ensure universality and quality to all children first. The effort was promoted by the belief that focus of school

education must be to provide a better workforce so that both the individual and the nation would benefit. . This is from one of the most sincere and concerned Project Director of a State, *'In my view, if there is a population structure that is educated, it will form a strong nation and the nation will not face any problems. Even the social problems will be reduced. The nation will be a power house because the educated can be trained and would work more productively. Once they are economically independent, contribution to the savings of the state would be high leading to a galloping economy.' He added, 'We have a good population structure, a lot of people are between 18-45 years of age. This is the most productive age and these people are capable of working hard. If they were all to become educated then they can be trained to take up more useful jobs.'* There is a lot in this statement that talks positively about education, but what it does not include is the need for the population to be a part of the process of considering options in changing their present situations.

In conclusion it would appear that we have deviated from the guiding principles that the preamble suggests to us in the creation of an equitable society by emphasizing only on economic progress and servitude. Preparation of the majority to fit in to the roles of serving others in some way instead of bringing down barriers in society. The conversation is about enmeshing children in family work and about producing more for the nation. The idea of childhood and the option to dream and aspire seems to be considered a privilege of only those who have 'merit'.

There are other crucial considerations in the relationship of educational processes and inclusion of the diversity of children equitably. These relate to the nature of knowledge and the way it could be transacted in the classrooms and the school. It also relates to the nature of the structures that provide educational experiences. Only a few critical aspects of these have been considered here. There are many steps to these critical issues, but they are all clearly only a product of the larger concerns of convictions and beliefs about diversity and equity and in the will to make it happen.

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Hridaykant Dewan is currently a Professor with Azim Premji University. He has been member of the Founding Group of Eklavya and Educational Advisor of Vidya Bhawan Society, Udaipur. He has been working in the field of education for the last 40 years in different ways and aspects. In particular he has been associated with efforts on educational innovation and modification of State educational structures. He may be contacted at hardy.dewan@gmail.com

The Consequences of Privatisation of Education for Social Stratification

Amman Madan

I argue here that privatisation of school or college education cannot be a satisfactory solution for India or for any country with a great deal of internal inequality. Saying clearly what one means by privatisation first may help. While a case may be made for an even larger usage of the term, in this article by privatisation I refer mainly to schools or colleges which charge fees from parents and use that as the main resource for paying teachers, maintaining the school and so on. This is not the same as schools where the major costs are borne by grants from the government or from community donations or from philanthropists. I include in privatisation the growth of schools and colleges which are paid for through student loans, since those, too, have to be eventually paid for by individual students and their families. So even a school run by the government, but with most of its costs borne through school fees, would also be a form of privatisation. Asking a student to pay most of the material costs of education relies primarily on the notion of the private in society, where a private individual pays a cost in exchange for private benefits. This is in contrast with where society bears most of the material costs of education, in return for a mix of private and public benefits to both the individual and the community.

There are also several other issues here, like whether choice and market mechanisms are the best way to operate in the education domain, the growth of cultures of neo-liberalism, whether the state is actually the best representative of social interests and so on, but I shall not address them in this article, restricting myself to the problem of private investment and private returns in an unequal society.

My basic submission is that, when a society has several economic classes to begin with, then an education which is paid for mainly by the wealth of parents will tend to worsen social inequality.

This is particularly true of societies where higher paid jobs are relatively small in number and not enough to absorb all students. An example will help to explain what I mean.

Class Inequality in India

There are several ways of understanding class inequality in India, with the best ones arguably being relational, locating classes vis-a-vis their structural relations with each other. Classes do not stand by themselves, of course, being deeply inter-connected with castes, regions, gender, religions, ethnicity and so on. For our example a simple method of depicting class inequality will suffice, which is to ask how many people are rich and how many are poor in India. This is usually depicted through tables of family incomes, but since many people are unwilling to reveal their real incomes, the convention is to collect and examine information on consumption instead. Surveys are conducted which ask people how much food they bought or consumed in the last month, what school fees they paid, how many magazines they bought, how much they spent on cinemas and so on. This gives a useful way of comparing the wealth of different households and individuals. The 68th National Sample Survey surveyed 101,723 households in India in 2011-12 inquiring about, among other things, their consumption expenditure. Since the size of the household will vary and the conditions of a family of six earning Rs 20,000 per month are quite different from a carefree bachelor earning the same amount, the consumption expenditure was divided by the size of the family to get a figure called the monthly per capita consumption expenditure (MPCE). The percentage of the Indian population with different amounts of MPCE is presented in the table on the right.

What this tells us is that 33.3% of India lived on less than Rs. 1000 per head per month in 2011-12 and about 75% of lived on less than Rs. 2000 per head per month. In comparison, the middle to upper level Indian manager will be consuming well above Rs. 10,000 per head per month. The figure of 0.7% looks rather small, but it is 0 .7% of a country with 1.2 billion people. When that 0.7% looks around itself it sees 0 .7% of 1.2 billion, that is 8.4 million people, in its income group. Those numbers are so large that the individuals who constitute them are surrounded by other individuals of their own

class and don't get to see many of the very poor. However, the truth still remains, that 75% people of this country have to survive on less Rs. 2000 per head every month – food, medicines, clothing, school and college fees, everything.

Expenditure in Rupees (MPCE)	Percent of Households	Cumulative Percent
<1000	33.3	33.3
1000 < 2000	42.1	75.5
2000 < 3000	13.1	88.5
3000 < 4000	5.4	93.9
4000 < 5000	2.3	96.3
5000 < 6000	1.3	97.6
6000 < 7000	0.7	98.3
7000 < 8000	0.4	98.7
8000 < 9000	0.3	99.0
9000 < 10000	0.2	99.3
> 10000	0.7	100.0

The above table gives us something to examine the costs of schooling against. That will helps us to better understand what happens when the family, rather than society as a whole, is expected to bear the costs of education.

The costs of a private school

Some quick back-of-the-envelope calculations will tell us the costs of running a private school or college. The biggest single cost is likely to be that of teachers. (There are indeed schools which pay Rs. 4000 per month to teachers, but they are usually pathetic in quality). Let us look at the costs of a sustainable and reasonably good teacher. By sustainable I mean a teacher who will not always try to switch careers to get a better position. It is also necessary that the salaries should be such that people from at least the lower middle-class will aspire towards teaching as a good career, motivating them to work hard and cultivate this profession, the way engineering or accounting is thought of as something worth working hard for. Otherwise we get reluctant, poorly qualified teachers who are unwilling to build a vibrant profession of teaching.

When I ask what is a sustainable salary for teachers to various NGO personnel and to students from small towns, I usually hear them saying about Rs. 20,000 - 25,000 – 30,000 per month. Let us take Rs. 25,000 as a central figure. So what would be the fees for a student whose family alone has to pay for costs of the school? In a class of 40 students, that comes to about Rs. 625 each for the salary of one teacher. To that can be added the cost of the building, electricity, administration, security, laboratories, and so on. It would not be surprising, if a school has to be self-paying and has to have reasonably good teachers, a monthly fee of at least Rs. 1000 has to be paid. When I put this amount against my table of MPCE in India, I get a rude shock. Can families living on less than Rs. 2000 per head pay Rs. 1000 per month as school fees? It is quite difficult to do so. And remember that is 75% of India. The result is quite predictable. If we have schools and colleges where families have to bear the entire cost of education, those with more money will be able to pay higher fees and get somewhat better teachers and those with less money will get (on average) worse teachers. There are some exceptions, of course, like the dedicated and committed teachers who I think are the real heroes and heroines of India, who work selflessly to teach underprivileged children. But most people are not heroic. When we are talking about practical arrangements for a society as a whole, we must talk about ordinary people and what will induce them to seek to become good teachers and the social consequences of creating, or not creating, such practical systems. We cannot rely on the occasional self-sacrificing soul.

Increased Inequality with Privatisation of Education

If there is considerable social inequality in a society, like what we see in ours, the consequences of a privately paid for education will closely parallel the distribution of the ability to pay. Those with more money will be the ones who pay for higher qualities and levels of education. Those with less money will remain lower down the ladder. If those at the top seek to become more powerful and seek to increase only their own personal wealth then this society, which already has a pyramidical structure of inequality, will tend to become even more narrowly pyramidical. The growth of privatised education will favour those at the upper levels of the pyramid and weaken those at the lower levels.

The above example was one of class inequality and education. Roughly similar results may be expected of caste, regional inequality, gender inequality and so on, given their own unique characteristics

of stratifying a society. In each of them, if the disadvantages of certain families are not evened out by external agencies like the state, greater social stratification results.

Most people who have thought about the purposes of education tend to agree that it is a bad idea to restrict a good education to a powerful few, leaving a sliding scale of bad education for the rest. There are many purposes of education, including the ability to think clearly and make knowledgeable choices, the ability to take control of one's own life, to participate actively and thoughtfully in public life, to stand up against injustice and oppression and so on. The rich are not the only ones who need such an education. If anything, the poor need it more. Adam Smith, one of the pioneers of privatisation, acknowledged the need for education to be kept outside the market almost three centuries ago. For him the market and individual choice through buying and selling commodities was the best way to overcome feudal bigotry and tyranny. This needed individuals who could choose sensibly and knowledgeably. He insisted, however, that a good education and health had to be provided to everyone for even the market to work well.

Education should not be bought through market processes, with those having more money getting a better one and those with less money getting a worse education, he said. Everyone needed to have a good education, for a thoughtful and informed consumer was the prerequisite for a fair market. If that were not to happen, he would have argued, the market will no longer be a mechanism to provide the best choices, leading instead to the perpetuation of ignorance and of manipulation by the powerful.

In today's times the values of equality and freedom have gained widespread support across the world. Instead of hereditary privilege, it is merit that is supposed to be the gateway to higher rank. A meritocracy rests on the idea that hard work, motivation and dedication be the deciding factors in who gets ahead. However, if getting a good education depends mainly on the accident of being born with wealthy or otherwise powerful parents, which is what privatisation will accelerate, the ideal of a meritocracy is seriously compromised.

Amman Madan is currently a member of the faculty at Azim Premji University. He works on questions of social inequality and on identity politics. He has been associated with several NGOs including Eklavya, Digantar, ACCORD, etc. He may be contacted at amman.madan@apu.edu.in

Do private Schools Really Ensure Better Learning Outcomes for Children?

D D Karopady

The debate comparing private schools and government schools is age old. Many recent researches across several countries seem to indicate that, contrary to common perception, private schools in general do not provide any additional value over government schools in terms of learning outcomes. This paper discusses the issue with the help of findings from a few recent studies.

Introduction

Are private schools in India really good? This question would have gone through the minds of most readers of this article at some point in time or the other and they may or may not have found any definitive answer to it, because the question does not have very easy answers.

To begin with, there are a wide variety of private schools. These include high-end urban private schools, premium residential schools, 'alternate schools', private schools catering to the urban middle class, low-fee private schools (mostly in rural areas) and so on. Hence, clubbing all of these in one group would be erroneous. The answer to the question is further complicated by the fact that there is very little agreement on the definition of a 'good school' and how it can be measured. To be sure, education is a complex subject and is influenced by several in-school factors such as curriculum, text books, pedagogy, number of teachers, teacher preparation, pupil-teacher ratio, to name just a few, as well as outside school factors like home environment, socio-economic background, availability of educational support systems etc. Learning outcomes is only one of the many parameters but important and relatively more easily measured and widely understood. In this paper, I will discuss findings from a few research studies which largely use learning outcomes based measures to draw their conclusions. While it is not my intention to say that this will provide clear answers, it is hoped that it will shed some light on the difficult topic.

The debate between government schools and private schools is not new. However, this has intensified since the Right to Education (RtE) bill was first mooted at the beginning of this century. In the recent past, the divide between the proponents and opponents of private schooling seems to have sharpened. Detractors believe that private schools will lead to economic stratification of schooling which is harmful and that the exit of children to private schools will in fact end up worsening government schooling, presumably since the 'better children' will shift. They point to the fact that private school teachers are underpaid and are of poor quality. They feel private schooling will lead to increased commercialization of education which will ultimately lead to it going out of reach of the poor and marginalised segments of the society.

Supporters, on the other hand, cite data on increasing enrolment in private schools even in rural areas as an example of how people are 'voting with their feet' – taking their children out of free government schools and moving them to fee charging private schools even if they have to make some sacrifices in other areas. If people are rejecting what is given to them 'even for free', there must surely be something wrong with it, they believe. They argue that private schools are more accountable and responsive to the parents and provide better learning to children.

Rural schools

Let us first look at the schools in rural areas of the country (which now have many low-fee private schools) and where more than two-thirds of the children study. Since the turn of the century, simultaneously with an overall increase in the figures for enrollment in primary schools in India, there has also been a large and consistent increase in enrollment in private schools. While this figure was always high for urban areas, the latest Annual Status of Education Report (ASER Rural) 2014 estimates indicate that more than three out of every ten children in rural primary classes are in private schools. There is also an increasing clamour for expanding access to private schools for all children regardless of their socio-economic background. This growing popularity of private schools has led to concerns about further economic and social stratification in the society in general and the education sector in particular. Many believe that

this increase in popularity of fee-charging private schools is on account of parental dissatisfaction with government schools. It is implicitly assumed that private schools are better. How valid is this assumption?

One of the major arguments of supporters of private schools is based on the premise that the learning achievement of children in private schools is better. They point to vast data on marks obtained in school examinations to prove their claim. The argument that the data from the two types of schools is not comparable, since the tests in different schools are different, is countered with results from tests carried out with common assessment papers simultaneously in the two types of schools where, too, the private school children seem to outperform government school children. This is their 'clinching evidence'.

This line of thinking however has a serious limitation. The children in private schools come from a significantly different socio-economic background as compared to children in government schools. This makes the comparison very unequal, like comparing apples and oranges. A fair comparison would need children from similar backgrounds in private schools and government schools to be assessed simultaneously using common tools.

This need prompted the Andhra Pradesh School Choice study (APSC), a five-year longitudinal cohort research [1] with a rigourous randomized evaluation design. The study was carried out between 2008 and 2013 in the rural areas of five districts of the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh. This is a very important study, the only one of its kind in India and among the largest in the world. For the first time, this study provides authentic data on the impact of children from socio-economically weaker sections of the society being given an opportunity to attend private school with the help of scholarship provided to them. This is critical from the perspective of future directions for education in India.

The study clearly and conclusively establishes that these 'scholarship children' did not benefit academically by studying in private schools. Their performance in learning achievement tests in Telugu, math, social studies and English is no better than their counterparts who studied in government schools even after five years. This is clearly contrary to the general perception about private schools. Interestingly, the parents of these scholarship children claim to be happy with the private schools. Where is the dichotomy? Why then are parents sending their children to private schools?

Qualitative data collected during the study provides some possible answers. The parents seem to be swayed by softer aspects like smarter looks of the children, teachers giving homework, English medium of instruction, improvement in perceived social standing in the community, etc. Clearly, aspects other than learning achievement are at play here. Further, private schools seem to be benefitting some more than others. Why is this happening? The reasons for this second dichotomy have perhaps to be found in factors outside the school – better educated parents, better academic environment and support systems at home, access to private tuitions and less domestic responsibilities placed on the children at home.

This study raises another interesting question – the findings from the study may be true but it relates to Andhra Pradesh. Can we draw similar conclusions about other states in India? To be sure, this is a very valid (and important) question. There are no such comparable, rigourous and large scale studies in any other region of the country. However, findings from a few other researches in other states (though based on secondary data analysis) point to similar conclusions. Some of these have been referred in the paper on APSC study. An analytical article in the recent ASER (Rural) 2014 [2] says that, when all factors other than the type of school are accounted for, there is very little difference between government school and private school children in terms of learning outcomes. The author of the article goes on to say that in some states, government school children actually seem to be doing better. So overall, the finding that in rural areas, private schools are no better than government schools in terms of learning outcomes seems to be generally applicable across the country.

Urban schools

Let us now move to urban areas and more specifically, the so called 'elite schools'. A very interesting study – 'Quality Education Study' [3] was carried out in 2006 among some of the top private schools in the metro cities of the country by Wipro and Educational Initiatives. The broad conclusions from the study indicate that the schools considered among the best in India leave a lot to be desired. The performance of their students is below global averages. These students seem to do well in areas that require memorisation and procedural skills, but not in areas like understanding, conceptual clarity, and thinking and application. If this be the

situation with top urban private schools, one can imagine what happens to students in the other private schools.

There is other data available at the international level that confirms the dismal state of education in the country. After a lot of coaxing, for the first time two states – Tamilnadu and Himachal Pradesh participated in the PISA 2009+ assessment. The results [4] showed that we were second from the bottom out of 74 countries in terms of learning achievement of 15 year olds (selected randomly from rural as well as urban areas), just above Kyrgyzstan. India has not participated in PISA thereafter. So, even while there are those who disagree with the PISA assessment tools and process, this tells its own story.

Does competition help?

Another argument used by the private school supporters is based on the 'competition theory'. They claim that increasing number of private schools results in greater competition leading to overall improvement in school quality, even in government schools. Corresponding examples in the banking, airlines, mobile telephony sectors are cited as proof of the idea. This is an extremely unidimensional econometric perspective which seeks to club a 'social purpose' with commercial goods. The two are absolutely not comparable. The argument is unfortunately used aggressively by those who try to make a case for 'education vouchers' (or school choice as it is also known).

There is now however increasing evidence which suggests that competition in education can in fact be detrimental. An analytical analysis based report PISA Infocus 42 [5] in August 2014 indicates that school choice could lead to greater segregation which is detrimental to learning outcomes. It may surprise many to know that Finland, the country which is considered to be at the forefront of education quality consistently for several years, does not have any 'standardised assessments' in its schools [6]. Instead, their focus is on inclusivity and equity. Clearly, there is a lot to be learned by schools in India both in the government and private sector.

Conclusion

Let me hasten to add in conclusion that this paper is not meant to trash private schools at all. Government schools have their own problems and shortcomings. If anything, this is intended to provide a wider perspective to the debate on education quality in the country. Blindly assuming that private schools provide good education may not be correct. In recent times, internationally more and more studies are pointing to private schools being no better than government schools. To be sure, there are schools in India (both government and private) which are doing good work in providing all-round quality education to their students. However, these are few and far between. Our efforts have to be to see how we can improve the quality in all schools. Encouraging wide adoption of good practices from Indian examples at school level besides learning from countries like Finland at a systemic and policy level could be the way.

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D D Karopady is a Consultant with the Research Center at Azim Premji University. Prior to this, he was the head of Research and Documentation at Azim Premji Foundation. He has come to the social sector after more than two decades of experience in market research in the corporate world. He has a basic degree in Technology from IIT Kanpur followed by post-graduation from IIM Calcutta. He may be contacted at karopady@azimpremjifoundation.org

Significance of the RtE Act to the Public Education System

B S Rishikesh

Introduction

The RTE Act 2009 (The Act) is about the 'right of children in India for free and compulsory elementary education'; it is about children and not about schools, hence the significance of the Act is to all schools. However, the popular perception, accompanied by the undue focus of implementing one minor provision of the Act by the education departments of the various States, coupled with a few judgments from the Supreme Court has led to the belief that the Act has, in fact, nothing to do with the public education system! It is important to clarify this and other myths associated with the Act. Hence, in this article the attempt will not be to detail out the significant aspects of the Act to the public education system, as much as, to detail out the Act in order to bust the myth that the Act is all about reservations in the private schools and hence has nothing to do with the public education system.

The biggest myth to bust is – 'the RTE Act in India is about privatising education'. Recently at a high level meeting, I was witness to one gentleman going on relentlessly at every given opportunity that the only way to progress on the education front is to abolish the RTE Act! I was not just aghast, but dumbfounded at these remarks within a circle that comprised influential policy makers. To figure out what really is making his stand against the Act so strong and highly critical, I spoke to him on the sidelines, after the meeting and what he shared made me believe further in the reason we have identified for the failure/delay in ensuring compliance with the law's requirements - which is the failure to effectively disseminate ALL the provisions of the Act. This gentleman, clearly one who believes that private schools are the answers to all the ills plaguing our education system, was of the view that the Act primarily focusses on regulating the private schools by imposing restrictions on admissions while allowing Government run schools to go scot free even on the infrastructure front. The truth cannot be farther than this! And, if this is how someone interested in the progress of education in our country has interpreted the Act, one can imagine what must be happening with the different stakeholders.

At Rs. 2,04,000 crore over five years, will the legislation cost too much to implement?

2 lakh crore over 5 years to ensure a bright future for our children is by no means 'too much of money' it is made out to be! If thousands of crores for each of the many metro systems for the urban population in the country can be justified, how can one not justify a couple of lakh crore for insuring our future with quality education.

The RTE Act 2009 is made up of 38 sections in seven chapters and one schedule for the norms and standards for a school. Each section has many sub-sections and clauses and sub-clauses within. Unfortunately, of all these provisions, for most people around the country, the understanding of RTE is limited to just one! Yes, one – which is 12 (1)(c); that is sub section 1 (c) under section 12 which states: 'For the purpose of this Act, a school, - specified in sub clauses (iii) and (iv) of clause (n) of section 2 shall admit in class 1, to the extent of at least 25% of the strength of that class, children belonging to weaker section and disadvantaged group in the neighbourhood and provide free and compulsory elementary education till its completion'. This provision therefore is particularly focussed on a certain kind of school, which if read from the Act, would be an 'unaided school not receiving any kind of grants to meet its expenses from the appropriate Government or local authority'; which in lay terms is our 'pure' private school (as against the aided private school).

It is highly unfortunate that, as a nation, we have reduced the Act to this minute level. All of us are complicit in this, be we officials in the Education departments, parents, activists or academics – all of us are guilty of focussing on the 12 (1) (c). As

department officials our entire focus has been on implementing this particular provision, as parents it is either seeking admission to a private school under this provision or wondering what are the 'side-effects' of this provision on our children already in private schools, as activists seeking for fair and transparent measures in implementing this and as academics writing endlessly about the pros and cons of this provision and what it has done to the education system. The damage is so extensive that if you ask around what is the Act about, most replies only contain three words: '25% reservation in private-schools'.

Can the shortage of 12.9 lakh teachers be met?

No education system can progress without investing in its teachers. Uttar Pradesh has the largest shortfall Having ignored this key aspect of education, we unfortunately do not have any shortcuts but to meet the shortage of teachers by preparing more than a million fresh teachers with the appropriate qualifications. The additional number is designed to make up for the new teacher-student ratio of 1:30. 5.5 lakh teachers' posts are lying vacant. There is a five-year window to ensure all teachers have the proper professional qualifications.

Given that the Act has 37 other sections filled with sub-sections and clauses covering a host of issues related to school education, one only needs to cast a eye beyond 12 (1)(c) to understand the significance of the Act.

One way of checking what the Act covers is to glance at the headings of the different chapters. Other than the first one, which is titled 'Preliminary' and focuses on definitions, such as 'child' , 'school', 'guardian' 'local authority', and 'capitation fee' and so on, the rest of the chapters are categorised based on the different aspects of Act. For instance, the fourth chapter is about 'Responsibilities of schools and teachers' and the previous one (third chapter) deals with the 'Duties of the Government / Local Authorities as well as the parent'; the fifth talks of the all-important area of 'Curriculum' and the chapter following that speaks about the 'Protection of this right (of children)' and the measures that ought to be taken in this regard and the designated authority to do so. The Act therefore covers curricular reforms, minimum teacher qualifications, minimum school working days and teacher working hours, appropriate teacher ratio for each of the eight classes in elementary school, creation of school management committees and a host of norms and standards for an institution to be considered as a school such as all-weather buildings and toilets to functioning libraries and play equipment. Along with all these provisions, it also brings in certain rules and regulations to align our progress, while keeping in mind contemporary ideas as for example encouraging classroom-based assessments, not detaining children in the same class, prohibiting corporal punishment, etc. It also prohibits some of the negative practices in our society – capitation fee or 'donations for admissions'

The Hub for Education, Law and Policy (hELP)

The School of Policy and Governance, Azim Premji University, Bangalore works on education policy related matters with a special focus on RTE. After the Act had been passed, it was felt that the key reason for its failure/delay in compliance was its dissemination communicated appropriately to all the stakeholders. hELP felt that the need was a tool to increase awareness at the stakeholder level—school administration, school management committees (SMCs), parents and students; about their rights and obligations under the Act. An RTE Awareness Project was created using a 'rights based framework' so that RtE entitlement could be disseminated more widely. Primers and self-assessment tools were conceptualized as part of this project. Together with partners (such as Akshara Foundation, BOSCO, Save the Children and Yadgir District Institute, Azim Premji Foundation) hELP has initiated RTE awareness projects in nearly 1000 schools across Karnataka.. hELP seeks partners to roll this out across different parts of the country.

which is a common fleecing mechanism across most 'good' schools in the country (both public and private), denial of the TC (transfer certificate) which is a 'brahmasatra' used by the school principal / management to threaten parents and children who do not conform to convoluted and perverted ideas enshrined by certain schools – with the hope that we are one step closer to ridding ourselves of these practices.

If all these significant provisions for education are part of the Act, the other important aspect is that all this applies to all elementary schools, both public and private, across the country except Jammu & Kashmir (which subsequently enacted its own RTE). The Right to Education Act (RtE Act) was enacted by the Indian Parliament in 2009, making education a fundamental right of every child between 6 and 14 years. Given that the Act came into force in April 2010, it was expected that within three years all schools would be have complied with it. There were some relaxations extended to some States, which had to put in enormous resources, to meet the pupil-teacher ratio for which nearly a five year time frame was given. Whatever be the provisions, it was to be met by all the schools, irrespective of whether they were public or privately administered and irrespective of which part of the country they were located in.

Hence, coming back once again to the focus of the topic of this piece, there should be no doubt that RTE is highly significant even to our public education system. The Act gives the power to take many steps to reform our public education system, such that it can drive us closer to a common school system. Using the provisions of the Act if we fight for all our children's right to education in a school as envisaged in the Act, why would we need of private schools? There would be excellent public schools, with the requisite infrastructure, human resources and appropriate and modern curriculum, in keeping with the principles of our Constitution, offering free elementary education to which most of us would want to send our children to – just the way it was in our country a few decades ago* – and just the way it is in most part of the developed world!

However, we all know that a law is only as good as the people / society in which it is enacted. Just by transforming a goal into an act we cannot hope for much. But, nevertheless, the legislation is a landmark, and to see it deliver what we want, we need to take the entire society into confidence. We need to build on the provisions in the bill to create a positive force for it. The Right to Education is interlinked with rights to equality, dignity and freedom. While the Act attempts to secure universal elementary education, it also pays significant attention to ensuring equal and dignified spaces of learning for children. The notion of dignity and equality are not only crucial in education, but they also provide a conceptual framework under which various entitlements of children can be classified.

Rights based approach is alien to us in the country – hence, in order to ensure that our children enjoy their right, a mindset change is required at the societal level; in fact, a paradigm shift is required from the incentive based framework that we operate in to an entitlement based framework even in terms of operationalizing the Act.

The Act provides a framework of rights of a child and the corresponding obligations of the other stakeholders. The state and other actors are legally obliged in their various capacities to perform certain duties to ensure that a child's right to education is properly realised. For instance, a local authority is responsible for ensuring that there is adequate access to schools in a neighbourhood. Similarly, a school must ensure that it complies with the stipulated norms and standards; teachers are obliged to pay attention to the progress of each child with the parent community being responsible for the development of the school. All these features are enhanced when the school in question is a public school – which makes the significance of the RTE Act for the public education system tremendous, to say the least.

**the private a few decades ago were mostly aided and hence practically part of the public education system.*

Rishikesh is an Assistant Professor at the School of Policy & Governance, Azim Premji University; he also leads the Hub for Education, Law & Policy located at the University. His research interests are in the domains of educational assessments and teacher education and is deeply engaged with current matters related to educational policy. He can be contacted at rishikesh@apu.edu.in

Aspiring Public Solutions to Public Deficiencies

Manabi Majumdar and Kumar Rana

We come together for various social purposes. As Tagore ruefully remarked on the self-destructive events in Bengal during 1934-40, 'People here do not combine to build up anything bit by bit, but they flock together to enjoy the unholy glee of pulling down what has already been built'. That it is within the realm of the possible to imagine a counter-current of collective striving for constructive social objectives is the point that is pursued in this brief note. Drawing on the accounts of quotidian efforts and experiences of school teachers, anganwadi workers, health workers, and of several 'street-level' education and health officials that were presented in a recent workshop in Santiniketan on 'School Health and the Health of the School' organized by Pratichi (India) Trust, this sketchy report seeks to demonstrate the willingness and resolve of a group of people – people like us who do not claim to be having super-natural qualities – to cooperate and aspire for public solutions to public deficiencies.

A public institution – a government school, a primary health centre or an anganwadi centre (though almost never a military outfit)- is quite often viewed as a wasteful, ineffective and foredoomed to fail system in the currently dominant public and policy discourse. Against this general climate of suspicion regarding anything 'public' and of the corresponding urge to rush for an individuated, exclusive, private alternative – a private doctor, a private tutor, a private transport, a 'gated' residential complex, and even a private alley and an enclosed footpath, several participants in this meeting vigorously underlined the need to both defend public institutions for their egalitarian potential as well as improve them because of their quality gaps. They detailed stories of initiatives they have undertaken in their own spheres of influence to cultivate a stronger and positive linkage between the home and the school, to encourage the active involvement of mothers in the delivery of nutrition and healthcare of pre-school children, to ensure better coordination between the school and the health centre for promoting physical, emotional and cognitive development of children and so on. These activities pay heed to two distinct and equally challenging tasks: of generating demand for better facilities and services and of organizing collective action for the realization of such demands.

School health and societal health

A health worker, for example, not only explained in concrete details why in some situations lactating and pregnant mothers do not pay enough attention to the importance of taking iron tablets together with vitamin C for better absorption of the same into the body. She also reflected on the larger societal pressures such as the one for early marriage of girls that constitute a major reason for maternal anemia. In her perceptive remarks, 'Unless we stir up the entire society, our efforts will remain ineffective'. Again, a group of primary schoolteachers shared their experience of engaging their own students in conducting a public health survey in the neighbourhoods adjacent to their school. In the course of the survey the students in question could gather a real-world picture of sanitary conditions and drinking water facilities in their locality and at once build up a social understanding of the reality around them. After the first round of the survey a child investigator requested his teacher, 'Sir, please do not send me to the house of the rich, they turn me down'. The teacher reminded the audience, 'Thus the child becomes aware of the graded society we live in'. One cannot but notice the imagination and earnestness of these schoolteachers in inculcating a sense of active citizenship among these children. Surely 'folk wisdom' is not always and necessarily helpful; but the wit and wisdom demonstrated in this case can go a long way in cultivating citizenly concerns among children.

A number of speakers at the workshop talked about innovative steps they have taken to inculcate healthy habits of hygiene, hand-wash and toilet use among their students. Research reveals that in many parts of India even in those households that have toilets within their premises, some members still practise open defecation. Thus toilet use is not only contingent upon its availability but also requires behavioural change. A school teacher gave an example of what a school can do in furthering this hugely daunting cause of attitudinal transformation. In a village peopled almost entirely with SC and

ST families, nine years ago there were only two toilets. Now each and every household has built a toilet with a modest subsidy from the government, but mainly owing to the major role that the local school has played in this effort. The collection of waste from each house and its proper disposal has also become an accepted practice. The preparation of the school meal in a proper kitchen, cleaning of utensils, and hand washing before and after meals have become routine affairs in the life of this school. The school keys are kept with the residents of this village. The health and ICDS workers and the teachers keep regular contact among themselves. In the words of the teacher, 'we have integrated the village and the school. The school has become the common property of the entire village'.

Surely it is not fair to expect that a government school will single-handedly deal with all the numerous social problems that swirl around us, while at the same time giving children basic training in language, mathematics, history and so on. Still, this is a public institution that can, in principle, touch and stir many tiers and layers of the community and society to prod people to re-examine some of the questionable behavioural norms and social practices. And it is through children that the school can try to make an entry point into the social space. As a teacher described how the universe of the school could be creatively designed for it to then shape the social world. 'If we can instill sanitary habits among children pretty early on in their life, it would be easier for us to improve society's health. It is our students who transmit our mobilization back home'.

The usually sluggish bureaucratic norms and practices may also gather some momentum and vitality when enlivened with community-wide campaigns and movements for elementary health facilities in school. Spearheading such a collective initiative, a group of schoolteachers have had a number of meetings with the local officials in the Department of Public Health Engineering and demanded a PHE connection for the supply of potable drinking water in their school, especially as the existing PHE pipeline is just 160 metres away. Their sustained efforts have borne fruits: now the school has a washbasin, a reservoir and an assured supply of safe drinking water. As one of them said, 'we are trying to create a healthy school environment that RTE enjoins us to guarantee'.

In a similar vein, the general neglect of the nutrition of poorer children appears to find an inspiriting antidote in the resolute efforts of an ICDS worker who runs a centre in a poverty stricken region in West Bengal bordering Bangladesh. She has been trying against many odds to make this public nutrition scheme for pre-school children work. She has painstakingly built up a relationship of trust and camaraderie with the mothers of these children and persuaded them to contribute to the anganwadi kitchen whatever vegetables and fruits they can afford to part with from their tiny homestead plots, to top up the paltry amount of government provisioning. The mothers form smaller groups that take turns to bring their offering to the centre on fixed days in a week. This worker is careful not to exert undue pressure on these already indigent families. Yet these hard-up residents of a poverty-stricken area are the ones who have appreciated her proposal and responded generously. As a result, there has been perceptible improvement in the running of this centre. Their collective effort has attracted the attention of the district magistrate who has not only encouraged other ICDS centres in the district to learn from this experiment but also ordered, perhaps in appreciation of this spontaneous ground-swell of public action, a hike in the quantum of governmental allocation for each Anganwadi centre in the district.

These small details are important for us to understand why big plans and macro-structures do or do not work. They tell us how in an unexceptional everyday manner, though painstaking nonetheless, a schoolteacher or a health worker struggles to oil the nuts and bolts of a public institution such that children pick up 'good' habits. As a participant described, 'we make use of many things- from rhymes to newspaper cuttings on healthy dietary habits to thermocol insulin boxes collected from local pharmacy for use as dustbins in order to cultivate good habits among our students. They need to be told again and again. Repetition and reiteration are the tools that we work with to make them think and understand'.

Drawing on associational strength

These specific examples are not necessarily atypical; they differ in details but not in the underlying public spiritedness. Yet the image of indifferent, insincere or corrupt public officials and functionaries keeps attracting our public gaze, to the relative neglect of the counter-figure of a village schoolmaster or an ASHA *karmee* striving to both make a public

institution work better as well as encourage the public at large to get 'educated, agitated, and organized' for bettering its performance. This UBUNTU style ('I am because we are') of doing things together distinguishes public action from both governmental action and private choices we make in a self-maximizing way. No doubt, public institutions are often found deficient. And hence they need to be fixed, but certainly not abandoned, because we cannot find a private solution to every public deficiency. After all, to access an exclusive and private health facility, we need at the least a publicly maintained all-weather road! Indeed, many basic services need to be shared rather than to be used exclusively by each individual. Put simply, public goods have to be publicly provided and sustained and public 'bads' need to be collectively controlled. And finding a public solution together is a resource in itself: it connects people together who can learn for each other and draw on their associational strength.

Two usual doubts are likely to surface at this point against the promises of collective pursuit of public values: can we scale up such initiatives? And can we fit them within the 'parameters of the possible'? Answers to these questions are neither obvious nor simple, but neither are they unimaginable. First, what became apparent from the discussions at the workshop was the capacity of several 'street-level' public functionaries to imagine beyond current confines, even without underestimating their hardiness. A headmaster reflected on the issue of toilet use in a positive yet pragmatic note, 'Even with limited infrastructural and other resources, we need to act upon these urgent social issues. If we think that the time to act is only when everything is in perfect order, nothing will ever get done'. Such a sensible and down-to-earth approach certainly falls within the ambit of the possible.

Second, to counter the charge of promising efforts remaining localized and unreplicable, we recall the deeply perceptive words of Margaret Mead, 'Never doubt that a small group can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has'. The people whose voices are recorded here are seeding and sustaining everyday activism in their fields of work in order to make a difference to other people's lives. This is a kind of scaling up of what Adam Smith has described as 'social passion' – amplifying and deepening collective efforts to deal with shared predicaments.

Manabi Majumdar and **Kumar Rana** are affiliated to Pratichi Institute, Kolkata. Majumdar also teaches at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta. Her research interests include issues of politics of education, politics of public health and local democratic politics. Rana's research interests include areas of human capabilities such as education, health and nutrition, as also village studies, and marginality studies. He regularly publishes essays, short stories and public commentaries in the print media. Manabi may be contacted at manabimajumdar@gmail.com, and Kumar may be contacted at k.rana7@gmail.com

SECTION B

From the field

Romancing with Education

Sharad Behar

I love learning. Learning is the heart and the soul of education. That explains my lifelong love with education – formal, non-formal, informal et al. Let us have a peep into a fragment of my love life that has been as challenging as fulfilling and occasionally appearing to be hugely frustrating, endlessly disappointing and dismal beyond repair, but when clouds clear, the sun of optimism and enthusiasm shining as bright as in midday. I will just skip the fascinating experience of joys and disappointments of facilitating the learning of class fellows, juniors and even seniors that started with the third standard and continued until I remained a student.

Even for this period, two episodes where my role and status was of a formal teacher deserve brief mention. In 1954-55, as a student of class XI, on the annual self-government day of the Government High School, as the Chief Minister of the school parliament, I had the privilege of being the headmaster for a day. I taught a class of English to the students of eighth grade. The pride of being headmaster for a day was probably surpassed by my happiness in the self-rated excellent and satisfying role as a teacher.

After this fleeting flirtation with formal education, a more lasting affair was as a school-teacher. During the period 1957 – 59, as an undergraduate student, probably inspired by the nostalgia of the ecstasy I felt as a teacher in the school on the self-government day, I offered to volunteer to work as a teacher of English in a night school run by my college – Hislop College Nagpur, government aided but privately managed – for dropouts which I now call, and believe to be, push outs. Most of them were adolescent and adult workers of the cotton mills and the industries in and around the city. I enjoyed teaching-learning with the students of 9th and 10th classes that reinforced my self-image of a good teacher. Without any understanding of inequity in education and unsuitability of the rigid formal schools system for the social and economically deprived, I had a very uneasy feeling and deep concern about their further deprivation from education also that they suffered and which they were trying to make up.

Most of the students in the night school were Marathi speaking. As an English teacher who had negligible understanding of, let alone competence in, Marathi, I learned many lessons on the pedagogy of teaching a second, particularly a foreign, language, without switching over to Marathi, so that the students acquired proficiency in the language and not only in the content of the chapters of the textbooks. This challenge accompanied by frustrations, shared both by the teacher and the learners, was more than compensated by the Eureka moment when I would note their eyes lit up and the face and the gestures unmistakably conveying a feeling of joy and happiness of achievement. This momentary happiness seemed to be good enough to amply compensate for the frustrations of the failed numerous earlier attempts, stretching my creativity – whatever little I had – to the limit.

The sudden jump from an ex-volunteer- school teacher to the manager, administrator and leader of around 500 rural schools in Sihora sub-division comprising four community development blocks of Jabalpur district is attributable to my joining the Indian Administrative Service in the year 1961, and being posted as SDM in 1963(until 1965) when school education was a component of the system of democratic decentralisation in which Janpad Sabha, an elected local body at the sub-divisional level had substantial wide-ranging powers and functions in almost all development sectors. As the SDM, by law, I was also its chief executive officer. This provided me a remarkable opportunity to work for, and experience school education at grassroots of governance.

The policy of the State which I was supposed to implement had no concern for the complex issues of equity, including universal enrolment, attendance and participation. Article 46 of the Constitution probably had been forgotten as soon as the ink dried. I also merrily pursued the agenda of improving the quality of education only for those who were in the schools without ever bothering about those deprived. In retrospect, I consider shameful because it meant that I had not really

and properly absorbed the lessons of inequity in education that the night school had offered to me. It is ironical that at that time when most of those who were at the helm of affairs of the government were freedom fighters with varying quantum of idealism were also being driven by the agenda and demand of the powerful and articulate sections of the society, having totally forgotten Gandhiji's talisman of focusing on wiping the tears from the face of the most deprived.

I was very enthused to notice that the chairman of the Janpad and the chairman of the education committee were also very deeply interested in education, hoping to do wonders with their support. Very soon, I discovered, to my utter disappointment, that their interest was skin- deep, or teacher-transfer-deep. It however, took much longer to understand the dynamics behind it. The political power and importance of the teacher gradually dawned on me, which explained their limited interest, but also made my task easier. I kept myself away from the affairs of transfer of teachers and concentrated on improving the quality, which I must admit, was generally much more satisfactory then than it is now. The schools also had vibrant cultural and sports activities, another area of my deep interest which I encouraged with the little financial and other support it required in different schools. Reflecting today, it appears that since there was no television and even the penetration of film was not deep, the folk forms of art and culture smoothly and easily gelled with the co-curricular activities that may explain its popularity.

The unique and very critical role of the teachers in politics is much better understood and recognised by the politicians than by all others involved in education with so-called missionary zeal. Ignoring this in designing and initiating any reform or intervention implies defective DNA of the intervention. This learning was very useful during the later career, although I cannot claim that I could successfully deal with it in the innovations that I initiated as principal secretary education or as founder director of Eklavya.

There were two unanticipated adverse consequences of my unusual interest in education. I did not realise that for the orthodox administration, any amount of excellent work in education is worthless because the focus ought to be hard-core administrative machinery. I narrowly escaped an adverse comment in my annual assessment report, thanks to my boss Mr R S Naidu, the District Magistrate, a very seasoned and sound officer who had very great affection and fondness for me. Looking at my self-assessment report and the highlights of achievements in the education sector, he only orally cautioned me and provided me with the right administrative lens – criteria for fixing priority and focus.

In those days when the officers like the Sub-divisional Magistrate did not make news in the newspapers, the first time this unique distinction was conferred on me was highly adverse. It had reported that because of my angry, uncontrolled scolding and behaviour, the superintendent of the Janpad Sabha had had a heart attack. Since this was contrary to my generally held image of a very soft, gentle, kind and tolerant person amongst those who knew me, I had a very hard time explaining to everybody, particularly because the incident, though exaggerated, was a fact.

At 9:30 PM in the night before the inauguration of the annual tournament in which all schools were participating, I visited, probably unprecedented for the SDM and the CEO and therefore unexpected, the venue to see for myself that everything was being managed properly by the superintendent and his team responsible for the purpose. To my utter surprise, I found that while the students who had come from different parts of the subdivision after a very long and arduous journey on the bad roads of those days, had not been served their food, which was still in the process of being cooked, the superintendent along with his team was merrily having sumptuous snacks equivalent to what is fashionably called high tea. At the sight of this atrocious behaviour, I must confess I completely lost my cool. I was not my own self. I did shout at the top of my voice and expressed my anger as best as I could, or should I say, as worst as I could. Any explanations he tried to offer only infuriated me further because I believed that there could be no conceivable acceptable explanation for what I was observing. Within minutes he complained of high palpitation and left the room. It was left to me to organise food for the children at the earliest.

I don't blame my youth (I was only 23 years of age) or inexperience. I was moved by the hungry children. My empathy with them did not permit me to imagine the possible impact on and reaction of the aged superintendent, who at that time looked to me like the devil incarnate. I believe now, that

probably an experienced deputy collector may have handled things better. I will leave the judgement to you. This first experience of interface of the bureaucracy with the students and teachers was, to say the least, shattering.

In June 1966 (up to '68), I was posted as District Magistrate of Sidhi, a district reeling under two consecutive years of acute drought which unfortunately, because of the failure of that monsoon also, proved to be the third consecutive year. On the basis of the experience there (a detailed account of which is available in the book, 'District Collectors, Recollect' edited by Ramesh Arora and CK Saldana), I can claim expertise in management of drought conditions in situations of very short supply of food grains. Yet the lure of education has been so irresistible that, despite overwhelming preoccupation with management of drought, I intervened in education in a big way.

It was a predominantly tribal district. While travelling in the tribal belt, I had made a point to visit the schools where I soon discovered the pathetic quality – total absence would be no exaggeration – of education in the elementary schools. The class V students could not even read and write. The teachers would explain by blaming their predecessors. This poor quality of education, in contrast with the quality in the schools of Sihora, served to demonstrate dramatically the unattended regional inequality. I wrote to the Director Public Instruction, the head of education those days, to pay special attention and take corrective measures. To my disappointment, I found that there was no response, but regrettably my total involvement with drought conditions spared me no time to follow up my efforts.

The other intervention in education had a cascading effect. Its story would be long. It had a series of unimaginable shocks and surprises for me. I will keep the narration as brief as possible. Sidhi and the neighbouring districts were notorious for mass-copying in the examinations. I decided to ensure fair examinations. I had done this in the district headquarters with some success in respect of the examinations of the Board of Secondary Education. The University examination, however, proved to be a hard nut to crack. There was only one college in the district. I wrote to the Registrar of the Sagar University about the prevalent conditions of mass copying, suggesting to him the measures required to be taken by them for conduct of fair examinations. After frustrating silence from their side, instead of acting on my suggestions, they only sent a letter authorising me to visit and inspect the examination centre. In those days any role of the District Magistrate in examinations was inconceivable. With my hands more than full in managing the famine, I had not the slightest desire to be personally involved. I had hoped that they would act on my suggestions and district administration would provide any support they sought. After having taken this initiative, I did not wish to withdraw because I was terribly keen to ensure fair conduct of examination.

On the busiest day of the examination, I suddenly arrived for inspection. I was aghast to observe the scenario. Copying was going on openly. almost every student had a few books on the desk, along with some in the bag kept on the side. The quantum and openness of mass copying was beyond my imagination. I got all the material seized. A box of 8' x 4' of 3 feet height, full of the material was sent to the Registrar to whom in my report I sarcastically suggested to take advantage of the mass copying to fill the University library.

Once again for a long time, I did not receive any information about the action or proposed action of the University. I wondered whether educational bureaucracy both at the school and higher education level was so inefficient. The sight of mass copying proved to be a nightmare haunting me. Therefore, despite all my preoccupations, ensuring conduct of fair examinations became my mission. I decided to adopt strategy of negotiations with all the stakeholders in this task. Accordingly, I went to the college and met the students to appeal to them to eschew copying and to explain to them how it was in their own interest to study well and obtain marks and certificates based on real achievement which would stand them in good stead in their career and life. I was astounded by their open and stoutly determined defence unashamedly of the practice of copying, presenting their economic condition and other ingenious arguments, beyond my imagination, in support. A meeting with the parents was fixed, but was aborted by the students who drove the parents away. The teachers also pleaded helplessness in view of the threat from the students. My assurance to provide full security support did not satisfy them because, they argued, that security cover cannot be provided for their whole life and as soon as it was withdrawn, they would become vulnerable. In support of this view,

they gave examples of professors who had been attacked after quite a lapse of time.

After the strategy of negotiations was stonewalled, I was planning my alternative strategy when as bolt from the blue, the silence and inaction of the University was broken by their decision to discontinue the examination centre in the district and fixing the neighbouring Rewa for the purpose, as if the practice of mass copying was not there, although it was common knowledge that all the neighbouring districts were suffering from the malady equally badly.

This led to students' agitation, bringing the life of the town to a standstill. I had to use force for the first and only time in my career and impose curfew in the town which had never experienced such conflict earlier. Students blocked oxygen cylinders from being taken to the hospital for use of the patients for whose survival they were required. However, following the strategy of a flexible and evolving blend of direct negotiations, helpful mediations as well as use of force, the agitation was brought to an end after about 10 days. Those not involved in tackling a law and order situation in a small town with limited police force and resources cannot imagine the difficulty of the task. Most of the nights were used in planning for the strategy for the next day and the day was packed with action. By the end of it all, those of us who were directly involved were fully exhausted.

I've never felt angrier and more disappointed than when, after the end of the agitation, I received a letter from the University communicating the decision taken by the Executive Committee of the University on the very day the agitation had started, modifying the earlier decision of discontinuing the examination centre at Sidhi and reinstating it. Was the callousness of the University bureaucracy pardonable, particularly when they were fully aware of the worsening situation of the agitation which was making big news? The agitation would have been called off the very first day if the information had been sent to us immediately on telephone. But for the unpardonable and atrocious insensitivity and inaction of the University bureaucracy, the entire team handling the law and order situation, the students themselves and the whole town could have been spared the unprecedented (for them) stress, hardship and tension.

As postscripts, I will share a fact and a secret. The fact is that the favourable decision of the University, despite concrete proof of mass copying, had emboldened the antisocial elements in the students, who during the next examination (I had moved to another district) had set fire to the building where question papers were kept for safe custody, giving rise to another law and order problem that had to be handled by my successor.

The secret is that my initiative and action to curb the practice of mass copying was a significant factor in my transfer from the district. It transpired that the important political leaders of the district were also in favour of the continuation of the practice.

I have no regrets: all the above have been extremely useful inputs in my continuing romance with education.

S C Behar is a member of the Board of Directors of Azim Premji Foundation. He is the former Chief Secretary to the Government of Madhya Pradesh. Closely associated with the field of education, he has published over 150 papers on Education Public Administration and other issues of social concern. He is the Founder Director of Eklavya, a voluntary organisation for educational research and innovative actions and also the Founding Vice Chancellor of Gurughasidas University, Bilaspur. Post retirement, he served as the Vice Chancellor of Makhanlal Chaturvedi National University of Journalism. He may be contacted at behar@azimpremjifoundation.org or sharadbehar@gmail.com

View from the Ground

S Giridhar

In my work with Azim Premji Foundation, I travelled to almost every block where the Foundation was working with government schools, be it Deesa in Banaskantha or Mori in Uttarkashi or Pindwara in Sirohi. So when the editor of Learning Curve asked me to contribute an article to this special issue on public education, I thought that the best way I could fulfil the editor's mandate was to recall and write what I saw on the ground. But I must also confess that this is not going to be a neatly sequenced narrative but a dip into memories of visits to schools, and hoping that as I move from incident to incident, I will still end up with a kind of meaningful narrative.

What does it mean to be a teacher at the tiny village of Hanakanahalli in North East Karnataka? Many miles from even a small town in the taluk of Huvinahadagali – its name enchantingly means 'flowers being transported in a boat' - the village government school has 54 students, most of them first generation learners, their parents working as daily wage labour in the farms around the village. Two teachers in the school, one also doubling up as the head teacher. Out there in this outpost, it is almost as though they are the most autonomous of teachers. There is just the occasional bus that runs close to the village. The Cluster Resource person is incidental and peripheral to their existence, while it is impossible for the Block education Officer to visit their school more than once in 3 years. But the two teachers are there every day. The children arrive early. The school is small but neat. The timetable is theirs to decide. The district has of course given them the timetable, 40 minutes of Kannada and then 40 minutes of math, then 40 minutes of this subject and 40 minutes of that. But these two teachers know what they are doing and they have a rhythm. It is an entire day, theirs to plan and execute. So it becomes two hours of Kannada because they are doing a drama about a king and his durbar. It is a girl who plays the role of the king. Every child in school, every child learning and it has been so for many years. The teachers are simple souls, they are happy that their students clear the test for admission to Navodaya School.

Far and away in Banaskantha, Gujarat, a series of workshops have been planned for teachers to introduce them to some concepts of how to prepare interesting question papers – that do not test rote memorisation but some conceptual understanding. But it has been raining incessantly in the entire week leading to these teacher workshops. Much of the region is being inundated, and waist deep water surrounds the dharmashala where the workshops are to be conducted. The 'master trainers' have somehow arrived the night before the workshop is to commence but they are all worried whether any teacher will come tomorrow morning if it is raining and flooding like this? But at 9 am the next day, 120 teachers of Banaskantha troop in, men with trousers rolled well above their knees, the women with saris hitched up as much as possible, wading through the water and slush. And the programme begins. Would anyone have said anything if they had not turned up? No. But turn up they did. And over the next three days they argued, baulked, resisted and understood what this kind of assessment was all about. And then they went back to their schools in Deesa and Kankrej and Khedbrahma to try out the things they had learnt. In their schools, with their children, with their limited resources and with whatever they had been able to learn. They are ordinary people like you and me but they had shown the mettle they were made of.

Back in Bellary district, two schools separated by just 400 metres, both serving children of the same largish village (do not ask me why schools are situated like this). One unkempt and slovenly,with a disinterested head teacher who had not even read the 10 by 6 feet wall painting on the compound wall of his school exhorting the mantra of universal education, though he parked his motorcycle beside that wall every morning. The other school, less than half the area of the other school, two rooms, thriving, vibrant, buzzing with activity; the head teacher and his colleague managing a noisy, eager bunch of children. One school had got the children's uniforms and books well on time for start of academic year. The other one had no idea. The same village, same cluster, same block but a surreal picture, to see two completely different worlds

separated by 400 metres. What good luck for 50 children in Lingappa and Hanumanthappa's school and what infernal luck for the 120 in the other school!

To another place and from another visit some years ago; a tale that I have narrated before but am quite happy to repeat here. In remote Sirohi, where a feudal restrictive way of life is still pervasive, a band of women teachers in the face of family opposition attend voluntary forums of teachers on one Sunday every month. Of their own volition, spending their own money to travel; a keenness to learn and grow in their profession, forsaking a holiday whose preciousness for women can never be fully comprehended. Self-motivated, courageous, eager, sincerity shining on their faces, the unknown, unsung torch bearers. What else do I remember of my interactions with these rural government school lady teachers? For sure, the poignant words of one of the teachers: "I know that there will be no recognition from the system for all these things but if someone in the block office even sends me an SMS saying 'well done,' I will be happy for the rest of my life".

Do you remember government school teachers being given Rs.500 every year to create teaching learning material to augment the text books? I remember this well, for in my very early visits to schools I would unfeelingly say that all that this allowance does is to increase the sale of thermocole in the local markets because most teachers would simply cut and colour thermocole into some shapes that they thought would help them in the classroom. In these same places over the years I learnt a humbling truth – teachers want to learn, they want to improve. And so in the same village schools, when some resource persons showed these teachers the way they could create really helpful material to teach math or history, they simply surpassed themselves. The same teachers in Surpur taluk of Yadgir district who cut thermocole to depict temples and forts now worked with their children to create a captivating video to describe the history of their villages – the significance of the special shape, size and construction of the graveyards or the special abilities of the local chieftain's armies that could climb the fort walls. Unobtrusively and naturally they along with the children made the educational journey to understand the centrality of evidence in history even as they accorded respect to the handed down narratives from generations of the local people.

As one stitches these vignettes of government schools and teachers in rural India, one can perhaps see a few things in the context of discussion around public education. One, that it is the hard working, committed, motivated teacher who loves her work who makes all the difference. Two, there is enough space and autonomy in public schools and curriculum for the teachers who wish to exercise such autonomy. Three, resources and material can be accessed by the resourceful teacher who wants the best for her children. When one discusses something as gigantic as the public education system, there are buzz words like policy implementation, academic and administrative institutional support and other things that treat the system as one large monolith. We miss the point completely. On the ground, for the valiant government school teacher braving all odds, it is a world of two class rooms, the children, the community that trusts them with the education of their children and their own conscience. These are children who are mostly first generation learners, with little or no parental support and with hardly any reading material in their homes, and for quite a few of these children the lunch provided at the school is the only hot meal of the day. For the teachers, as they strive to get books, uniform and other material on time, and work with the children to make every day count, every tiny step of progress made by their children is a huge victory. They are creating change in their own remote worlds and won't even want to understand what we mean by systemic change or wait for it.

S Giridhar is Registrar and Chief Operating Officer, Azim Premji University, Bangalore. He may be contacted at giri@azimpremjifoundation.org

Our Experiences with the Government School System[1]

Anand Swaminathan

The popular narrative

In popular narrative, Government schools[2] are mediocre and failing. They have inadequate and rundown infrastructure. Teachers do not come to school; if they come to school, they do not teach; and if they teach, children do not learn. Most Government school students cannot read or write or do basic Math despite years of schooling. Only the very poor send their children to the local Government school; if they had a choice, they would prefer private schools, which are far better. It is a system without any hope of reform.

This narrative has been fuelled by mainstream media and by a large number of neo-liberal voices in civil society. It has become so dominant, that any experience or evidence to the contrary has little chance of a hearing. This article examines how much of this stereotype is real and how much is myth.

Azim Premji Foundation has been working with the Government school system since 2001, in some of the most rural, remote and disadvantaged districts of India. Every day, our teams go to Government schools that are off the radar, in the deserts of Rajasthan, the mountains of Uttarakhand, the tribal belt of central India, and in many other parts of the country.

This continuous on-the-ground engagement with thousands of teachers and others, year after year, has given us a deep insight into the methods and motivations of the Government school system. These experiences are often at variance with the popular pejorative narrative, and needs telling.

Keeping things in perspective

Over the past three decades, India has pushed hard to have a school in every village. Today, the Government Primary School and the Anganwadi Centre (pre-school) are the most ubiquitous symbols of public systems in India. Walk into any village anywhere in the country, no matter how remote or inaccessible, and in all likelihood you will see a Government school. In a country as vast as ours and with its complex geographies, this is an enormous achievement.

With close to 11 lakh elementary schools, we have one of the largest Government school systems anywhere in the world.[3] School enrolment is close to universal, irrespective of gender, caste, or religion. If you consider that just 30 years ago, less than half of our girls were in school, this is nothing short of remarkable. All this has not happened by chance, but is the result of a systematic effort to ensure every child in the country, no matter who she is or where she lives, has access to a school.[4] When reflecting on the Government system, this perspective – of its sheer scale and complexity, and its significant advances – is important to keep, for these are markers of a healthy and evolving system.

Government schools run

Put together, all of us at Azim Premji Foundation would have visited thousands of Government schools over the past decade and more. These visits are neither brief nor one-off. Also, given that by design we work in more underdeveloped districts, the more remote a school is, greater is the possibility of our having been there.

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[1]The term 'public education system' is open to wide interpretation and critique. For instance: Should the term be limited to schools run by the Government, or could it include schools regulated, but not run, by the Government? Can a system that has been abandoned by large sections of citizenry be truly called public? Since this article is specifically about Azim Premji Foundation's experiences of working with Government schools, I am using the more specific term, 'Government school system'.

[2]By Government schools, I am referring to State Government-run schools that form the bulk of the system. It excludes Government schools than run under special schemes, by separate managements, and so on. E.g.: Kendriya Vidyalayas, Navoday Vidyalayas, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas, Army Schools, Aided Schools.

[3]To offer another comparison, India has 1.5 lakh post offices.

[4]There are those that argue that this enormous expansion has done more bad than good. That we have ended up with a large proportion of very small schools (<20-30 children and 1-2 teachers) which are unviable educationally, economically and administratively. However, this wisdom is largely retrospective.

We have seen, more often than not, that teachers and students come to school, and there is a genuine effort at teaching-learning. To those unfamiliar with the debates raging around Government and private schools, this might seem like a basic claim, for what else would one expect from a school? But this is nothing short of blasphemy to those who like to believe otherwise.[5]

In addition, schools typically have sufficient classrooms, potable water, toilets for boys and girls, and a well-managed mid-day meal, which for many students is their most important meal of the day.[6,7]

That the Government manages to pull this off, day after day in 11 lakh distributed locations, is an administrative feat worthy of study.

But then, why are students not learning enough?

The big mystery of school education is that despite genuine efforts at teaching and years of schooling, students struggle to learn. On an average, students learn only 40-50% of the scholastic concepts expected of them in each grade.[8]

An argument one hears is around teachers. It goes like this: Teaching is not an aspirational or well-paying profession and it only attracts those who have no other career options. What else can you expect with such teachers?

Now this argument really has no basis. One, becoming a Government school teacher is quite an aspiration for many; in most towns and villages in the country, a Government teacher's job pays better than most other options, and offers good service terms to boot.[9] Two, being a good teacher is not the privy of a few. With appropriate education and practice, most people can develop into capable teachers.

Some people argue that there is a strong correlation between the socio-economic backgrounds of students and educational attainment , that children from disadvantaged homes tend to have lower learning levels than children from more privileged homes. Since a majority of children in Government schools come from poorer homes, learning levels there are low. Hence, the only systemic solution to the 'poor learning' problem is to reduce poverty.

This argument misses three things. One, it is an ethically barren idea that a student's learning is only going to be determined by the family she was born in. In a nation that aspires to be a democracy, this argument strikes at the very heart of things, that one's abilities and choices will get determined by one's birth.

Two, new evidence suggests that the reason children from privileged homes seem to have better learning outcomes is because they get more educational exposure at home. For instance, there is a greater chance a young child in an urban middle class home has access to children's books; there is less chance she has to work to support her family's livelihood. Now, positive action can resolve some of these differences – such as having a good library in the Government school or framing student scholarships to supplant the income of really poor households.

Three, the view does not have educational validity. Any decent teacher will tell you that with good teaching, just about any child can master elementary curriculum.

Teachers and the wrong-pedagogy hypothesis

Teaching is a complex profession. It requires a strong conceptual understanding of one's subject. We have seen teachers come with good textbook knowledge, but that is far from adequate. For instance, a history teacher needs to understand what history is, how historical knowledge is formed, a broad historical view of the world, etc. Unfortunately, our school and higher education system does not really help build this kind of deep conceptual ability in subjects.

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[5]It is the fashion of the day to lambast Government schools and teachers. Some of the critique certainly has basis, which we will explore further on. But to stuff everything into this narrative of a failing system borders on fiction. It does not help that some of these Government school bashers are also avowed fans of private schools. But more on that later.

[6]This is not to suggest all Government schools have sufficient classrooms, etc. There is a small but significant percentage of schools with inadequate infrastructure. However, that is not the general norm.

[7]Many schools have inadequate budgets for school maintenance. Which means it is usual to see Government school facilities in poor repair: Classrooms in need of a coat of paint, plumbing issues in toilets, weeds in the open areas.

[8]This is based on our internal assessments. However, the broader point about poor student learning, has been established time and again in various studies, and there is more-or-less a consensus on this matter.

[9]One short-sighted action by several State Governments was the appointment of a large number of 'para-teachers'. These were people without requisite educational qualification and were hired on short-term contracts at pay-levels far below regular teachers. This has severely undermined the teaching profession in the country. Mercifully, this practice is now illegal with RTE 2009 coming to force.

Teaching needs an insight into every student in the classroom. This is not easy. The student likely comes from a very different family circumstance than the teacher is used to. Most teachers come from general caste categories and are economically middle-class. Government school students come from poor homes and are more likely to be from scheduled castes and tribes and other backward castes.

Teaching has to be guided by a broad understanding of the school's role in a democratic society. And it needs a specific understanding of how a child constructs meaning in the context of that subject.

The Government school classroom is a complex theatre. It has children from different cultural and religious backgrounds. Students are at various stages of learning and bring different abilities and inclinations to the learning process. More complex yet is that students of different grades are often clubbed together. The greatest complexity is when children come from different linguistic backgrounds, and these languages are not the teacher's, or indeed the school's, language.

The teacher has to combine her understanding of the subject and the learner, situate it in the broader aims of public education yet customise all this for the diversity of her classroom. This point, when teacher pulls all her abilities together to finally engage with students in the act of teaching, is pedagogy.

Our wrong-pedagogy hypothesis is this: most teachers do not know how to teach such that most of their students learn. (To clarify, this is not a comment on the teachers themselves, but is a reflection of the pathetic state of teacher education in India.)[10]

Many new teachers begin in right earnest and often go out of their way to make things work. However, since she has not been adequately prepared for the profession, nor does she have adequate on-the-job support, it is a losing battle. After a few months (or years) of trying, most teachers end up resorting to the least effective of pedagogic methods, which is built largely on lectures, rote, drills and the stick.

However, while the last few paragraphs have painted a bleak picture, there is more hope than despair. In our experience, a large number of teachers and others are genuinely concerned about this issue. Given the right support, they come forward in significant numbers to rebuild their professional abilities.

In the districts we work in close to 25% Government teachers and head teachers voluntarily give their personal time (after school hours, over weekends and holidays) to engage in their development. How many of us would be willing to sacrifice our holidays month after month, so we can do our jobs better? But they do, and they do it because they care about their profession and are concerned for their students.

Exponential growth of private schools

Our country needs a robust Government school system. A healthy democracy needs a school system that actively works for its ideals, one that exposes students to democratic values and rational ideas. And I cannot visualize any other construct, except a Government school, playing this role in full measure and at the scale that our country demands.

By their very nature, private schools cannot serve this purpose. The natural inclination of private enterprise driven schools[11] is to cater to the immediate aspirations of the communities they serve. These mushrooming for-profit (in practice even if not on paper) schools that have come all over the country are at every fee level – from hundred rupees per month right up to a lakh of rupees per month.

A direct import of this is that private schools tend to serve socially and economically homogenous groups, furthering social stratification. By doing this, we are designing inequity right into the heart of our society. Hence, while I have no fight with private schools and while I know some wonderful private schools, taken as a whole, the private school system inadequately serves the purpose of a school system in a democracy.

Now, if private schools only served a small proportion of students, it may not be a major cause for concern. But that is not the case in India. 67% of children in urban towns go to private schools. While this number drops to 23% in rural areas, the trend clearly points to rapid shifts happening here as

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[10]The greatest imperative today is to dismantle our hopeless Teacher Education system of incompetent (and often spurious) colleges, and set up a new system grounds-up. One hopes that the new National Mission on Teachers and Teaching will rise to the occasion.

[11]There are several private schools that are non-profit and run primarily for social purposes; I am not referring to them here.

well. By the next decade, we may well have private school students outnumbering Government school students for the entire country.

There is a large pro-privatisation lobby in India which claims that this is a good thing, simply because private schools do better. But evidence from across the world clearly highlights that private schools do not contribute to student learning any better than their counterpart Government schools.[12]

From what we have seen, many of the private schools that compete with Government schools employ unqualified teachers on almost contract-labour wages, and operate out of tightly packed and unsafe premises. Fear is considered an acceptable pedagogic tool, and there is little attempt to customise school practices for the child. That this could become the dominant educational future of our children is a troubling notion.

Many believe this shift is part of a larger social shift from public to private provisioning of services, fuelled by a growing distrust of public institutions combined with a liberal market economy. The issue is that education is a not a service that can be traded, but a social process in developing a certain kind of citizenship and nation.

Conclusion

The Government school system has made decisive and significant strides. It has expanded to every corner of this vast country. It has motivated children from the most deprived backgrounds to come to school.

Every day, this system runs. Teachers and students come to school and there is a genuine effort at teaching-learning.

However, student learning is far from satisfactory and we now have to figure how to make this system work for the students. For that, our teachers and school leaders will need to be differently prepared and better supported.

The big challenge to Indian education is the burgeoning of private schools, which stratify educational opportunity on the basis of what parents can afford to pay. This rapid privatisation of school education is fuelled, among other things, by a false belief that these schools are better. The only response we can imagine is to visibly improve the quality of Government schools. But only time will tell if that will turn the tide.

To truly understand the Government school system, one has to take a decadal view. And that tells us that, rather than being a system in decline, it actually is a system that is slowly maturing. With the right support, it can improve.

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[12] The most emphatic of these studies from the Indian context is the longitudinal School Choice study in Andhra Pradesh; see this special EPW article by my colleague D.D.Karopady: http://www.epw.in/special-articles/does-school-choice-help-rural-children-disadvantaged-sections.html

Anand Swaminathan is part of Azim Premji Foundation's field operations. He may be contacted at anand@azimpremjifoundation.org

Some Constitutional Battles in the Field of Education

In the last 65 years, the field of education has seen several pitched constitutional battles. Below are some of the key issues and the leading cases in a number of areas within the field of education.

1. The Right to Education

Mohini Jain v. State of Karnataka (1992) – This case held that the right to education flows directly from right to life. The right to life under Article 21 and the dignity of an individual cannot be assured unless it is accompanied by the right to education. Therefore, the state is under an obligation to make endeavours to provide educational facility at all levels to its citizens.

2. Constitutional Validity of Article 21A

Pramati Educational and Cultural Trust v. Union of India (2014) – This case held that Article 21A which guarantees the right to education was constitutionally valid and did not violate its basic structure. The case however also held that all cultural minority administered educational institutions would be exempt from the application of the RTE Act, 2009.

3. Constitutional Validity of the RTE Act

Society for Unaided Private Schools of Rajasthan v. Union of India (2012) – This case upheld the validity of the RTE Act, 2009, and stated that it did not violate the right of individuals to freedom of trade and occupation under Article 19(1)(g) of the Constitution.

4. Minority Rights

Gandhi Faiz-e-Alam College v. Shah Jahanpur (1975) – In this case, the Supreme Court held that a provision for 'principal and staff' representation on the management board of a college was conducive to the better management of the college and de minimis in nature so as to not offend Article 30(1), which guarantees cultural minorities the right to establish and administer educational institutions.

5. Validity of Reservation Policy

PA Inamdar v. State of Maharashtra (2005) – In this case, the court held that the state could not validly impose reservation obligations upon private educational institutions. It was as a result of this judgment that the 93rd Constitutional Amendment came about which permitted such policies.

Ashok Kumar Thakur v. Union of India (2008) – In this case, the court held that the 93rd Constitutional amendment which inserted Article 15(5) of the Constitution, permitting reservation for socially and educationally backward classes, was constitutionally valid.

Indira Sawhney v. Union of India (1992) – In this cases, the court held that a wide range of factors, not limited to caste, could be used to identify social and educational backwardness for the purpose of reservation in educational institutions. It also recommended the use of economic criteria to determine backwardness, giving rise to the concept of 'creamy layer'.

6. Infrastructural Standards in the RTE

JK Raju v. State of Andhra Pradesh (2014) – In this case, the Supreme Court asked the government to ensure the availability of drinking water facilities, separate toilets for boys and girls, and separate facilities for teaching and non-teaching staff. Significantly, the court cited Pramati as it reiterated that these directions would be applicable to both minority and non-minority institutions. The two judge bench chose the idiom of 'basic human rights that enhance the atmosphere where the education is imparted' while justifying the need for these directions.

The above legal case summaries were compiled by Gaurav Mukherjee, a graduate fellow in the School of Policy & Governance, Azim Premji University.

Some Disjointed Reflections on the Private and the Public

Arjun Jayadev

In the late 1990s I went to the US for graduate school. As young graduate students, experiences are often similar between people- the same classes inspire, the same anxieties about life and the same adventures arise and we often deal with them in similar manner. My fellow graduate students came from places like Canada, the UK, China, Europe, Korea, Turkey and, of course, the US. The enormous energy and vitality that sprung from those encounters continue to reverberate in my life more than a decade later. I did not find myself better equipped in any way to face life than them. Only years later when talking to one of them did I realize that there was only one deep structural difference between my fellow graduate adventurers (one that was not evident at all in our engagement with our work and life) and me: they were educated in public schools, while I, like almost all the South Asians there, was educated entirely in a private school. As it happened, I married one of my fellow graduate students who, throughout her life, from kindergarten to PhD, was in the public system.

Many years later, when my son joined school in the US, it was in a public setting, in one of the most notoriously 'difficult' school districts in the state. Certainly his first year had challenges. But there was never a time that I felt that the school, or more accurately the human beings in the school, were failing in the deep purpose of educating him. To a person, the teachers were loving, kind, engaged and pedagogically sophisticated. They interacted with the students with much the same degree of affection and concern that I recall my teachers providing me decades earlier.

Thinking back on these facts in the light of the debates on private and public schooling that rage in the US and India, I wonder if the public/private dichotomy is worth obsessing about in terms of what can be achieved in educational outcomes. My gut, unresearched, instinct is that the more relevant difference is to the extent that there is an engaged, able and responsive community responsible for education, and that this community remains flexible and empowered to deal with differences. In the public school district where my son went, parents were engaged, tolerant and supportive of teachers and, most importantly, had a sense of social belonging and community capacity. Although it was a racially mixed neighbourhood with a mix of richer and poorer, there was a real sense of collective responsibility for the children.

Why then is that not replicated en masse in India? Here perhaps, one can take a broader view that this is a feature of Indian society and not just merely the Indian educational system. Some of the difficulty possibly lies with our overall sense of social collectivity and our stop-start, indigeneous and incomplete modernity. In this lack of a genuinely felt inclusiveness, education is not the sole casualty, of course. We are lacking in public provisioning in many spheres. The ways in which individuals imagine and interact and identify with 'the public' form a core area of enquiry in social science. Nowhere are these questions more complex, varied and interesting than in the Indian context.

It is not an exaggeration to claim that the notion of equality within India as a felt sense of a collectivity, is still highly fragile. Despite the democratic upsurges of the nineties and later that established political footholds for the marginalized, the idea that we (by which I mean the middle classes) can and should be collectively responsible for our whole society is a notion that is looked upon with some degree of scepticism. The joint failures of society and the state in providing basic minimum quality of amenities, public infrastructure and administration continue to impede our notions of what is possible (which is why periodic appeals to 'good governance' are so attractive). Relatedly, the boundaries of the community to whom one has obligations remain quite circumscribed. The notion of an equality of personhood for everyone continues therefore to be very thin. Put another way, if our major (perhaps only) locus of collective identification remains limited to Bollywood and cricket (as we sometimes celebrate), it is a very thinly veneered basis for empathy indeed.

Having noted this, it is not an argument for 'turning peasants into Indians' to mangle Eugen Weber. The creation of a public in the relatively homogeneous

European states of today was based on two sets of strategies: first, through vicious ethnic cleansing, violent boundary adjustments and forced assimilation of minorities, and, second through a concerted effort at building state capacity, national identity and getting rid of landlords and other feudal elite. We have thus far managed to make some headway into the latter approach, while not completely adopting the former set of strategies. If the public is to be built on exclusivist grounds, it is not something to be desired, especially given our current polity, which is a hair's breadth away from the worst excesses of majoritarianism.

How can we then think of provisioning of collective goods like education and the creation of a public imaginary that supports such goods? This is a challenge given the lack of success in previous efforts and the dangers of the ways in which it may be promoted in the present zeitgeist. I'm not sure what concrete policies to espouse, but some things seem apparent. The notion that state provisioning is doomed to failure, whether in education or other realms and that therefore privatization is the way to go is an error that has come to be seen as an irrefutable (if politically incorrect) fact. We have plenty of evidence that this is not the case, and as my fellow graduate students taught me, public education is no barrier whatsoever to creating individuals who are sophisticated, capable and engaged.

This is not to soft-pedal the numerous weaknesses of public education and school in India, but merely to recognize that one may not be comparing like to like when making comparisons. Certainly, to the extent that the middle class in India can afford to pay for the human and infrastructural resources in better schools, their children will be provided a better education. But when like is compared to like, private schools do not perform better than public schools. This is especially the case with low-fee private schools whether you look at a recent randomized trial in Andhra Pradesh (Muralidharan and Sundaraman, 2015, Karopady, 2014) or the more extensive work of Prachi Srivastava (for a review, see Srivastava, 2013). The more relevant differences between schools will tend to be in community engagement and overall resources.

The legal theorist Roberto Unger has often called for what he calls 'democratic experimentalism', by which he means that human social organization should not be confined to rigid and predetermined institutional arrangements such as the state and private sector but needs to be left open to experimentation and revision. In the Indian context the possibilities for such an approach are endless. One can imagine very many forms of institutional and curricular organization and practice that can serve the fundamental human purpose of education, and indeed, there are many such experiments taking place, whether through social policies like RtE or alternatives such as the Lokavidya approach. In all cases, however, the necessity is for a committed and engaged group of people who see these experiments to educate a body of young human beings as something for which the whole community is responsible.

During the same initial years of graduate school, I also read the following quote from the Italian intellectual, Antonio Gramsci: 'How many times have I wondered if it is really possible to forge links with a mass of people when one has never had strong feelings for anyone, not even one's own parents: if it is possible to have a collectivity when one has not been deeply loved oneself by individual human creatures'. (Quoted in Fiori 1965) That quote has remained with me through these years, and seems apposite to summarize my thoughts. If one is to create a real and meaningful sense of the public, one needs to begin with love and care. It is to that purpose that education should be aimed, and whether it is achieved through the private or public is of secondary importance.

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Arjun Jayadev is an Associate Professor of Economics at the University of Massachusetts, Boston and an adjunct faculty at Azim Premji University in Bangalore, India. He is also closely involved with the Institute for New Economic Thinking. He has a PhD in Economics from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He may be contacted at arjun.jayadev@apu.edu.in or arjunjayadev@gmail.com

Experiences with the Varadenahalli School Children

Kamala V Mukunda

There are thousands of people working with our government school system to improve learning conditions and psychological outcomes for students. For these dedicated people, I feel deep appreciation and admiration. I myself teach in a non-formal private school (Centre For Learning), and most of us teachers and students come from city backgrounds. One of the many objectives of the CFL education is to connect with lives and worlds outside our own, to break our bubbles of physical comfort and self-indulgence from time to time. We do this in several ways, one of which is to engage regularly with students from the nearby village primary school. From the start, we have seen that the Varadenahalli children treasure these interactions too, so we continue them year after year. I hope to share in this article some of what we have observed and learned from these rich and varied sessions. However, it is clear that we can share neither the depth nor the breadth of experience of those who work full-time with government schools, and therefore I offer these points in humility.

Our school, Centre For Learning, with around 75 students, is located in Varadenahalli, a village 40 km away from Bangalore city. There are around 100 homes here, with a range of affluence. Most families have at least a few acres of land, some in addition a shop or a tractor and some rely on daily wages to survive. The village has a primary school housed in a small two-room building, run by two dedicated and affectionate teachers. There are about 22 children here, a number that has reduced dramatically over the last several years. (When we first came here in 2000, there were nearly 60 children in the primary school.) Our neighbouring village, Bachenahatti, has an upper primary school. After Class 5 children from Varadenahalli walk there and the school attracts children from several surrounding villages. In spite of this, their enrolment has also plummeted in recent years. We suppose that this reduction has to do with some larger sociological factors across the country.

Since the year 2000, we have been doing mini-projects with a joint group of government school students and CFL students (either middle school or seniors). Over the years we have done all these things with students: bilingual drama, playing games, math, science, history, English songs, dance, pottery, art and craft (painting, sketching, embroidery, collage, paper weaving) and a formal programme of English as a Second Language. The format is usually a weekly ninety-minute session for three months at a time.

The village school children form bonds of affection and trust with our students and with us in no time. They are eager and excited about the weekly interactions, partly because of the novelty of spending time with outsiders, and partly because of the activities we do. They are keen to learn and do anything we suggest. Some (mostly the girls and those children who come from poorer, lower-caste homes in the village) are shy. The caste-class correlation in Varadenahalli is apparent in the way that affluence, skin colour, size and confidence levels go together among the children. They form their own divisions, perhaps mimicking those of the adults: who they will work with or sit next to.

Their transition from being utterly obedient and subdued to becoming unruly and mischievous is quite sudden! When we visit them at their school, they are very 'well-behaved' and this demeanour

carries on into their first couple of weeks of coming to CFL. The space we provide them here is relatively unstructured in a few important ways: no desks and benches to restrict movement, no blackboard to gather the attention, no mechanical tasks to keep them occupied. Crucially, they have a larger space to move about in than they are used to, and we like them to have some time in each session to run around freely. After a few sessions of this, they go a little wild. I am delighted to stand back and watch the fun while our CFL students try to manage this chaos. When things get out of hand, they resort to threats—Aunty karithini, aunty barthaiddare—and this always works!

As I mentioned, we deliberately construct activities which push the children to think independently, and to discover their own expression and creative urges. We realise that for understandable reasons, they have been trained to repeat, to copy, and to speak in chorus. In the CFL sessions they are told: 'What do you think?' or 'Don't look at his book, you draw the way you see it.' Our experience has been something like the following: when asked to draw whatever they feel like, most of them will draw a three-step flag post and the Indian flag. When asked to draw a plant, they will all draw more or less the same plant. Then we seat them in front of a plant and say: draw this plant. Even then, some of them will draw the fixed plant from their imagination. Eventually, with repeated and patient urging, they begin to draw from their own observation, and this process is something lovely to watch. Once we asked Class 7 students to draw a cubical box which was placed in front of them. The idea was to learn to depict a 3D object in the 2D plane of the paper. It is not an easy task for anyone who has not learned the 'trick' (see figure), and nothing they knew could be immediately put on paper. This exercise brought forth some very unusual and creative drawings. But the moment we commented on any one drawing as being nice or interesting, several others would give up the struggle and try to copy that one!

One extreme example of this tendency comes from a history project that we did with the Class 5 children (we were using Deepa Dhanraj's film for ideas and inspiration). They learned how to draw a family tree beginning from their grandparents and they were each to make their own at home by asking family members for as many names as possible. The next week when I asked to look at the sheets, there was some giggling among the girls, and then they showed me—identical family trees! They happily informed me that they had all copied from Anasuya (she was clearly the acknowledged 'good student' in class). I turned to the boys and asked for their sheets. One of them grabbed Anasuya's and started copying it! It took a while and a lot more giggling to explain that Anasuya's grandmother was not everyone's grandmother, and so on...

Over the years we have noticed a few things that worry us, things that strike us because we make the comparison to CFL students. Firstly, Varadenahalli students are quite a bit smaller on average than their same-age peers at CFL. Even though I know from general statistics that, among rural children in India , stunted growth is widespread, seeing it with my own eyes is always a bit of a shock, especially because this village is not very impoverished.

Secondly, while they are full of energy and very bright, we find that some activities we plan for and expect to be relatively 'easy' (such as keeping a beat by clapping) are surprisingly difficult for them.

And third, we notice persistent problems in learning English pronunciation and grammar (simple English sentences we teach can get distorted within a week, forever fixing garbled versions in memory). Perhaps there is a connection between these observations. Psychological research points to a cluster of abilities of the brain called 'executive function' as being very important for school and life. A recent Harvard University publication describes it thus:

'... the ability to hold onto and work with information, focus thinking, filter distractions, and switch gears ... Scientists refer to these capacities as executive function and self-regulation.'

This description seems to fit the difficulties we see in the Varadenahalli children.

What could be the root cause of these difficulties? Could it be that the Varadenahalli children have fewer opportunities and exposure to cognitively challenging activities at home, in the neighbourhood and at school, such as reading or playing indoor and outdoor games? Alternatively, could it be a nutritional issue, beginning from early childhood? A 2007 Lancet paper, titled Child development: risk factors for adverse outcomes in developing countries, explains that school readiness and achievement are compromised by a four key risk factors for millions of children in the developing world: stunting, inadequate cognitive stimulation, iodine deficiency and iron deficiency anaemia.

This link between nutrition, stunting and executive function strikes us as important. CFL started supplying egg, milk and fruit, and a few years later the government initiated a similar scheme which was good news indeed. The primary school teachers are bringing in different and interesting activities, thanks to their in-service workshops and their own growth as teachers. A recent experience made me realise and be grateful for the openness with which these teachers have for so many years regarded our requests for time with their students. The new headmaster of another nearby school, where our seniors are working with Class 6 and 7 students on Arvind Gupta's Pumps from the Dump, told me: 'If you were doing something from the textbook, then it would be of some use to the students. What you are doing doesn't help them at all.' The Varadenahalli school teachers have never questioned the value of our sessions, and we hope we deserve their trust in us!

We have learned and gained so much from interacting with the Varadenahalli students. The unconditional affection from the children, the intensity of their experiences, the excitement and energy of the sessions, make an intoxicating mix! CFL students on their part show a degree of patience and kindness that they do not often show to each other. It is a very real opportunity for them to see the need to be responsible for another person's learning.

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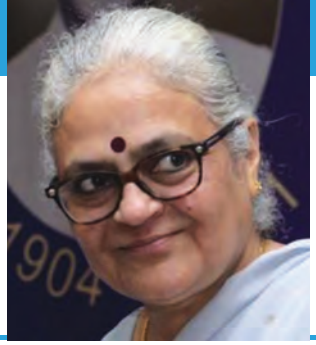
Kamala Mukunda works at Centre for Learning (www.cfl.in), a small teacher-run school outside Bangalore. She is interested in psychology and education, and also in bringing ideas from these areas to teachers and teacher-educators. She has written a book entitled What Did You Ask at School Today, published in 2009 by Harpercollins India. She may be contacted at kamala.mukunda@gmail.com

The Position of Teachers in Our Education System[1]

Vimala Ramachandran



I have been wrestling with the 'teacher' question for over fifteen years. Unfortunately the debate on teachers and their centrality to the public education system is highly polarised. There is a large community of administrators, researchers and writers who have taken to regular 'teacher-bashing' and there are an equally vocal community that takes a contrary view. The purpose of this short article is to try and understand the way teachers are positioned in our system and why and how this is an important cause for concern.

We all know that, in the struggle between quantity, quality and equity, the role of teachers is a key factor to turn the public system around. The experience of the last three decades and a huge body of research has shown that it is not a matter of numbers any more – and that teacher effectiveness is 'the most important school based predictor of student learning and that several consecutive years of outstanding teaching can offset the learning deficits of disadvantaged students…' (Vegas and Ganimian, 2011[2]). Globally, one of the key challenges being faced by many countries is related to teacher effectiveness: this includes competency (qualification / knowledge), motivation and management. Ultimately the tug-of-war is about the rights of children (to quality education), the rights of teachers (working conditions) and the ability of the system to balance the two (Cream Wright in Chikondi Mpokosa and Susy Ndaruhutse, 2008[3]).

In the last three years I have travelled extensively and talked to many teachers and administrators in connection with a research study on the working conditions of elementary and secondary school teachers. The overwhelming message that came through was that the public system looks at teachers as government servants whose primary allegiance is to the administration. She/he is not seen as a 'teacher' who is engaged in educating and caring for children. The unique status that teachers enjoyed in society has gradually been eroded and teachers across the country tell you that their professional identity has been lost. Equally, the way they are recruited, transferred and managed makes them vulnerable to the vagaries of administers and politicians. Most importantly, teachers across India tell you that they have almost no autonomy and their superiors in administration are happy if they follow orders. This is indeed tragic, especially in the light of compelling global evidence that teacher autonomy, identity, motivation and accountability are intertwined.

Is this the case in all countries? Perusal of the experiences of countries like Poland, Finland, China, Singapore and Chile tell us that the way teachers are positioned in the system is the key to success. Some core principles are followed in countries that have been able to rejuvenate the education system – namely:

- attracting the best into the teaching profession through a mix of strategies aimed at enhancing the professional identity and working conditions. Increasing teacher salary alone is not enough.
- preparing teachers well, focusing equally on knowledge and skills needed in the classroom. Provide opportunities for need-based continuing education and training. Supporting teachers to identifying their learning needs and providing timely opportunities is considered important.
- setting clear expectations for teachers and keeping this constant. Frequent changes in expectations can have a detrimental effect on teacher morale. Equally, set up a transparent system to enable teachers, headmasters and

[1]This article is based on a recent study led by Vimala Ramachandran, T Linden, T Beteille, S Goyal, S Dey and P G Chatterjee. 2015 forthcoming. Teachers in the Indian Education System. NUEPA. New Delhi. This study was done in NUEPA with financial support from the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, under the aegis of the RGF Chair on Teacher Management and Development

[2]Vegas, Emiliana Vegas and Ganimian, Alejandro J. August 2011. What are the teacher policies in top performing and rapidly improving education systems? SABER-teachers Background Paper No. 3. Washington DC

[3]Chikondi Mpokosa and Susy Ndaruhutse, 2008. Managing Teachers: The centrality of teacher management to quality education. Lessons from developing countries. CfBT and VSO, UK

administrators to appraise and review their performance.

- matching teacher's skills with student's needs – with a strong headmaster or principal who has the professional autonomy to plan for her/his school. Teachers who are led by strong and highly motivated school heads and given autonomy to innovate and experiment can do wonders in the classroom. They are motivated and also take great pride in their work.
- finally and most importantly involving teachers in tracking the learning of their students and support them to make sure each and every child is able to make progress.

The public system in India is unfortunately riddled with problems. Teacher recruitment policies are ad hoc and there are long delays and gaps before a successful candidate can assume teaching duties (with the exception of states like Karnataka and Tamil Nadu). Most states do not have a systematic or routine process for calculating how many teachers are needed, and what their specific qualifications and characteristics should be. In a handful of states, recruitment is aligned to political interests, making teacher recruitment resemble political strategies rather than recruitment policies. The timing of recruitment is also opaque. A significant number of court cases related to teacher recruitment and this causes insecurity among potential teacher candidates. Even in the states where recruitment is relatively less transparent and merit-based (like Karnataka and Tamil Nadu), there are considerable delays in the actual deployment of teachers in schools.

Transfer policies are rare in India. Where they exist (as in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu in our study), they are recent. The general situation in majority of the states is disturbing – they are mostly ad hoc. In many states teachers report needing powerful connections and paying bribes in order to get a transfer of their choice (or impede one against their interest) or to get a transfer relatively quickly. In some states political leaders are formally represented on transfer committees and some transfers are given as rewards to politically helpful teachers. In some states mass transfers are done – setting in motion a tizzy of activity among teachers.

The RtE Act says that all teachers should perform the following duties: (1) maintain regularity and punctuality in attending school; (2) conduct and complete the curriculum; (3) complete entire curriculum within specified time; (4) assess the learning ability of each child and accordingly supplement additional instructions, if any, as required; (5) hold regular meetings with parents and guardians and apprise them about the regularity in attendance, ability to learn, progress made in learning and any other relevant information about the child; and (6) perform other such duties as may be prescribed. However, translating these duties into practice in spirit is a challenge that is yet to be addressed fully.

The inspection, feedback and support systems in most states are dysfunctional. The numbers of schools have expanded far more rapidly over the past two decades than the inspection and support system. There are very few officers with limited resources for such functions. The system expects teachers to show that all chapters given in the syllabus for the year have been 'taught' – and this is seen as completion of their primary responsibilities. Teachers are not empowered to perform the roles that children and parents expect of them. Induction or orientation programmes are not a regular feature in any of the states. Though all positions seem to have a 'probationary' period of two years after which the teacher is to be confirmed, in practice this has no relevance. The officials and the teachers are unable to state any difference between what happens or is expected from the teacher during the probationary period and otherwise.

Approximately 42 per cent of government elementary schools have only one or two teachers for the elementary grades. However, the teachers are not equipped to effectively conduct multi-grade teaching despite clear policy directives at the national level. The NCF 2005 suggests considerable planning is required on the part of teachers to address multi-grade situations — however, the teacher education process still treats multi-grade situation as an anomaly.

Most teachers have yet to come to terms with several provisions stipulated by the RtE like 'no detention' and 'no corporal punishment'. Teachers in the nine states said that such provisions have impinged on their professional rights and have made their tasks more difficult. Teachers and senior officials critique the no-detention policy. They say that this takes away the imperative from students to actually study. On the other hand, educationists argue that it is the interpretation of the no-detention policy that

is the problem – because no-detention is equated with non-assessment of learning outcomes. Though teachers have cut down on corporal punishment, it is more out of compulsion than any real belief in the concept.

The position of the head teacher is particularly difficult. All states under the study have significant number of vacancies for the positions of headmasters / teachers. Maintaining student, financial and administrative records of the school; periodic and non-periodic reporting; and liaising with the education department are some of the tasks that the headmasters do. For the last decade and a half, activities like mid-day meals and construction of buildings have emerged as major activities of school heads. All of this leaves obviously little time for academic support and supervision. This problem is further compounded by the fact that most schools do not have administrative, accounting or support staff.

The school team consisting of the head and teachers do not have any say in who should be posted to their school. In many states the teachers told us that when they need a mathematics teacher, they are given a language teacher! As a result – especially at the elementary level – teachers are expected to teach all subjects. They are not part of any decision-making process – but given orders and asked to perform their 'duties'.

The most tragic feedback was that those who managed our schools, provided resources and actually taught in them had little faith in the government school system. Not one teacher or administrator or teacher educator we met sent their own children or grandchildren to a government school! There is a sense of disquiet across the country, a sense of despair when we talk about our schools, our teachers and the learning of our children. And yet, in most states teachers report that they had seen improvements in their overall status and working conditions. The last twenty years have witnessed significant developments in school infrastructure as well as general infrastructure (roads, communication, electricity, water). The government has also paid attention to pupil-teacher ratio, provision of teaching and learning material and availability of libraries and books. Salaries of teachers have also gone up significantly since the Sixth Pay Commission. Many states have reversed their contract teacher policies and are now on the track to regularise all teachers.

All these are important and significant issues – but the most significant is that the status of the teachers has been eroded. Across all levels we noted that teachers are seen as a government servant at the bottom of a hierarchical system. By virtue of their administrative role, officials exuded a sense of superiority. The relationship between teachers and administrators is contentious, with both trying to work the system in their favour. It is perhaps not surprising that teachers eagerly seek promotions to administrative posts.

At one level, it seems as if a lot has changed. All states have adopted the RtE recommended Teacher Eligibility Tests (TET). But it was not possible to understand whether this helps the government recruit teachers who have mastery over their subject knowledge and their pedagogy. Moreover, in none of the nine study states was there any effort to use TET results to inform pre-service training practices, curriculum reform and the assess pre-service teacher training institutions. Very little is known about the quality of the TET itself in the different states: whether the tests unambiguously written, if the TET accurately measures the knowledge and skills it claims to, and whether it does so consistently over time.

The ultimate test of the effectiveness of teachers is whether all the children they teach are able to reach their educational potential. Whether teachers teach in the most effective way is determined by a complex set of policies and practices. Blaming teachers is perhaps easy – what is more difficult is to work with the system to ensure greater autonomy to schools while at the same time set in motion a process whereby teachers, headmasters / principals and administrations can evaluate their performance and held accountable to children.

Vimala Ramachandran, of Educational Resource Unit, New Delhi was involved in the conceptualisation of Mahila Samakhya (Education for Women's Equality) and served as the first National Project Director from 1988-93 in MHRD, GoI. She established Educational Resource Unit (now known as ERU Consultants Private Limited) in 1998 as a network of researchers and practitioners working on education. She was a National Fellow and Professor of Teacher Management and Development in NUEPA. She has been engaged in research on elementary and secondary education focusing on gender and equity issues, teacher status and motivation, systemic barriers to realising the equity goals of national policies and programmes for elementary education, adult literacy and continuing education, and most recently has been engaged in researching educational needs of out-of-school youth – especially girls. She may be contacted at vimalar.ramachandran@gmail.com

Voluntary Teacher Forum(s): An Experience of a Journey (Rajasthan)

Abhishek Singh Rathore

Background and History

Evolution of Voluntary Teacher Forum is rooted in some organizational priorities, concerns of teacher community and joint initiative. It was in 2009 that as an organization we were in Tonk and Sirohi District and were exploring alternate methods of teacher professional development under the circumstances when in Rajasthan entire academic support system for teachers consisting Block Resource Center and Cluster Resource Centers were abolished. We were thinking about an idea that is ideologically different, which is primarily driven by teachers, assumes that teacher is a thinking individual, and which does not have problems of formal in-service teacher training programs. In our effort to address this we decided to provide a platform to self-introspecting teachers where they can share with, question and learn from each other. The central idea was/is to provide teachers the needed space to talk openly about all issues concerning the teaching-learning processes in schools. Hence we decided to create voluntary spaces for teachers.

At the same time there was a group of teachers in Malpura (Tonk, Rajasthan) who had common concerns. They were fed up with in-service programs but interested in sharing their classroom experiences. Although it may appear that it is virtually impossible to find such teachers in public education system; this accorded with our belief that every system has some good individuals. We started the journey of teacher forums with those set of teachers which now exists in 7 states in which we work and hold the key to our teacher professional development programs.

Concept and the Process

Since it was a shared concern there was a joint action. The team of Foundation facilitated discussions with teachers to arrive at certain premises and operating principles on which we laid the foundation of these forums. The then premises and operating principles are as follows:

- Teacher Forum is conceptualized as a self-help commune, a group, which undertakes responsibility for its own professional development.
- This is an informal platform where teachers can meet up and converse on the experiences, problems, successes and triumphs they encounter in their everyday classrooms.
- The central assumption behind the forum is that there is no absolute expert who can provide solutions and address the needs of the group. Instead every member should work together to seek collective solutions.
- Here the problems encountered are not theoretical or hypothetical in nature, they are burning problems which every practitioner wants to address to make their classroom processes more effective and inclusive in nature.
- The Teachers' Forum is a flat democratic platform where there is no hierarchy between different participants. Everyone has the same stake over the issues and their strength to influence a discussion or dialogue is based on their logic and reasoning rather than their power or position.
- The group decides when to meet, where to meet, what to discuss, and how to take the forum ahead. The forum functions based on the norms decided by the group.
- The group would be only comprised of teachers who have felt the need to come together due to their own interest, even if the number is small.
- There would be no monetary benefits in the form of TA or DA, the teachers would come on their own expense and would decide on a venue that would be most comfortable for them to commute.
- 2-3 hours might not always be good to discuss all the issues. For issues that need to be dwelled in depth and details we can have residential teacher forums.

It took us a year to evolve these premise and principles together with teacher community and simultaneously teacher forums were also taking place.

Why is it working?

So many things look so dismay, hopeless and depressing in the current education scenario in the country that anything of this nature gathers grains

of doubts and disbelief. The fact that currently there are over 10000 such individuals who are members of these forums across the country is good enough an indication of its popularity and success. When this is discussed in different forums people don't believe this and the question people often ask is – what is the motivation of the teachers behind this?

1. Reciprocating work and respect - As a social construct, reciprocity means that in response to friendly actions, people are frequently much nicer and much more cooperative than predicted by the self-interest model; conversely, in response to hostile actions they are frequently much nastier and even brutal. When you see individuals from same teaching community taking the initiative for the professional development of their colleagues there is a tendency to reciprocate it in terms of making some contribution, even if it means only participating in the forum. We have observed that teachers who are doing some work in their classrooms are looking for respect for their work. Reciprocity and Respect remains the core idea on which these forums work.

Mutual voluntary aid exchanged between Greece and Turkey, when earthquakes struck both countries a few years ago. The voluntary collaboration between these two populations has subsequently led to an official Memorandum of Understanding between the two countries regarding future disasters.

Global Research – Volunteerism and Capacity Development (2002)

In the Andes, for example, mingas orfaenas are traditional ways of communities coming together to share labor, usually for the common good. Similar traditions exist in Africa and Asia. Records show that these forms of reciprocal labor can be traced back many centuries.

Global Research – Volunteerism and Capacity Development (2002)

2. Showing Solidarity for the Profession – Every community has good individuals and human beings and teaching community is no exception. It was not very long back that one of such forum was organized in Malpura and the same question was asked to teachers; what is your motivation to start such a group? Well one of the guy came up with an amazing reply: I come here because of three reasons; a teacher must be honest towards her subject; her teaching profession; and her country. To put it in Hindi so that its basic fabric is not lost, it is 'Vishay ke prati imaandaarii, Peshe ke prati imaandaarii aur Desh ke prati imaandaari'.

3. Mutual Concern – The forum itself has been laid on the foundation of concerns shown by teachers and we also share the same with them. There are enough such analogous examples available which will prove why initiatives driven by mutual concerns achieve its objective.

4. Pride, Identity and Image – Preliminary findings of our recent research on VTFs indicates that teachers believe that it is helping them regain their lost identity and image. Many teachers in our research reported that being part of such a forum is considered good and valuable in the teaching community and amongst the district administration.

The discussion of teachers on issues like Anna Hazare Andolan indicates that the group has matured a lot and has started getting in to larger social issues.

Learning/Critical Attributes:

There has been a continuous discussion/reflection of the team and teachers on the attributes responsible for the continuity and flourishing of these forums. After reasonable debate amongst ourselves regularly, we have identified factors/ attributes which altogether are working behind these forums:

1. Commitment and Belief – We have experienced that forums where we had an initial core of members who were committed and had a belief in collective action for common good, are the ones where we can see a marked difference in people capacities.

2. Ownership and Initiative – Forums which were jointly initiated by Foundation and Teachers initially are now owned by teaching community as compared to forums where we had significant role in initiating forums. We observed that wherever we have failed to create joint ownership we have also struggled to sustain the discussions with teachers.

3. Resource Mobilization – This has been a critical factor in ensuring the continuity of forums. Forums where more local resources (Resource Person, TLM, Content etc) have been mobilized are the ones which are more regular as compared to forums which unnecessarily created a dependence on Foundation.

4. Quality of Transactions – It was in 2011 that we discovered that attendance of teachers was dropping. The reason can be attributed to two things:

A. Discussions were not well structured and preparation for each forum was not up to the mark
B. Teachers now wanted that we must operate one level higher than before.

Quality of transactions depends upon two critical things: Preparation/Quality of Module and Quality of Resource Person. We observed that once we kept both these things under check we quickly recovered from the problem. This has remained as one of the most critical attribute to the success of these forums.

5. Escalation of issues in Residential Teacher Forums/Workshops – While 2-3 hours regularly is a reasonable time to discuss issues, not all issues can be discussed in limited time. Some issues require greater academic rigor and time to discuss. We had that in mind and conceptualized Residential Teacher Forum or such issues are dealt in workshops.

Teachers of Uniyara block (Tonk, Rajasthan) make frequent classroom observations of each other's classes and held discussions around it. We want teachers to come up with such progressive ideas and stay with them.

Miles to GO……

The way the entire idea unfolded has been really exciting and challenging but something that has worked on the ground. Currently Voluntary Teachers Forums forms an integral part of our overall strategy of teacher professional development in a district. Going ahead we have to answer some of these questions that how we reach to more number of teachers with the same idea, how do we meet the diverse needs of the group and while many teachers do experiment in their class room how do we make sure that all teachers are using constructive ideas of teaching learning in their schools. We have complete belief in the idea and believe that it will emerge as one of the good ways of pursuing teacher professional development for individuals and we have good reason to believe so.

Abhishek has been associated with Azim Premji Foundation since 2006 and has contributed in the areas of Computer Aided Learning, Workbook Development, Research, Large Scale Assessments of Learners, and Professional Development of Teachers, Head Teachers and Education Functionaries. He has evolved and led the District Institute and Azim Premji School of the Foundation at Tonk, Rajasthan. He currently provides leadership to State Institute, Rajasthan, Azim Premji Foundation. He may be contacted at abhishek@azimpremjifoundation.org

A School by Any Other Name…

Rahul Mukhopadhyay & Archana Mehendale

World class universities in India might still be a distant dream, but there is a world very close to us populated by the Oxfords, Cambridges, and Stanfords that strangely pitch for uniqueness not through their singularity but through their multiplicity. This very same space is also dotted with anachronistic public figures – Vivekananda, Martin Luther, Max Muller, Aurobindo, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Indira Priyadarshini, Nehru, Mother Teresa, Isaac Newton, Alfred Noble, Rajiv Gandhi, Annie Besant, including the one which seems tinged with an ironical overture towards our current 'medium of instruction' predicament – Macaulay. Yes, indeed, these are the names of private schools that dot the educational landscape of Bangalore city and its nearby areas, as we found during a recent study.

Though 'globalisation' is still to prove itself in terms of its trickle down effects for the 'bottom of the pyramid', its symbolic value is undeniable in our everyday lives and private schools sprouting in our neighbourhoods are not blind to this knowledge. 'Global' and 'International', thus, not only become the primary or secondary descriptors in names of private schools but also the means through which parental aspirations can be channelised towards the promises of 'globalisation'. Often, these very same aspirations are manifest in names that are unambiguous about how the schooling process will inevitably orient the students to become citizens of the 'New Millennium' towards a 'Bright', 'Brilliant', 'Excellent', *'Magnifique'* (as if our obsession with English was not enough!), and 'Confident' 'Future'. Sometimes, though, the force of the 'global' is not deemed to be adequate on its own, and is hence balanced with appeals to sentiments that are aligned to religious and nationalistic revivalism, with co-descriptors such as *'Gurukul'* 'New Bharath' or 'Jai Hind' that are supposed to invoke images of our glorious past and its achievements.

The 'global', unfortunately, does not help us overcome our colonial hangover – both in terms of the language that has become the means to economic and cultural 'capital' in recent decades, and in terms of our continuing homage to the colonial symbolic order. So, even private unaided schools which have secured recognition by their endorsement of Kannada as the medium of instruction, have 'English' or at least 'Convent' alongside their vernacular titular roots, in complete deference to the language of the markets. It is, therefore, not difficult to find a *'vidyapeetha'* supposedly upholding the best of Indian traditions – *'bharatiya samskruti'* – in its name, attaching itself simultaneously to the now desired language of the markets – 'English'. Similarly, many private schools do not shy away from the tag of 'public school' in their names, though one would often be at a loss to find any obvious characteristic of 'public-ness' in their orientation or everyday operations. The essence of this signification of the 'public' lies in the British public school system, a univocally private school system catering to an elite minority population. It is not surprising that the postcolonial state, which has been unable to effectively democratise the instructional medium in our schools, has also failed in its efforts to erase such markers of 'exclusiveness' in our school system.

Private schools across the country draw upon a range of strategic nomenclature strands to distinguish themselves in the rapidly proliferating world of such schools in both urban and mofussil areas. In the new education marketplace, a school name goes beyond the mere necessity of defining an institutional identity. In fact, it functions as a tool that establishes a brand identity, so essential to woo the confused but eager consumer-parents. Given a general lack of systematic, complete, transparent and reliable information available in the public domain about schools, the school name becomes a tangible proxy for judging school quality.

Indeed, the desire to mark out a unique character is what provides private schools a justification to straddle diverse appellative strands. The choice as we saw is unlimited, from more identifiable substitutes of the 'global' or direct appropriation of names of educational institutions of world-class repute, to names of political figures and statesmen of diverse persuasions – national, international, regional, and sectarian. It is interesting to juxtapose

this enormity of 'choice' in naming of private schools to the two primary descriptors that characterise the names of most government schools, these being 'government' to show public ownership of these schools and the name of the 'locality' in which the school is situated. A couple of things stand out in this comparison.

First, none of the private schools have 'private' as a descriptor in their names, and can even dissimulate their 'private' character through the invocation of 'public' – a descriptor with a slippery etymology when we come to its usage in the Indian school system. On the other hand, the public ownership of government schools, which could have been built through bottom-up accountability mechanisms to the local community, has been shortchanged in the dominance of the 'government's' top-down control over its schools. Second, the 'choice' open to private schools in naming such schools is nothing but a notion of 'choice' guided by market mechanisms, a notion reinforced in the social streaming that such schools invariably result in, and a notion that market advocates endorse as desirable for the revival of our current school system. Government schools, conversely, are forced to grow and sustain within the limited scope of the 'locality' without the freedom to appeal to other imaginations that might make such a school distinctive –culture, personalities, or even history. But it is this lack of imagination that can also be read as the non-exclusive character of 'public' institutions which are created for and cater to public interests, although the full potential of the 'locality' probably lies unfulfilled in the thwarted dreams of the common school system.

Probably it is time we start asking what it means to be 'public' for the 'private' schools, a question that the 25% provision under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2009 tries to raise, when these schools are everything but 'public' in the 'virtues' they embed and propagate. It is probably time we also start asking what it means to be 'public' for the 'government' schools, a question that arises from the widespread concern over its capacity to deliver quality education for the children of the country. Perhaps, it is also time to ask how the varied choices, preferred ideals, and exclusive identities established by private schools seek to balance the 'public' and 'private' aims of education in our contemporary globalised society. With a little change, these wonderfully evocative lines from the master writer of nonsense verses Sukumar Ray might have something as an answer:

'They claim the (name) is mine—as though it's something you can own!

The (name) owns the (school), my friends—that's how (schools) are known.'[i]

Undeniably, names have symbolic significance that transcends ownership by individuals or institutions. But, the significance in the choice of school-names lies in the possibility of drawing upon either material values aligned to the market or cultural values that resonate with the understanding of education as a 'public' good. Schools in India, both private and government, seem to have a lot of re-thinking to do on whether a school by any other name would serve the purposes of education as well.

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[i] *The lines in the original translation from Mustache Thievery by Sukumar Ray read: 'They claim the mustache is mine—as though it's something you can own! The mustache owns the man, my friends—that's how we all are known.'*
This particular translation is from: http://www.parabaas.com/translation/database/translations/poems/sukumar_mustache.html

Rahul Mukhopadhyay is a member of the Faculty at Azim Premji University, Bangalore. His research interests are in the area of sociology of education, education policy and sociology of organisations. He may be contacted at rahul.mukhopadhyay@apu.edu.in

Archana Mehendale is a Professor at Centre for Education Innovation and Action Research, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. She may be contacted at archana.mehendale@tiss.edu

Teacher Learning Communities – Some Insights from Surpur

Umashanker Periodi

In 2008 we had a review of the Child Friendly School initiative which had started in Surpur, an underdeveloped and underserved area of NEK in 2005, with the objective of quality education to all children in a child friendly atmosphere. We were working in the block consisting 300 plus schools in 5 areas – 1. School environment, 2. Classroom environment, 3. Teaching learning process, 4. Teacher academic development and 5. Community participation. The review threw up the fact that among the five areas the most neglected areas were teacher academic development and community participation. Our deeper analysis on these review results made it clear that without teacher academic development nothing significant in education could be done. Hence, our focus for the next phase was on teacher academic development or teacher professional development. After a lot of deliberations and exposure, Mela or Baal– Mela and Teacher Learning Centers (TLC) were two approaches on which we concentrated.

The Mela we conduct is on a subject, for example, science, math, social science or language. One school, or a group of schools, takes on the responsibility with a subject and a theme and prepares their children to present the concept in an interactive mode to people (student's teachers and community) who participate in the mela. In these five years in NEK we have conducted nearly 400 melas on different themes. The first mela was conducted with all the 25 volunteers (margadarshis) working for the mela. All of us stayed in the school for a week though now when the school conducts a mela just one of our margadashis helps the school. All the planning and preparing of the children is done by the teachers. It is heartening to see how the teachers, all public school teachers, prepare themselves. When they prepare the children, the questions the children's questions force the teachers to learn more about the concept. Hence, they start a journey of learning with the children. The majority of the teachers in government primary schools have usually not done any science experiments or used Teaching-Learning Materials (TLMs) either in their schools or during their D.Ed, B.Ed courses. However, after a mela is confirmed teachers of surrounding schools come together, for example, all the science teachers of surrounding schools to put together the concept and allied activities. During the process, they start reading and sharing information and knowledge. This process of coming together builds cohesiveness and is the genesis of an informal learning forum.

After some time the learning of the teachers becomes very intense. They extend this learning with students and other teachers. This process slowly grows and extends and moves out of the school to other teachers in other schools and high schools. They try to meet experienced persons and experts to build themselves. This learning together is the best part of the mela. It makes people vulnerable and ready to learn from others, which I feel is the starting point of relating to others. The hierarchy between teachers and students, other teachers, head teachers and functionaries is broke, a pre-requisite for evolving a learning community of the teachers.

This process, of meeting others and learning from them, has led to teachers encouraging and helping others to conduct melas. The preparation for the mela is key to its success and it is in preparation that the capacity building of the teachers happens. When they start reading, exploring, experimenting and conceiving together. The non-formal space thus created is enough to motivate and encourage teachers to build up a small group of open and enthusiastic teachers who want to do something, learn and contribute. If the preparation creates a space for learning, the event itself provides a lot of scope for recognition. The teachers receive a lot of gratitude from the parents, community and kudos from their teachers' community and higher officials.

At this juncture, we felt that the informal space needed to be converted to a more formal and rigorous space for learning together, since learning is a serious endeavour which needs organized reading, discussion and sharing. And thus the idea of the Teacher learning Centre was born.

In Surpur first we started four Teacher Learning Centres (TLC). The TLC is a space for teachers to

meet, share and learn. A lot of discussion went in to changing the name from Teacher Resource Centre to Teacher Learning Centre. The emphasis for the teachers was on the word learning- that it should

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not be a passive resource centre but an active learning centre for teachers. It is true that in the initial phases, teachers did not participate willingly. It took about 18 months to get an organized teachers group to form in TLC. The initial programmes were the usual hard spots, something to immediately execute in classroom the next day, tomorrow. More of immediate problem solving. But the teachers themselves showed the way. Subject teachers gradually felt that there is need to meet at regular intervals to address common classroom problems. They started meeting once a month as a group to discuss the issues which later became the voluntary teacher forum since they have volunteered to build their capacity by investing their personal time. Subject teachers began asking specific things in their subject which led to the forming of voluntary subject-specific teacher forums. These forums later started having discussions on the aims of and perspectives in education. The voluntary teacher forums became active with a lot of capacity building activities. The teachers trained here in English under 'change agents' began doing very well in their classes and were selected for the government training sessions as resource persons. The teachers slowly started taking more responsibility and a core group was formed which manages and runs the TLC. The newsletter being published by the District Institute team was slowly taken over by the TLCs. The TLCs became a hub of activities for teachers. Some teachers demanded sports materials, others wanted books. Teachers started borrowing books, science equipment and using it in their classrooms. They went to different places on exposure visits to different resource centres (Chamrajnagar, Kuppam,) and classroom transactions (Kerala).

Today there are six TLCs in Surpur and twenty two TLCs in North East Karnataka. We have a wide range of TLCs run by our own coordinators, government officials and teachers groups. The TLCs are attempting to formalise their activities calendar and are focused on academic discussions and activities. Along with the academic work they have attempted many things like making video clippings that can be used in classrooms, and newsletters. Many teachers are involved in 'barefoot research'. They conduct seminars, conferences, informal discussions and workshops on relevant topics. Discussion is happening on the core committee on developing curriculum for teachers who come to TLCs. These TLCs in Surpur are visited by other TLC members of NEK. They are a source of motivation and inspiration for other teachers.

The most important thing to be understood here is that these are all teachers of government primary schools in most remote, underdeveloped and underserved areas, which is a challenge. But the teacher community is vibrant, learning at every step. Moreover these are voluntary teachers' forums, a learning community of teachers, something we have still not understood .

We do not know what really works. We cannot single out anything as the magic silver bullet. We have done many things and everything was integrated in an organic way. We have done it for long but today, we feel this is not enough. This is just a trend we see and it has to be grounded and rooted for sustainability.

However, there are a few basic assumptions that we have gathered in our journey. The intentions, which have to be genuine and clear, get communicated only through our work and action. Everything has to happen, creating demand and then supplying what is demanded. It is important that teachers' capacity building efforts that are taking place in TLCs are adding value and contributing to their professional development. Our being in the field and working shoulder to shoulder with the teachers helps to convince them that we are not short- term players, who have come here to initiate work and vanish but will remain with them through their ups and down as their true partners, working together, with respect for their experience and knowledge. We begin with the attitude that we do not know and want sincerely to learn from each other. A community gets built on a sound foundation of relationships which respects and believe in each other. A lot of initial group building happens in non-formal settings, but the rigours of learning demand a more structured and systematic designed process. The most important thing is teachers enjoying learning and tasting the power of autonomy.

Umashanker Periodi leads the initiatives of the Azim Premji Foundation in North-East Karnataka. He has over twenty-five years' experience in the development sector. He has contributed extensively to the National Literacy Campaign as well as towards tribal education in BR Hills, Karnataka. He has been training grass root level field workers and primary school teachers in, what he calls, Barefoot Research. He is also the Founder-Member of Karnataka State Trainers' Collective. He can be contacted at periodi@azimpremjifoundation.org

Ensuring Dialogue and Institutional Alignment in the Education System

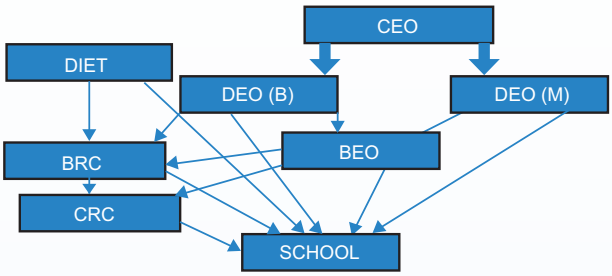
Anant Gangola and Jagmohan Singh Kathait

Education is important, interesting but a complex process. It is complex because it is social in nature. Geographical, cultural and other diversities in a society are a major source of complexity. A second source of complexity results from the wide field of content areas and pedagogies which keep changing. Yet another area that adds to this complex process is the variety of stakeholders, for example the diversity we come across with respect to students and teachers with the kind of changes happening there in multiple dimensions.

The context of public education in a large and culturally diverse country like India takes the issue and scope of complexity to an entirely different level. We can get a glimpse of it by just looking at the number of children who are being provided Mid Day Meals (MDM) in schools. This number is more than entire populations of many countries. The diversity of food habits even in one Indian state is such that preparing MDM menu itself is quite a challenging task.

Due to the changing characteristic of education, from time to time, new institutions are set up which result in the addition of new set of stakeholders with different kinds of expectations from them. Universalization of education is a major change that we have seen in the education domain which cannot just be seen as expansion of education. It has come with new sets of issues and concerns and demands a different kind of value system and social awareness. The mission mode approach to universalization has ensured that new institutions and structures have come into existence. Decentralization of education in this context has demanded community and larger civil society participation and we do find it happening in various forms and levels of the system.

The biggest challenge facing universalization agenda is the lack of dialogue and mutual alignment among different actors and institutions. Either there is absolutely no dialogue or it is limited within individual institutions only. There is no mechanism to ensure that the left hand is well informed about what the right hand is doing. The following line diagram shows the various institutions and their inter-relationships. Several of these institutions have taken up 'monitoring' role rather than performing 'academic enablers' role.



CEO – Chief Education Officer; DEO (B) – District Education Officer, Elementary Education; DEO (M) – District Education Officer, Secondary; BEO – Block Education Officer; BRC – Block Resource Centre; CRC – Cluster Resource Centre

It is absolutely essential to bear in mind that in education only those efforts succeed and sustain which are done out of self-motivation, self-initiative and with a spirit of voluntarism. Following commands can only lead to mechanical compliance which neither has life nor sustainability.

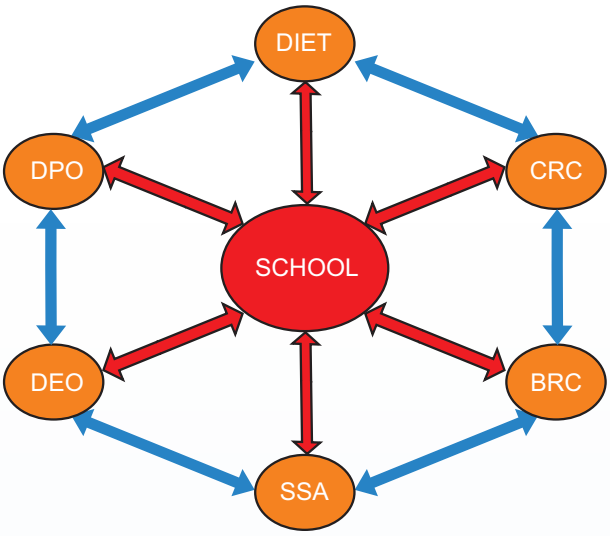
We have observed that there is a lack of communication, cooperation and alignment among the educational institutions. We do come across sensitive individuals who could grasp the essence of the prevailing circumstances and who are able to direct themselves towards the need of the children. Whatever good these individuals are able to do is because of their individual goodness rather than an institutional effort and outcome. Institutions, who were originally envisaged and established to play a complementary role and whose success depended on it are seen functioning in isolation, as parallel institutions or sometimes in conflict with each other.

In the above context, we conceptualized an institutional mechanism called Academic Resource Group (ARG), formal in its constitution but informal in its processes. A mechanism for ensuring communication and alignment in an atmosphere of mutual respect so that it adds value to the system

rather than becoming a burden. The government also felt the need and not only gave us permission to constitute ARGs in the Uttarkashi and Udham Singh Nagar districts but also made financial provision for its functioning. Thus ARGs came into existence with the following identity and objectives:

- It is an inclusive forum that has representation from teachers to senior education officials, basically covering all stakeholders including NGOs, PRIs also
- It is a forum that provides opportunity to all stakeholders/institutions to not only get to hear expectations from each-other but also understand their problems and challenges
- It provides a common space to all institutions in the role of academic enablers for better coordination and alignment
- It provides an opportunity for sharing 'special' efforts being done in the field of quality improvement with the 'rest of the stakeholders'
- It identifies the problems and challenges being faced by teachers and academic support functionaries and suggests possible solutions
- It tries to shift the decision making culture from 'individual' to 'a collective'
- It does not only aim to 'break' the lack of communication but also aims at 'enhancing' it
- As a forum, it adheres to democratic values through its practices, such as all, whether teacher or an official, share their thoughts as members only; anyone can be the facilitator; same quality of boarding and lodging arrangement for all etc.
- It also aims at supporting DIET, DPO/DEO for formulating and reviewing their annual academic plans

If the idea of ARG gets internalized completely, the following form of institutional alignment emerges and we have moved a few steps in that direction.



Some milestones achieved in this journey so far:

In district Uttarkashi, some decisions and initiatives taken up after the constitution of ARG have also given direction to the state. For example:

- The academic discussions in ARG gave rise to an innovative idea called Bal Shodh Mela (student researchers seminar) which later got adopted by the entire state
- Teachers' Grievance Redressal Camps at block level was another idea that tried to solve administrative nature of problems faced by teachers. Such camps gained popularity among teachers and also provided a moral right to academic support functionaries to be a little emphatic while demanding performance from teachers during their visits.
- Encouraged the culture of having a research based approach to articulating problems/issues in the meetings
- Many block and cluster level meetings have not only become academic in nature but are gaining maturity in that direction
- Many teachers and academic support functionaries got recognition for their successful and meaningful initiatives and their work inspired many others for similar steps
- It's not that just the ARG meetings and discussions led to such efforts; the following capacity building workshops and exposure tours were also organized for the ARG group members:
  - 10-day Capacity Building Workshop on Education Perspectives by and at Digantar, Jaipur, Rajasthan

- 10-day Capacity Building Workshop on Education Perspectives by and at Vidhya Bhawan, Udaipur, Rajasthan
- 10-day Capacity Building Workshop on Education Perspectives by and at Eklavya, Hosangabad, M.P.
- 5-day Capacity Building Workshop on Education Perspectives by a collaborative effort of Azim Premji Foundation, DPO (SSA) in Uttarkashi

Some Observations:

During the course of this journey we realized the importance of this initiative for bringing about institutional alignment. Seeds of good behavior and culture were sown among people and institutions. We found that a dialogue with respect and as equals was always constructive and led to effective decisions with long term impact. The onus of generating conducive environment for facilitating dialogue with respect and as equals falls on those who are in leadership positions. The perspective of leaders, to a large extent, determines the success of this initiative.

ARG is in operation for the last 5-6 years only in Uttarkashi and Udham Singh Nagar districts and we haven't had regular meetings of this forum because of frequent transfers of district education leadership. Still in this short span, the achievements have substantiated our belief that – In this vast education system, with its whole range of education functionaries, teachers, in particular, find themselves 'isolated'. Collective and coordinated efforts and a continuous 'dialogue' are much needed for all those working in the education domain. This dialogue and mutual alignment would break the professional isolation of education functionaries and thus help individuals and institutions to support each-other and play complementary roles. ARG experiment in Uttarakhand provides a healthy beginning though the journey is very long and we find ourselves only it its first leg. We see that 'communication and alignment is not a destination but a direction and ARG is heading towards it.

Anant Gangola is currently working with Azim Premji University, Bangalore. He has earlier worked with schools and teachers of government schools in about five States across the country, including Madhya Pradesh and Uttarakhand. He may be contacted at anant@azimpremjifo.undation.org

Jagmohan Singh Kathait is currently working with Azim Premji Foundation and leading the Garhwal team at Srinagar Pauri. He has been working with the Foundation for the last 7 years, and was earlier leading the District Institute at Uttarkashi. He has twenty five years' experience working in the social and education sector. He may be contacted at jagmohan@azimpremjifoundation.org

Workbooks or Playbooks? – Experience of Developing workbooks for Rajasthan Government Schools

Aanchal Chomal

Azim Premji Foundation conducted an assessment of Mathematics, Environmental Science and Language learning in Classes I to V of government schools in Rajasthan as part of one of its programs, known as the Learning Guarantee Program. The study showed very low levels of learning in basic reading, writing, mathematical operations and simple connections to the environment. This drew out from teachers a constant demand, 'Help us to impart true competencies.' The textbook, totally teacher-driven, had so far been the sole resource, for transacting the subjects. Teachers felt the need for something that would supplement the textbooks, so as to open doors to multiple ways of transacting the lessons - and they did not feel that mere teacher training would serve that purpose. This led to the genesis of the project of developing workbooks.

At the invitation of the State Project Director, **Azim Premji Foundation** (in collaboration with **Digantar** and **Vidya Bhawan Society**) developed workbooks for the State of Rajasthan - for all the 78,000 schools which deal with almost about 1.5 crore children across Grades 1-8. One team was constituted at Jaipur (with Digantar) and another at Udaipur (with Vidya Bhawan Society) for a period of about 6-8 months. Workbooks for Grades 1 to 5 were for the subjects- Hindi, Mathematics and Environmental Studies, while for Grades 6 to 8 - workbooks for Hindi, English, Mathematics, Science & Social Science were developed. All those involved in the project collectively reviewed the content of all existing textbooks. The following emerged as **points of concern:**

Layout: Font size, colour usage, overall layout and printing quality were all felt to be areas of improvement in the textbooks. Therefore, these were addressed specifically in the development of the workbooks, so that a child would instinctively feel drawn to picking up such a book form a pile.

Selection of information: Selecting, pitching and presenting the information in a manner that would be age appropriate was inadequately addressed in the textbooks. Very often, there were too many concepts introduced in a paragraph with very little explanation on what each of them meant. Concepts, in the workbook were, therefore prioritized according to age, prior learning and conceptual linkages in subsequent grades, so that a few core and essential concepts would be dealt with but in greater depth. Wherever needed, supplementary reading materials were provided to address the concept gap that was found in the textbooks.

Weeding out of inaccurate information: Alarmingly, there were a few factually incorrect information as well. This was addressed by checking and rechecking sources of information inserted in the workbooks, and in fact, the entire exercise brought out the need to do this while preparing any teaching learning resource.

Sequencing and organizing of content: An absence of concept mapping across each textbook, and across stages of learning was evident. Linkages between chapters were sorely missing, as were linkages across concepts…inter-disciplinary linkages were of course a far cry. So the workbooks were designed so as to allow for back-and-forth learning by the child, across concepts, subjects and levels, without expecting the child to know more than a certain minimum to proceed with the workbook.

Visual Appeal: When dealing with unfamiliar concepts like, for instance, volcanoes or earthquakes, it is vital that the pictures give as vivid an experience as possible, for every child is not likely to be familiar with these. Also, the pictures needed to be attractive and meaningful. This, too, was addressed in the workbooks that were developed.

Contextualisation of content to the learner's own context: Folklore and familiar songs were used as part of contextualization, as were examples of local flora and fauna.

Since these workbooks were directed to the child, plenty of opportunities were provided for independent, peer and group learning, all independent of the teacher. This is not meant to imply that the teacher was left out, as clear, unambiguous and easy-to-follow instructions were given for teachers (as well as learners) to use the workbooks. In short, the entire resource was developed within the paradigm of both teacher and child being co-learners, and not 'one teaching the other'.

Aanchal Chomal has been working with the Foundation for over 9 years. She heads the Institute for Assessment and Accreditation at Azim Premji School of Continuing Education and University Resource Centre. Her work involves developing frameworks, tools, processes and approaches for assessments with learners, teachers and teacher educators. She is a post graduate in Geography from Centre for Studies in Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and has graduated in Geography from Presidency College, Calcutta. She may be contacted at aanchal@azimpremjifoundation.org

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Next to Wipro Corporate Office
Sarjapur Road, Bangalore - 560 035. India
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