

School Education, Regional Workshop, Kolkata (25th-26th August '07)

Summary of discussions at the Workshop:

The National Knowledge Commission held a regional workshop on School Education in Kolkata on the 25th and 26th August 2007. Participants from across the range of stakeholders were invited from West Bengal and Orissa including administrators, teachers, and civil society representatives. The discussion was broadly structured around quantity, quality, access, and management issues in school education. Important insights emerged specifically with regard to resource allocation for and management of school education. Increasing professionalism in teaching and examination reform emerged as other important issues.

I. QUANTITY

Resource Allocations, State- Centre expenditure commitments:

- Resource requirement for school education depends on the quality of education sought to be imparted. Alternate models of schooling like Education Guarantee Schemes (EGS) in Orissa and Shishu Shiksha Kendras (SSKs) / Madhyamik Shiksha Kendras (MSKs) in West Bengal, typically have a far lesser resource requirement. Effectively, this allows governments to claim enrolment without the responsibility of providing adequate resources. Therefore resource requirement cannot be based on needs of parallel/alternate systems primarily, but should take into account needs of an appropriate formal education system.
- Alternate models of schooling cannot replace formal school system. Especially in West Bengal there is tendency for SSK/MSK to become a parallel system to formal education and in fact often there is a shift of students out of primary schools to SSKs.
- States have very little leeway in developing their own norms for SSA under the current system. Considering the expenditure on SSA will be now be shared between the centre and states equally, states should have greater flexibility in developing their own needs based norms.
- SSA treats urban and rural schools alike, however in urban areas SSA laws should be flexible enough to allow for 5-6 room schools so that urban poor have an opportunity to go to these schools instead of paying to go to expensive private schools. Under SSA, in principle, financial arrangements exist for undertaking studies. These should be utilised to ascertain reasons for which we are unable to address the needs of urban poor under SSA.
- NKC has recommended that the centre provide all additional funds for realising right to education for states that are spending more than 15% of their GDP on school education.
- A different system of finance and fund flow needs to be evolved for school education. The current system is entirely focussed on colonial accounting methods, creating very little opportunity for creative needs based utilization of funds allowing for adequate focus on quality. The present system was felt to be an excessively bureaucratic and rigid system geared towards minimising expenditure. Given that there might be problems in the fund flow, states have

no option but to spend first on the infrastructure and salary component and thus quality is often not adequately addressed.

- The district was found to be too large a unit of management by participants both from West Bengal and Orissa. Further, the disparities in performance between districts has created a situation where better performing districts are held back due to non performance of others.
- Planners should take into account the revised population projections. According to recent projections there will be 6 million less children in the 5-14 age group than anticipated earlier. Thus resource requirement for realizing right to education as estimated by the committee headed by Shri Kapil Sibbal will come down significantly.

II. MANAGEMENT

Alternative systems of education, Decentralisation, Regulation:

- Alternate models of schooling such as SSK/MSK in West Bengal and EGS schemes in Orissa need to be seen as transition phases. The objective has to be to provide quality formal education. Therefore these schemes should be planned keeping in mind that they are time bound and will be merged into the mainstream system at some point. In West Bengal no clear strategy has been envisaged for merging SSK/MSK with the formal system. There is a plan for adding 650 additional sections in class nine to absorb the students coming out of MSKs. Firstly this does not provide a comprehensive strategy for merging alternate education schemes into the mainstream and secondly issues like ability of students from MSKs to tackle the formal curriculum are not clear. This has potential implications for drop outs at this level which needs to be addressed.
- In Orissa the decision to dismantle EGS schemes has been taken but it is being undertaken in an inappropriate ad hoc manner. This has adverse implications for the children currently under this scheme and the resource persons who contribute in the process.
- The level and extent of decentralization need to be thought out more clearly. There maybe some tension at the conceptual level in devolving management to the Panchayat level and providing uniform school education. Given that we are a class/caste ridden society we need to examine to what extent we will be replicating inequalities if we are to completely decentralize and have community management.
- However, apart from this conceptual issue several other issues remain in terms of level of accountability for the system. It is not clear whether the teacher should be accountable to the department of school education and its various bodies or to the community. The community may monitor Mid Day Meals, and attendance but complicated pedagogy and curriculum issues cannot be adequately monitored by local communities.

- In Orissa Panchayati Raj Institutes (PRIs) were empowered before the 73rd amendment, and several departments were devolved to them. However the experience has been that communities are not able to take on these responsibilities. There is a clear need for capacity building for communities through trainings and orientations if they are to effectively manage/monitor some of these programs.
- In West Bengal, well before the 73rd amendment there was a decentralised system for education management, especially at the primary level. Decentralised democratically elected councils- District Primary School Councils (DPSCs) are the monitoring authority within the district. When the Panchayat came into this system it was in effect by-passing this already existing decentralised model.
- The community has to be empowered to make the system responsive, they should have some regulatory capacity otherwise it is meaningless to make them monitor the system without providing any real locus standi for effecting change. As of now the Village Education Committees (VECs) have several functions to perform but no real mechanism to ensure accountability.

Monitoring and Supervision:

- There is a clear need for defining goals of management and monitoring, at present goals of management are very diffused, leading to great dilution. Apart from attendance, there are not too many standardised monitoring criteria. A shortlist of monitorable criteria needs to be prepared. This will enable planners to identify clearly the aspects that in fact require monitoring.
- A results based monitoring framework with due process indicators and outcome indicators needs to be evolved. This will monitor the outcome in terms of actual results such as number of teachers trained, learning levels achieved etc. Currently there is no feedback on actual impact and outcome of various schemes and initiatives.
- The inspectorate system needs to be examined. There are structural issues in terms of feasibility of inspecting the numbers under each inspector. The solution does not lie in simply expanding the system. Rather, we need to develop models where meaningful monitoring may take place. Supervision and administration need to be separated as they require completely different orientations.
- Extensive data is collected but it is not available to the final stakeholders in the system- the teachers and students. By the time data is made available it becomes redundant.
- Private management schools are increasing in numbers considerably, but there is no regulation to ensure quality, especially in the non elite private schools, which are mostly unrecognized. No data is available either on the numbers and condition of these schools.

Policy Issues:

- Education commissions have periodically talked about the common school system but no modalities have been spelt out so far. The report of the Common School System (CSS) Commission, Government of Bihar was shared at the workshop. The report outlines the modalities for a common school system in Bihar. It was acknowledged as a bold initiative, however the modalities in terms of financing, defining catchment areas for schools in urban areas, bringing private schools into the fold of CSS, are issues that still require careful thinking. It was suggested that perhaps a pilot in a few districts could be carried out to gain experience in the implementation of this scheme.
- SSA has now become the focus of education planning, however there are a considerable number of still illiterate children who will very soon come out of the scope of SSA (over 15 years). Despite this, continuing education has not been adequately addressed and sufficient funding is not available for continuing education centres (CECs). No serious thinking has been done on CECs, and the achievements of NLM have been considerably diluted. Literacy and adult education programmes thus have continuing relevance and should not be de-prioritised.

III. ACCESS***Universalization of elementary education, access for urban poor, migrant children, minorities, and tribal communities:***

- In West Bengal the extreme adverse ratio of primary to upper primary schools is a very big contributory factor for drop out from class four to five, and is a huge hurdle in universalizing elementary education.
- Seasonal migration was understood to be the single most important cause for drop outs. Since seasonal migration takes place in areas where industrialization is taking place; corporate interests should make attempts at providing education to migrants. Access for migrant children would ultimately have to be provided through the realisation of the fundamental Right to Education, where schools will be obliged to admit migrant children into their programmes.
- The Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya scheme should be extended to all areas with a predominance of minority population, to address drop out of girls. MHRD has instituted a scholarship scheme for girls at the secondary level. In addition to that, upper primary school girls, especially in educationally backward blocks (EBBs) should be provided a scholarship scheme whereby money is kept in a bank account and access is provided only once the girl attains a stipulated level of education.
- Every State should have an education policy for tribal and minority education. It was felt that planning is not guided by a long term vision and policy, specific to tribal education.
- Capture and application of indigenous knowledge and language issues were identified as the most significant issues affecting education for tribal

populations. While education in mother tongue was important it was also acknowledged that there is a great demand for access to English and other languages that allow in turn access to higher education and employment.

- The West Bengal Madarsa Board experience was shared, which has considerable merits. However, it was still felt that modernizing madaras could not be the government's primary intervention for providing quality education for the Muslim population, since the percentage of children attending madarsa's was very small. The state would have to take on the responsibility of providing adequate schools in Muslim majority areas.

IV. QUALITY

Curricular and pedagogical reform, examination reform:

- In both Orissa and West Bengal the pass percentage of students taking the class X exam is less than 50%
- It was agreed that the constructivist approach outlined in the NCF 2005 is a good approach for curriculum development and should be taken up by all states. The new NCERT textbooks were also thought to be of a good quality and schools should be encouraged to use them.
- Primary School Curriculum should focus on developing good language and communication skills, basic foundation maths, inculcation of the skills and habits of self learning , rudiments of collecting & organizing local information , and critically examining the environment (new NCERT, Eklavya, Digantar books) .
- It was strongly suggested that NKC should emphasise doing away with excessively difficult primary school syllabi like in West Bengal. There are considerable numbers of first generation learners and the undue emphasis on formal science, geography and world history discourages these learners very early on. This would also free up time for development of necessary language skills, which are extremely inadequate all over India today, specially with a large number of students being first generation learners.
- We need to ascertain what has been the assessment of quality in states. Pedagogical reform can be of two types: curriculum remaining same there can be different text books, or textbooks remaining the same there can be variation in content during transaction. The problems of curriculum, learning experience, and textbook are interlinked, and have to be addressed simultaneously.
- Evaluation practises across the system need to be over hauled. Historically examination reform has been a good first step in expediting curriculum and pedagogy reform. The current system of evaluation primarily rewards rote learning and does not encourage critical and analytical thinking.

- The system of boards of examinations needs to be evaluated. It was suggested that the NKC may undertake a survey of existing boards and question papers at all levels from primary to senior secondary

Teacher Training:

- Teachers are the bulwark of the education system. Any system that alienates teachers and mistrusts them will not be able to deliver quality education.
- Teacher training needs to be conducted in a more systematic manner. Currently there is no link between pre service and in service training components. Further there is no assessment of the impact of training because no follow up is carried out after the training period.
- Teacher training courses are prepared by administrators and trainers, without taking into consideration the needs of teachers themselves. The experimental school system has been abandoned and the period of practise teaching has been shortened to a great extent. Training in multilingual, multi class, multi subject teaching environments should be imparted since many schools in remote and tribal majority areas require these skills. Further, no manpower planning has been undertaken for the teaching profession, there are no databases on teachers qualification etc.
- Teacher training has to be multidisciplinary subject based on research. The status of teacher training institutions needs to be improved, not just an increase in the numbers. There should be more Institutes of Advanced Studies in Education, every state must have such institutes for strengthening research.
- The Knowledge Network proposed by NKC is a welcome idea, but content/application will have to be created by the users. Therefore teachers and teacher educators need to be figured into the process. The idea of a Teachers' Portal was proposed, like at the previous workshops. NKC would explore possibilities in this regard.
- It was felt that the National Council of Teacher Education (NCTE) set up to regulate teachers' education has not fulfilled its mandate. The norms set by it have not taken into account regional specificities and have led to anomalous situations such as in West Bengal where a large number of institutions have been de-recognised, among them many Primary Teacher's Training institutes. The NCTE therefore needs to be a much more decentralised structure. Further, by constricting the supply of good teacher education institutions, many bottlenecks have been created in the system and have resulted in increasing commercialization and privatization of teachers' education.
- There needs to be greater professionalism in Teaching. The idea that anybody can be a teacher and the teacher can be replaced easily has to be done away with. In that context it was felt that contrary to what was discussed earlier, the demand for teachers cannot be met by lowering the qualification requirement. This would further undermine the profession. However on the other hand it

was pointed out that there is a genuine problem where due to lack of formal qualifications many teaching posts are lying vacant especially in remote areas where there are underserved tribal populations.

- The teaching community represented at the workshop was in favour of exploring ways of increasing professionalism in the service and creating accountability. They emphasised the need to bring teaching at par with other professions such as law, medicine, engineering etc. Several ideas were suggested including:
 - the model of civil services where anyone who wishes to enter the profession would take an all India exam and subsequently be put through a training period. This would ensure that only those who actually wish to become teachers take up the resources that the state spends on training them.
 - another suggestion was to have some form of licensing or registration like in other professions, with periodic renewal of license dependent on having undertaken continuous training and other stipulated criteria. There would also then be the possibility of suspending the licence for a select number of criteria.