

School Education Regional Workshop, Guwahati, 11th-12th September '07

Summary of Discussions

The National Knowledge Commission held a regional workshop on School Education at the Indian Institute of Technology in Guwahati on 11th and 12th September 2007. Participants from across the range of stakeholders were invited from Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim including administrators, teachers, and civil society representatives. The discussion was broadly structured around quantity, quality, access, and management issues in school education.

Important issues regarding resource allocation and use as well as infrastructural and pedagogical reforms emerged within the special context of the north-eastern states. Although the region scores relatively well on most socio-economic indicators and compares favourably with the rest of the country with regard to universalisation and gender-based enrolment in primary education, there are major concerns relating to the quality of education and expansion of secondary education. Lack of infrastructure in remote areas, a sense of alienation from the rest of the country, ethnic diversity and conflict and limited state budgets are some of the other issues specific to the north-east. A summary of important points emerging from the discussion is given below.

I. QUALITY

Curricular and pedagogical reform

- The quality of school education is a cause for major concern. Despite the region performing well on enrolment and gender indices, students from the northeast are often at a disadvantage when competing with students from other parts of the country at the national level.
- Relevant issues regarding quality were brought to light during a presentation on the Educational Development Trust of Sikkim (EDTS), which was established to address problems of poor quality, high drop-out rates and abysmal results among school-going children in Sikkim, especially from the weaker socio-economic bracket. It was noted that results improved considerably upon providing inputs for communication and comprehension in English and basic mathematical skills using activity-based and imaginative pedagogical strategies. The feedback proved that good language and communication skills, basic foundation maths and inculcation of self-learning and critical examination through innovative teaching methods go a long way in enabling school going students realise their full potential.
- Due to the high demand for English, English medium schools are overcrowded and packed with unqualified, untrained teachers, whereas vernacular medium

schools are overstaffed with qualified teachers yet under-attended. This is especially a problem in Mizoram.

- Concerns were expressed over private schools out-performing government schools despite the latter having more qualified and better trained teachers. A thorough investigation in this matter must be undertaken to discern gaps in the quality parameters of government schools.
- A balanced pupil-teacher ratio and the rationalization of distribution of teachers (especially between remote rural and urban areas) are perceived as fundamental to the improvement of the education quality. Accordingly, teachers must be given incentives for teaching in far-flung areas where they are sorely required.
- The language policy in schools must give importance both to the mother tongue, in view of the diversity of tribal dialects in the region, as well as English for which there is demand across the board. However, propagation of a state language (for eg, Manipuri in Manipur or Bangla in Tripura) is viewed as an imposition by linguistic minorities.
- The evaluation system needs to be seriously re-assessed. A 4 year old student in Mizoram is required to give examinations in 9 subjects. Rote learning encouraged by the current evaluation system stymies critical and analytical thinking, thus functioning as a major hindrance to quality education.
- The approach outlined in the NCF 2005 was endorsed by all for addressing both curricular reform as well as the pedagogical “burden”. Meghalaya is in the process of implementing reforms in light of the NCF. In addition, the textbooks developed according to this framework must incorporate issues of local relevance and be familiar to the students. In Nagaland, textbooks up to the primary level are developed by the SCERT.
- Restricting mindsets and school environments are a major hindrance to reform. Although a flexible framework has been provided by the NCF, most schools are reluctant to discard conventional modes of curricular instruction for new, innovative ones. Many government school environments are steeped in resistance to new ideas and fear of experimentation.
- The above attitude may be linked to the blame-pinning tendency in the administrative structure and the punitive attitude of managers and bureaucrats towards school teachers. The latter must be provided incentives to break out of the pedagogical rut, undertake reform and experiment with teaching-learning

materials (which are usually locked up safely in cupboards rather than be (ab)used for pedagogical purposes).

- Instead of a prescriptive, top down approach, schools but be given the freedom to devise their own the curriculum and pedagogical strategies under the broad framework of NCF 2005. Objective, output based criteria must then be devised to set quality benchmarks and assess performance accordingly, so that “quality” does not remain an abstract notion.
- Information and Communication Technology (ICT) must be deployed as a tool for quality improvement. Currently, the northeast lacks adequate infrastructure for ICT intervention.
- A sort of manual consisting of best practices, drawing form both private and public schools, may be created as a set of guidelines for improving quality of education.

Perceived impact of Sarva Shikha Abhiyan (SSA) in the north-east

- The impact of SSA in the northeast is varied. However, given that funds from the centre are welcome in this region, the general view appears to be that SSA has significantly contributed to infrastructural development, the endeavour to universalize elementary education and streamline its management. Some variations at the state level are given below:
- Infrastructure for schools in Arunachal Pradesh is still very inadequate, especially in remote rural areas, leading to poor enrolment and high dropout rates.
- SSA has had a positive impact in Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram. States have been given leeway to work out independent and locally relevant action plans and flexibility in the utilisation of funds. But SSA has run into implementation problems at the district level in Assam.
- However, more autonomy from the state and politicians is required for ensuring quality. Decentralised monitoring of the kind conducted, for example, by Mizoram University must be enhanced.
- In Nagaland, SSA in tandem with the policy of communitisation of school education (see ‘III Management’) has had tremendous implications for transparency and local relevance.
- SSA has run into difficulties in Manipur given the fractured polity and internecine conflict. Although the EGS system has apparently covered most of the out-of-

school children, further decentralization in monitoring and management as well as autonomy in the utilisation of funds is desired, especially in the 5 hill districts. Communitisation of educational management is considered essential especially in the hill districts given the strong communitarian bonds prevalent there.

Teachers and teacher training

- Teachers are foundational to the education system. Providing proper training and necessary incentives to enable them to work better is essential for securing quality education.
- Although Assam has spent huge amounts of money for teacher training covering almost all teachers, the impact at the classroom level appears to be negligible. Funds for developing new teaching learning material (TLM) are used as a “bonus” and not utilized for the desired purpose. Instead, they use materials that are easily available.
- Post-training monitoring was recommended to ensure application at the classroom level. Block and cluster resource centres (BRCs and CRCs) could undertake the monitoring of progress made by teachers.
- Teacher training packages must include aspects of education psychology for dealing with heterogeneous groups of learners, especially learners with disabilities.
- Planning under SSA must take cognizance of perspectives from the District Institutes of Education Training (DIETs). DIETs need to be strengthened in order to professionalise training. Currently, most of them are understaffed, causing the existing faculty to be overburdened and leading to dilution of quality. They must be braced to provide academic support to BRCs; currently, no framework exists for providing such linkages. In addition, there must be provisions for networking with trainers in universities and with teachers from other states. The proposal for a teachers’ portal put forward by the NKC was welcomed in this context.
- Distance learning programs administered by IGNOU are used widely for training purposes, especially the Certificate in the Teaching of English (CTE). Although this is not an ideal option, it is the easiest stop-gap arrangement for clearing the immense backlog of untrained teachers, some of whom only have a matriculate degree.
- Most of the SCERTs themselves hire contract teachers since there are very few qualified and regular teachers and lecturers. In view of the personnel crunch, the faculty cannot be expected to supervise functions at the block level unless their

numbers are greatly increased. Funds are needed from the central government for human resource development at this level.

- Resource persons at BRCs and CRCs are often not amenable to being trained by teachers who are junior or at the same level as them.
- There should be national guidelines for teacher appointments. A 'National School Service Commission' with branches at state level may be established for this purpose.
- There was discussion around the suggestion put forward at the Kolkata workshop regarding the formation of a teaching cadre modeled on the civil services, where all aspirants would take a national level exam and subsequently be put through a training program. However, it was felt that this may lead to the creation of a 'caste system' amongst teachers, by allowing the division between 'cadre' and 'non-cadre' teachers to be played out.
- Teaching in remote rural areas should be incentivised. In addition, capacity building must be provided to the local teachers, especially intensive training in English, maths and science teaching, so that they can best serve the interest of the people. A certain level of competence and permanence is desired from teachers in these areas.
- Training contract teachers will have no impact unless they are given some security of service.
- Although punitive measures practiced by school management bodies have helped checked teacher absenteeism, it is equally important to recognize and reward performing teachers to boost morale, create incentives and role models amongst school teachers. In addition, bureaucrats and administrators must discard their high-handed and superior attitude towards them.
- Given the self-contained environment of the northeast region, it is especially important for teachers to network with colleagues from other parts of the country and stay abreast of the latest pedagogical developments. Some sort of network, regular conferences and grants for travel may be provided in an official capacity for this purpose.

Some state specific points that emerged:

- Arunachal Pradesh has neither an SCERT nor a state teacher education cadre. The State Institution of Education (SIE) forms the single line department for education.

- Rampant sub-letting of teaching posts occurs in the remote rural areas of Manipur where such activities are largely unmonitored. In some areas, school inspection occurs as rarely as once in three years.
- Para-teachers and contract teachers are widely recruited in Arunachal Pradesh. In Meghalaya, they are recruited as a matter of expedience and constitute about 10% of the teachers.
- Sikkim does not have an SCERT, and has only one functioning DIET. However, 2 more DIETS have been planned and the proposal for the establishment of an SCERT has been forwarded.
- Mizoram is grappling with the problem of untrained teachers, especially in the English medium and private schools.
- Nagaland has started activity based learning at the primary school level. However, its application in classrooms is not ensured.

II QUANTITY

Resource allocation, state-centre expenditure commitments, secondary education

- There is an insistence on devising need-based norms rather than formulaic norms when dealing with issues of resource allocation in the north east. The same parameters would not be suited to both Karnataka and Manipur.
- NKC has recommended that the centre should provide all additional funds for realizing right to education for states that are spending more than 15% of their GDP on school education. However, it was observed that even 15% of the budget is too much to expect of the small state budgets of the most of the north-eastern states. It was argued that the latter are primarily political, and not economic, entities. Thus, it was proposed that the NKC recommendation on cost sharing by the centre must include a rider for the north east region.
- The significance of central funding for the north east was repeatedly highlighted, since most of the states have very few resources to mobilize for school education, especially after the primary level. SSA fund-sharing must remain at 75-25 for any lasting development to accrue to the states. An alternative paradigm of 75-15-10 (centre – state-donor) was also put forward.
- Secondary education in the region is in a state of all-round disrepair and neglect. Investment from the centre must be increased or at least maintained at the same

level in order to finance quality secondary education for all. The proposed 2% surcharge for secondary education is perceived as inadequate for meeting its requirements.

- The government of Meghalaya has sought to rope in departments other than the department of education to finance and sustain secondary education. This implies partnerships between government departments and schools for agriculture, horticulture, vocational training, etc, in return for monetary benefits for the schools.
- Services like career counseling are lacking and are sorely required in the secondary schools of the north east
- It was observed that the wholesale diversion of funds from the National Literacy Mission (NLM) to SSA resulted in the exclusion of the 14 and above age group from all programs.
- Data for some of the states in the north east, especially Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur is scattered and unreliable. In some cases, infrastructure and enrolment data may even be fudged to account utilisation of funds and enable payment of teachers' salaries. A strict mechanism for validating and monitoring official data must be devised.
- The Mid Day Meal scheme under SSA could perhaps be extended to not-for-profit private schools under a special scheme. The provision of MDM should as far as possible be the responsibility of local communities and self help groups (SHGs). It was also suggested that transport costs for far flung areas may be incorporated into MDM funds.
- SSA funds are more creatively used wherever community participation is strong. There is a significant improvement in this respect in the context of the 'communitisation' policy in Nagaland.
- It was suggested that NKC should assist in the devising a set of guidelines or a manual putting together the positive aspects/best models drawn out from SSA implementation across the country.

III MANAGEMENT

Decentralisation, autonomy and cooperation

- The Bill for the communitisation ("Community & Decentralisation") of elementary education administration in Nagaland was notified in 2002. It aimed to

bring about universal elementary education while simultaneously involving and empowering local communities to provide educational management and services. The daily management of schools, mapping local needs, rationalization of teachers within the village and the disbursement of teachers' salaries are some significant functions performed by the village education committees (VECs) under this framework, and funds from the SSA are routed through them. They are also empowered to enforce the "no work no pay" dictum with regard to teachers. The VECs are perceived as the traditional governing body, organic and community driven and communitisation has been hailed as a success and touted as an essential aspect of school education management given the tight social bonds prevalent in the northeast.

- Sikkim is in the process of decentralizing the management of schools so that the day-to-day care may be handed over to the gram panchayat.
- In Arunachal Pradesh, the village employment committees set up under the NREGA double up as local self-governing bodies, looking after school education and the administration of the mid day meal scheme. It fulfils an administrative lacuna in a state which has no state policy or administrative support for school education other than a rather precarious State Institute of Education (SIE).
- Village councils, which derive their power and autonomy from the Constitution of India, are a very important institution in the tribal dominated areas of the northeast.
- Manipur is the only northeastern state that does not have the Sixth Schedule in place, thus compromising the autonomy of the tribal dominated hill districts. Decentralisation is a demand in all the five hill districts which fall under the Tribal Welfare Department, but not forthcoming from the state government so far.
- School education administration in Mizoram is excessively centralized under the directorate, leading to problems in the outlying areas. Although strong NGOs at the state level function as watchdogs for the state, an effective state policy for decentralization is required.
- Committees on Hill/Remote Area Education should be set up to deal with their special issues.
- Instead of conforming to the schedule prevalent in the rest of the country, school timings in the north east should be revised according to the daylight cycle peculiar to that region as well as for the convenience of teachers working in geographically remote and hard to access areas.

- It should be noted that government-*aided* schools are predominant in the northeast, and the church is a significant part of the education system.
- NKC recommended that every state in the north-east must devise a long term education policy, and commissions may be set up for this purpose. In some states, this work is in process.
- The northeastern states must have a forum where they may discuss common concerns, best practices, and points for collaboration and cooperation. The North Eastern Regional Council may provide one such platform

IV ACCESS

Linguistic minorities, ethnic conflict, special needs education, geographical inaccessibility

- Language becomes a major issue of both identity *and* access given the several linguistic minorities in the region. The demand from the tribal populations is, therefore, two-pronged – instruction in the mother tongue and, most importantly, in English. On the other hand, compulsory instruction in the state language is looked upon as an imposition by many.
- Special packages must be created for children in conflict ridden areas. Death of a parent implies immediate withdrawal from school where most families are poor and lead a hand to mouth existence.
- The physical infrastructure for integrating disabled children is completely absent in schools. Schools and teachers must be sensitized and equipped to meet the special needs of students with physical, mental or learning disabilities. Residential schools for special needs students may be established in remote areas.
- There is a perception that government mechanisms may not be best suited to provide sustained and sympathetic support for learners with special needs. In this context, it may be better to identify appropriate and willing institutions outside the government (or at least outside the education department) who may become partners and delivery institutions for special needs education. In Sikkim, special needs education is not under SSA but under the mandate of NGOs like the Spastic Society of India.
- Geographically remote and hard to access hill areas may require a special package with additional resource allocation for school education.