

# Voice and Agency of Teachers

## Missing Link in National Curriculum Framework 2005

*The National Curriculum Framework 2005 articulates a new vision of the school curriculum as an inclusive space that extends beyond the conventional textbooks into the realm of teaching-learning processes. While this vision has the potential to enable education to become a critical catalyst in the process of social transformation, it fails to engage enough with a most crucial link – the agency of the teacher. The proactive engagement of the schoolteacher with processes of curriculum redesign is a necessary condition to ensure the success of the NCF. However, as this paper argues, radical change in the school curriculum without changing the central reality of teachers in Indian classrooms can do little to alter educational processes and outcomes. The exercise of curriculum renewal must attend to the equally vital need of transforming the state of teacher education in India, if the NCF's vision of schools as sites of social transformation leading to an egalitarian and just social order in the near future, is to ever become a reality.*

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The centrality of the agency of teacher dominates the Indian educational narrative both within the India “guru-shishya” tradition and the more western form of biography. The importance of the exemplary, inspiring and essential value-imparting Indian teacher as an agent of personal transformation is part of the current mythos of teacher education.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the contemporary character of a state-led education system often acquires a pretended deafness to the agency of the teacher in the larger process of social transformation in the name of resource and institutional constraints<sup>2</sup> or blind obedience to the “guruji” in deference to a timeless tradition.<sup>3</sup>

The reality is more nuanced and complex, with most schoolteachers across the country being under trained, misqualified, under-compensated, demotivated instruments of a mechanical system of education that was initially conceived as a support to a colonial regime. Even today this system, dominated by upper castes and forward sections of society often prefers to strengthen rather than question the status quo on questions of caste, community and gender asymmetry. This is very different from the vision of a liberating education envisaged by Tagore's Shantiniketan of the 1930s, Gandhiji's Nai Taleem of the 1940s, and the vision of education as a force in nation-building and social transformation of dalits and minorities articulated by Ambedkar, Nehru and Maulana Azad in the 1940s and 1950s.

Half a century later, in a slowly globalising India, school teaching has declined to the status of a least favoured profession. It has become a last resort of educated unemployed youth; part-time business people and young women seeking to find a part-time socially acceptable profession away from a competitive university education system. Yet, due to the sheer demographic

demand from schools, an assurance of getting a job seems to draw many participants to teacher education courses. This, however is more of a “safe fall back option” than a formal career choice.<sup>4</sup> This bitter reality is rarely confronted in educational research and public documents that seek to eulogise the dramatic steps that India is taking to universalise elementary education.

It is therefore no surprise that for the last two decades the schoolteacher, as a former centrepiece of processes of social change, is reduced to a mere object of educational reform or worse a passive agent of the prevailing ideology of the modern state. A state that seeks to universalise schooling and the creation of a modern citizenry, through massive public investments in school infrastructure and the transaction of standardised curriculum pays only peripheral attention to the needs of its primary change-agent: the teacher. A state that seeks to be an IT and knowledge superpower of the 21st century, but uses a classical early 20th century paradigm of teacher education to “reproduce” millions of teachers who have few skills and lesser incentives to make this happen.<sup>5</sup>

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF 2005) presents a fresh vision and a new discourse on key contemporary educational issues. It also has a separate section on the education of teachers. Yet, it appears unable to define the contours of a traverse between the romantic ideal of the empowered and empowering individual teacher and an educational system comprised of several million such teachers focused on a “mechanical” universalisation of education.

This paper attempts to engage with some of the hard questions that surround this challenge. It seeks to locate the agency of the schoolteacher in the process of curriculum redesign and development, taking as its frame, policy perspectives, current teacher

education practice and the recent NCERT-led exercise in curriculum renewal. It also briefly discusses some of the structural and operational teacher empowerment measures to enable teachers to exercise their agency in processes of curriculum reform, their education and professional development.

### Elements of a Transformatory Education System

Access to schooling, an adequate teaching-learning environment, an appropriate school curriculum and an empowered and inclusive teaching community are four crucial prerequisites of a school system that seeks to enable social transformation. While educational reform since the 1980s was strongly focused on the first two elements, the late 1990s brought the role of the curriculum into national focus. The critical link that binds these four critical elements together – the agency of the teacher continues to be cast aside, by political ideologies of most hues, contemporary curriculum reform efforts and the professional practices of much of the teacher education community.

Radical educational initiatives of both the Left and the Right have recognised the potential power of the agency of the teacher. In multiple experiments, they have used this latent force to build committed institutions and cadres of teachers dedicated to their particular causes. In many instances this has led to extreme politicisation of the schoolteacher.<sup>6</sup> In others it has led to the education of a generation of students in half-truths underpinned by the personal beliefs, sectarian concerns and folk pedagogy<sup>7</sup> of teachers who have had little access themselves to education and training in areas outlined by the NCF 2005.

Over the last decade or so, educational reform has included, apart from access, a focus on developing alternative text materials and the training of teachers to transact these materials, without directly engaging with the issue of curriculum redesign. At the turn of the 20th century, a major national curriculum redesign was initiated following the change of political regime at the centre. NCF 2000 and the subsequent development of school textbooks came under wide public scrutiny and debate. Issues of equity, inclusion and exclusion, learner diversity, religious identity and communalism gained considerable importance in the curriculum debates that followed. For instance scholars argued that "...the NCF, while loud on rhetoric, fails to address the quality of education that children of poor and marginalised groups experience" [Nambissan 2000: 54]. Several other critics described the NCF 2000 as a retrogressive step in education that sought to impose the Hindutva agenda in the garb of a national identity.<sup>8</sup>

The subsequent change of national government in 2004, led to the NCERT curriculum review in 2005 underlining a new political interest in the role of education in national development, its role in social mobilisation and transformation directed specifically at questions of caste and gender asymmetry and minority empowerment. Deeper than these politically driven initiatives, however, the professional need for curriculum review emerges from the long ossification of a national education system that continues to view teachers as "dispensers of information" and children as "passive recipients" of an "education", sought to be "delivered" in four-walled classrooms with little scope to develop critical thinking and understanding.<sup>9</sup>

One of the key problems in the present crises of education, as perceived by NCF 2005, is the burden that it imposes on our children. This burden arises both (i) an incoherent curriculum

structure and content that is disconnected to the culture and life of children and (ii) from the inadequate preparation of teachers who are unable to make connections with children and respond to their needs in imaginative and dynamic ways. This intimate link between curriculum design and the preparation of teachers has been repeatedly demonstrated in successful educational innovations across the country since the 1980s – Neelbagh and the Valley School in Karnataka; Eklavya in Madhya Pradesh, KSSP in Kerala and Digantar in Jaipur to name only a few.

While the articulated need to respect the nature of the child and her pace of learning has carved a legitimate space for the "agency" of the child in policy documents, the educational reform process has been persistent in denying teachers their rightful place in the education process. This is despite a huge network of national and state-level institutions that were established post-National Policy of Education (NPE), 1986 at considerable cost to the public exchequer to enhance the professional development of schoolteachers. Among them the District Institutes of Education and Training (DIET) and Institutes of Advanced Studies in Education (IASE), have remained largely confined to conventional pedagogies and prescribe to a revisionist view of the status-quo in education with the teacher as the passive deliverer of state-prescribed child-centred learning.<sup>10</sup> Within such a framework, issues of inclusion and exclusion, gender disparity, communalism and the marginalised child become mere topics for discussion without disturbing the institutional structures and mechanisms which continue to legitimise the exclusion of this discourse from mainstream teacher education.

There have been few attempts to enhance the capacities of these public institutions to deal with the conspicuous absence of a professional cadre of practitioners, particularly in elementary education. It is no surprise then, that in both urban and rural areas, poor quality private schools are preferred over the increasingly dysfunctional public school system run by a demotivated cadre of teachers. A study observed that "...parents face a difficult choice between low quality and no quality at primary level...parents often helplessly observe while their child struggle through government primary school and after two or three years of such struggle they put him in the nursery class of a private school out of desperation" [Anuradha De et al 2002: 5234].

### Professionalising School Teaching

#### *Policy Perspective*

Since the 1960s, the need to prepare professionally qualified schoolteachers has been recognised as crucial for the qualitative improvement of Indian education since the 1960s. Recognising the crucial link between universities and schools, the Kothari Commission (1964-66: 622), recommended that teacher education be "...brought into the mainstream of the academic life of the universities on the one hand and of school life and educational developments on the other." Recognising "quality" as the essence of a programme of teacher education, the commission recommended the introduction of "integrated courses of general and professional education in universities...with greater scope for self-study and discussion...and...a comprehensive programme of internship." Pointing to the need to view the teacher as central to the process of change in school education, the Chatopadhyaya Commission (1983-85: 52) noted, "...if schoolteachers are expected to bring about a revolution in their approach to

teaching...that same revolution must precede and find a place in the college of education.” While mooted the idea of teachers’ centres, the commission (1983-85: 63) emphasises that what teachers need most “...is a change in the climate of schools, an atmosphere conducive to educational research and enquiry...” The Yashpal Committee (1993: 26) recommended that “...the content of (teacher education) programmes should be restructured...to enable the trainees to acquire the ability for self-learning and independent thinking.”

Despite repeated reiteration of the need to strengthen the active “agency” of the teacher in policy documents and commission reports over the last 30 years, teacher education institutes continue to exist as insular organisations even within the university system where many are located. This precludes the larger academic debates on equity, gender and community to enter the day-to-day discourse of teacher educators. The dominant practice of training teachers to adjust to the needs of the existing education system is reflected in periodic revisions of curricular framework (1975, 1988 and 2000)<sup>11</sup> with little emphasis on revitalising a largely stagnant teacher education sector. In spite of its fresh new emphasis on children and their learning, the NCF 2005 too falls short of engaging with processes enabling the agency of the child via that of the teacher, through a framework that builds on existing institutions and innovations and defines a set of concrete implementable steps forward rather than just another set of ideal principles.<sup>12</sup>

### *Themes in Curriculum Reform*

NCF 2005 has for the first time linked the ongoing debate on curriculum to the professional and pedagogic concerns of the child and the teacher. This was undertaken via a widespread process of national consultation involving officials, civil society representatives, university academics and teacher practitioners on various aspects of curriculum design and development. The linkage between the societal context of education, the role of PRIs in education; knowledge creation processes; the learning environment, learners and the learning process; the education of teachers and elements of educational reform including examination reform and deeper concerns of curriculum design and implementation have been clearly articulated. In doing this the NCF 2005 has taken the historic step of reestablishing the close relationship between school and society and the central role of education in enabling social transformation.

The NCF suggests five guiding principles of curriculum reform: “connecting knowledge to life outside the school, ensuring that learning is shifted away from rote methods, enriching the curriculum to provide for overall development of children rather than remain textbook centric, making examinations more flexible and integrated with classroom life and nurturing an overriding identity informed by caring concerns within the democratic polity of the country” [NCF 2005: 5]. It further reiterates the need to respond to specific developments and concerns arising in contemporary debates such as: the retention of all children in school to achieve the goal of UEE; fostering democracy as a way of life; inculcating a respect for constitutional values of plurality and secularism in children; promoting decentralisation to facilitate generation of locally relevant knowledge and curriculum practices; sensitisation to environmental issues; and broadening of the scope of curriculum to include traditional crafts, work and knowledge.

NCF 2005 further articulates a welcome new discourse within which students are no longer marginalised but engaged in challenging, remapping and reconstructing prescribed knowledge. An entire section of the NCF is devoted to learning and knowledge, establishing the primacy of the active learner, the socio-political context of learners and the significance of bridging the gap between home and school knowledge and the need to view knowledge creation as a process of social construction.

The NCF 2005 however offers little clarity on how this is to be done. In not doing so it could well have sown the seeds of its own capture by political and sectarian interests at state level within India’s complex federal polity, where education is primarily a state jurisdiction. The foremost challenge before the NCF therefore is in “...bridging the gap between existing realities and proposed possibilities (which would) need a coordinated effort between centre and states, and between the many agencies and actors that comprise the education system.”<sup>13</sup> Central to this is the empowerment of the teacher.

### **Voice and Agency of the Teacher**

NCF 2005 in its present form is unable to address this central challenge in the delivery of quality education – transforming the role and performance of teachers. While it focuses on the redesign and altering the perspective and content of the school curriculum, its expectations of the teacher’s role continues to be largely prescriptive and often contradictory. While there are several allusions to the role of the teacher in providing “... a safe space for children to express themselves and simultaneously to build in certain forms of interactions [NCF 2005: 22] and the need “...to build the capabilities and confidence in teachers to autonomously plan their teaching in response to children’s learning” [NCF 2005: 19], there are few concrete suggestions of how to integrate this into practice. Apart from making sermonising references such as “teachers need to plan lessons so that children are challenged to think and try out what they are learning...” [NCF 2005: 20], there is little clarity on the processes and interventions required to build appropriate knowledge, school and society linkages in preparing and supporting practising teachers.

Teachers are referred to more as passive agents of the state who are expected to be “persuaded and trained” to magically translate the vision of the NCF 2005 in schools. Researchers have long argued that many teachers have a tendency for example, “...to simply accept poverty as the reason for the absence of many children and to see poverty as an unavoidable and inevitable factor that leads to high absenteeism and dropout rates... teachers see conditions such as that of bonded child labour, migration of children during school, the retention of children for domestic chores...as unavoidable family circumstances that cannot be addressed by any policy or programme...” [Vasavi 2000:36]. The NCF offers limited direction on how teachers could be prepared to include hitherto excluded social narratives, experiences and voices and make them available in the classroom and more importantly, to respond and resist attempts of short-term ideological persuasions of educational policy-makers to intervene in the teaching-learning process. In doing so, it side-steps one of the central social and political challenges of our times.

While often reaffirming the predominant view of the teacher as a state agent, who must be “oriented to the perspective” of the curriculum framework, the stated NCF 2005 vision for the

education of teachers is populated with contradictions. According to the NCF, creating "...An enabling learning environment (is one) where children feel secure, where there is absence of fear and (which) is governed by relationships of equality and space for equity... *often (this) does not require any special effort on the part of the teacher, except to practice equality and not discriminate among children*" (NCF 2005:77-78, author's emphasis).

This contradicts much of the research on the sociology of education in India as well as the NCF's own assertion that "...Teachers and children are part of a larger society where identities based on membership of caste, gender, religious and linguistic groups as well as economic status inform social interaction..." [NCF 2005: 78]. Field observations indicate that "...many teachers accept practices such as child marriage, withdrawal of girls at menstruation and untouchability in school as cultural practices of communities to which they must be sensitive" [Vasavi 2000: 36]. In another study, teachers were found to relate the poor performance of dalit children to their social backgrounds. "Some teachers referred to children as 'good for nothings', stating that 'whatever benefits are provided, these people will not improve': 'even stones would respond but not these kids' [Anitha 2000: 89]. The NCF acknowledges active social exclusion and discrimination around questions of caste, gender, ethnicity and religion, yet expects teachers to be sensitive and informed, who "...should discuss different dimensions of social reality in the class, and work towards creating increasing self-awareness amongst themselves and in the learners" [NCF 2005: 51], with little preparation, training or classroom support.

It would be however, naïve to argue that a well-written textbook can successfully set aside the possibility of personal beliefs and biases being legitimised through classroom discourse, as asserted by some.<sup>14</sup> While recommending the need to move away from a "textbook culture" (where the textbook is seen as the only source of legitimate knowledge) towards a plurality of locally produced text materials, the NCF 2005 makes an important argument in favour of bridging gaps between the lived experiences of children and formal school knowledge.

It however, glosses over the fact that teachers are the crucial mediating agents through which textbooks (good or bad) are transacted. The hidden assumption that texts (multiple or singular) will by themselves help develop secular values and social sensitivity needs to be questioned. Neither the textbook nor the teacher is a sufficient condition for curriculum renewal in India. The vision of curriculum reform needs necessarily to be seen in the light of the current conditions within which our children are being "educated", namely, within folk pedagogic practices and the behaviourist frame of conventional teacher education. Within this frame, even perfectly balanced and sensitively written textbooks are more often than not, learnt by rote (for the purpose of passing examinations) which subsequently become forgotten memory. In contrast, the teacher's classroom communication based on her own "personal theories and understanding" often becomes lifelong learning.

How school education will enable the realisation of the five guiding principles outlining the perspective of NCF is also not clear. For instance, connecting knowledge to life outside the school and enriching the curriculum by making it less textbook centric are possible only with the proactive intervention of a teacher who is driven by the conviction that indeed this is the

way forward. To enable this, the teacher needs several things, including a resource pool of books to choose from, the professional skills to identify developmentally appropriate text materials, a critical and analytic mind and the opportunity to engage children with life outside the classroom. Likewise, facilitating children to move away from rote learning is possible only when children are inundated with opportunities to make meaning of what they read, see, hear, experience and discuss.

The assumption is that the teacher indeed thinks the way the authors of this document have thought or else, will start doing so soon after they are "persuaded and trained" to do so. The NCF unfortunately appears to be committed to undermine the implementation of its vision by failing to address the need to restructure teacher education to enable a process of pedagogical empowerment of the agency of the teacher and thereby of the radical new curriculum vision it presents.

### *Gaps in Vision*

NCF 2005 has left two major gaps in its vision of teacher education. First, viewing the teacher as one who "needs to be persuaded and trained...oriented to the perspective...should have the skills to teach...", rather than as one who needs to be empowered to evolve pedagogies that foster critical thinking within a consciously created democratic environment of learning for all children irrespective of caste, religion, region, community and gender. Second, of assuming that teachers (typically constructed as a homogeneous category) exist in isolation of a socio-political context that actively discriminates between people and children from differing backgrounds and that they can be "oriented" successfully to "implement" the articulated new perspective of the NCF!

NCF 2005 acknowledges important concerns of teacher education such as the divide between pre-service and in-service teacher education and the lack of professionalism. Yet, its own vision statement for teacher education indicates a lack of faith in the agency of the teacher in school reform. "The major shift" it says, is in the teacher's role "...from a source of knowledge to a facilitator of transforming information into knowledge/wisdom...In brief, the new vision of teacher education will be more responsive to changes in the school system..." [NCF 2005: 103-04]. In this, the NCF assumes a linear relationship between curriculum change and the role of the teacher.

It seems to suggest that teachers need to be "oriented" to be "more responsive to changes in the school system" that the NCF seeks to bring about. The NCF envisions the teacher as someone who "...develops the needed counselling skills and competencies to be a 'facilitator' and 'helper' for children needing specific kinds of help in finding solutions to day-to-day problems related to educational, personal-social situations" [NCF 2005: 103] rather than as someone who is a thinking, reflecting professional and who engages with children in an endeavour to facilitate critical meaning making.

The central question the NCF evades is: How do you enable critical thinking and meaning making among children (the aim of the NCF) with a teacher who has not been through such a process herself?

While the NCF questions a dominant contemporary Indian narrative of education as a model of information transmission and "banking", it fights shy of addressing an equally

dominant narrative in education: the teacher as a passive agent of state instituted change. If we truly want students to develop the ability to listen, speak and write a “multi-perspectival” discourse, their teachers will need “to redefine their role from servants of a hegemonic power to public transformative intellectuals”.<sup>15</sup>

In order to demystify the dominant culture, it is important for teachers to develop a critical social perspective, master the language of critical understanding and for educational policy on teacher education to acknowledge the importance of making visible the underlying assumptions of educators. To enable this in practice, it is important to listen to teachers’ voices, voices that exert an unquestioning authority over the taught, however, disempowered.

In the absence of this, the practice of teacher education would remain at odds with the proposed new NCF pedagogic process that seeks to involve teachers in a dialogical and egalitarian relationship with their students. Structural spaces within the education system have to be created to enable this. Without this, teachers are likely to remain passive agents of the state, in the process of school reform, potentially easy targets of “capture” by the particular ideology of the party in power. Neither improvement in school infrastructure, access or curriculum can address this central challenge of educational reform. The conviction that teachers can indeed transform Indian society in an active engagement with social change by being exposed to egalitarian methods of teaching-learning is a priority that the NCF 2005 implicitly admits, but falls short of making a clear statement.

### **Educating Teachers: Disempowering Processes**

One of the more important ideas articulated in the NCF 2005 is of the school curriculum as an inclusive space. A space that extends beyond the conventional curricular realm of textbooks into the realm of teaching-learning processes – enabling the agency of the child and her educator. In doing this the NCF recognises, though only implicitly, the role of the teacher in enabling an empowering education that seeks to bridge the gaps of caste, gender and economic status and thereby become an important instrument of social transformation. Yet, the NCF 2005 fails to articulate the necessary linkages between curriculum reform and the policy and programme interventions that are necessary to operationalise its vision. It also does not address the sharp divide between the school curriculum and the teacher that the practice of contemporary teacher education has accentuated over the years.

It is worth examining the current dominant model of teacher education in India, which has remained largely unchanged from its colonial origins.<sup>16</sup> The design and practice of teacher education in India is based on a series of assumptions, encoded in archaic institutional structures and disincentives which have effectively impeded the progress of ideas and the professional and personal growth of generations of schoolteachers. The immense gap between classroom practice and the theory and practice of mainstream teacher education, was brought into focus by NGO-led innovations (e.g, Eklavya in Madhya Pradesh); large-scale interventions of ideologically committed educational institutions (e.g, Vidya Bharati run by the RSS) and more recently the initiatives strongly supported by corporate sector (e.g, Pratham). The potential of the teacher as an agent of change has underpinned the effectiveness of each of these interventions to achieve their own ends.

Typically, teacher training programmes have followed the theory-into-practice model. Inherent in this approach is the view of teachers as implementers of a given theory of knowledge and learning, often derived from western sources and sometimes supplemented by experiments that reach back into the early 20th century. It is taken for granted that teacher trainees will follow these instructional theories as taught by the generalist faculties of teacher training institutions. It is assumed for instance, that disciplinary knowledge “given” through general education is independent of almost any professional training in pedagogy. This divide is reflected in the common belief even among teacher educators that a primary schoolteacher of mathematics need not engage with the discipline of mathematics beyond the “levels” required for the primary school. This concept may have found wide acceptability in Victorian England in the 19th century, but may be slightly out of place in a society that seeks to be the IT powerhouse of the world.

The concept of knowledge embedded in the prescribed school curriculum is similarly treated as a “given”. For example, “...most BEd courses assume that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with the school curriculum as a whole or with the syllabi of different subjects. It is also assumed that if there are certain problems in the syllabi and textbooks, nothing can be done about these problems in teacher training. Therefore teachers must learn to adjust to existing realities” [Krishna Kumar 2001: 3].

Conventional teacher education programmes train teachers to adjust to the needs of the existing system through the mechanical planning of lessons in standardised formats (reminiscent of the early Taylorist period of the industrial revolution), rituals of fulfilling the required number of lessons delivered and supervised; organising school assemblies and other routine activities. “Lesson planning, as it is taught during teacher training is merely a formal routine which masks the acculturation of the young trainee into the profession without disturbing its underlying assumptions about knowledge and curriculum and also without making the new entrant aware of these assumptions and the consequences of the practices based on them” [Krishna Kumar 2002: 10].

It is also assumed that links between theories of child development, instructional models, subject content knowledge and methods of teaching specific subjects are naturally formed in the understanding developed by teacher-trainees. Both national and international experiences challenge these contentions. A cross-national appraisal of teacher education programmes for example indicates that “...teachers have few opportunities even in college or in teacher education programmes to develop connected understanding of their subject matter” [Shulman 1987].

A central assumption is that teacher-trainees will be able to set aside their own social and cultural beliefs and assumptions about knowledge, the process of learning and their view of learners, once they enter the hallowed portals of teacher education institutions. This however rarely happens, except in the advanced sociological imagination of educational reform committees.

### *Perceptions and Pre-conceived Notions*

Empirical research in education indicates that many teachers continue to carry the belief that the most important criteria that make an effective primary schoolteacher are her ability to be “soft spoken, tolerant, kind-hearted, hardworking, honest and punctual, devoid of bad habits and well-dressed”.<sup>17</sup>

Teacher behaviour towards children and their approach to teaching-learning is centrally guided by such assumptions and beliefs rather than pedagogical concerns, a critical social perspective and theory and research based knowledge about how children learn. Often, "...teacher trainees in training institutions are treated like cadets...with little internal, personal preparation for evolving into an educator. Once in the field, the untrained mind of the teacher operates on the basis of old biases and prejudices collected through his own schooling and life experiences". It is argued that teacher preparation should include opportunities and specific activities to "...examine these experiences and beliefs, analyse and reflect upon them within the precincts of the professional course" [Mahapatra 2004: 26].

International research examining conceptual change and changes in beliefs in pre-service teacher education students support the claim that students, who are able to confront their beliefs, develop deeper knowledge [Hollingsworth 1989]. Paliwal and Subramaniam (forthcoming) note how "...over the years we can see a significant change in the way the teachers view social issues... respecting teacher's opinions, allowing them to freely air their questions and disagreements...and facilitating a comparison of their own experiences with what is being discussed...it is the democratisation of the training process that holds the key to change in beliefs and attitudes."

The preferred argument among teacher educators to explain the absence of the desired impact of teacher training programmes is the huge gap between theory and practice.<sup>18</sup> As a result, there have been several attempts to advocate the training of teachers in school settings rather than in university-based institutions so that they learn to adjust to current practices in schools. Implicit in this approach is an attempt to render educational theory redundant. This argument often feeds into formulating policies that justify the systemic shift from investing in long-term pre-service teacher education programmes to short-term in-service teacher education programmes.

Since prevalent school teaching practices are dominated by teachers' own assumptions and beliefs, an adjustment to such practices leads to their crystallisation. This further shrinks the space and skills to question an iniquitous dominant culture. An external imposition of educational reform, including elements based on critical theory, is likely to force teachers to make a choice between these externally driven changes and folk pedagogic methods internalised over long periods. In such a case, teachers often choose to revert to secure established ways of doing things, especially when these receive legitimacy from teacher training practices. Studies of the origins of teachers' beliefs indicate that many different life experiences contribute to the formation of strong and enduring beliefs about teaching and learning [Sikula et al 1996]. The dominant practice of an all pervasive "textbook culture" and the examination system also shapes teacher development. This pattern calls for the need to examine the socialisation process of teachers within school settings.

The current manner in which teachers view knowledge, teach students to view knowledge and structure classroom experiences reflects an impersonal, universalised historical context-free knowledge that is driven by a positivist educational ideology. The odd mix of a technical-rationalist approach embedded in a matrix of folk pedagogies shape the practice of training teachers and therefore the practice of teaching children

in much of the country. Hence school as sites of "cultural reproduction" play a significant role in reinforcing and legitimising dominant asymmetrical social and gender relations and ideologies.

NCF 2005, while it does correct for the multiple distortions in the NCF 2000 and presents an alternative vision for curriculum, makes little concrete progress along the road to empower teachers as agents of change. During a discussion held on the NCF 2005, a teacher educator observed, "...a lot of things are expected from the teacher, training, teaching-learning material, enabling the teacher to view education in the intended manner...the document has not dealt with the aspect of how to enable the teacher to achieve all this."<sup>19</sup> For instance, NCF 2005 makes no attempt to alter the status quo prevailing in most teacher education institutions by urging to provide for structural spaces for student teachers to reflect on their own experiences and challenge assumptions as part of classroom discourse and enquiry. This is a fundamental change in direction that is likely to develop critical perspectives and which ought to be linked to a curriculum reform initiative.

The typically poor historical performance of conventional university-based teacher education programmes has been coupled with the dilution of the emphasis on public investment in school education since the early 1990s. This has led to the promotion of several alternative measures of teacher recruitment and training – which have been justified on pragmatic economic and bureaucratic grounds, with little reference to the reality of the Indian classroom.<sup>20</sup> Large-scale recruitment of para-teachers within the formal school system and a creeping attitude of resignation towards pre-service programmes have become an integral part of state provisioning for elementary education. Such measures threaten to ensure that inequity of access and quality is institutionalised in the Indian state, making it virtually impossible for education to serve a full role in the process of social change.

In many cases, even the minimum qualification stipulated for the recruitment of schoolteachers has been lowered to induct para-teachers.<sup>21</sup> This trend has diluted the identity of the teacher as a professional and has led to a considerable erosion of faith in the agency of the teacher in bringing about change within the government school system and communities. "The underlying view (is) that elementary education does not require a fully qualified and trained teacher..." is reflected in most state governments favouring the scheme of para-teachers and the EGS<sup>22</sup> schools [Tilak 2004: 4720]. A strong focused set of policy interventions will be necessary to reverse this, which are currently beyond the scope of the NCF 2005. It is unfortunate, that the NCF found it difficult to take a clear position on this critical issue.

### **Educating Teachers: Systemic Gaps**

Schoolteachers, (particularly those in elementary schools) continue to remain severed from centres of higher learning and are typically intellectually isolated. As a result, mechanisms from within the teacher community to counter the recent spate of ideological experiments to capture curriculum development have largely ceased to exist. This is the long-term consequence of a systematic exclusion of research and academic support to schoolteachers, partially fuelled by the limited foresight of education policy-makers and the stakes of teacher

training institutions that fear loss of their monopoly over “expert” knowledge.

This is in spite of the large investments since NPE (1986) on establishing a national teacher education and support infrastructure starting with the SCERTs and DIETs (including District Resource Centres [DRCs] the total number comes to 553) and reaching down to the Block Resource Centres (7,201 BRCs) and Cluster Resource Centres (66,140 CRCs).<sup>23</sup> This potentially powerful network of institutions that forms the backbone of the implementation of the DPEP, SSA and UEE are largely disempowered to facilitate the exchange of ideas, sharing of classroom practices and the enhancement of educational knowledge in terms of content and pedagogical theory.<sup>24</sup>

Most teacher educators training elementary schoolteachers for example, are trained in secondary education, based on the false premise that elementary education is only a simplified form of secondary education. Data reveals that “...the academic faculty in DIETs in many states (are) simply secondary schoolteachers “posted” to these institutes...they were selected neither for their interest in elementary education, nor for their skill as teacher educators” [Sharma 2000: 3771].

Current teacher education practice also remains severed from the knowledge and experience generated by the large number of innovative experiments that have mushroomed across India since the 1980s. More often than not, institutes of teacher education have become breeding grounds of academic stagnation and resistance to change. The training of teachers happens in insular, intellectually impoverished environments that are as much severed from ground realities as from the lofty aims of education they espouse. Such intellectual isolation actively discourages educational theorisation and the growth of interdisciplinary enquiry. Locating programmes of teacher education within colleges of general education, as is the case with the Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEIEd) Programme,<sup>25</sup> is one way of breaking this insularity. Reflecting on the gross inadequacy of teacher training institutes in preparing teachers, the Chattopadhyaya Commission (1983-85: 49) had expressed the need “...to enable general and professional education to be pursued concurrently.” It took the teacher education community over a decade to materialise this vision when it launched the four-year integrated elementary teacher education programme (BEIEd) in 1994, which was later acknowledged as a model of innovation within mainstream teacher education.<sup>26</sup> In the words of Anil Sadgopal, (2001:5) “...the BEIEd has produced for the first time an elementary schoolteacher with a university degree... the programme has incorporated such elements and activities that enable a student teacher to reconstruct the prescribed knowledge as well as to evolve a critical appreciation of the curricular and pedagogic issues...who will have the potential to contribute to transformation (rather than maintenance of status quo) of school education.”

The arduous struggle for a radical change in the Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (an exercise entrusted to the NCTE<sup>27</sup>) and the dire need to carve a legitimate space for elementary education within the precincts of the university continues. As observed by Sarangapani (2004: 101),

There is a continued denial that the study of elementary education and the preparation of elementary schoolteachers require a knowledge base and academic preparation and standards that are associated with the university...Even after a

rigorous four-year programme of preparation for elementary school teaching (BEIEd), the training of these students in the ‘discipline’ has had to be defended, repeatedly.

Currently, entry into mainstream teacher education continues to be the last option for graduates. The lack of peer review, the fierce defence by education faculties of the right of generalist BEd’s and MEds to teach all disciplines irrespective of competence or training and the incestuous recruitment of multiple generations of mis-qualified teacher educators has contributed to the structural stagnation of the teacher education sector. Existing postgraduate programmes of education, such as the MEd have become, in many universities, programmes of liberal studies in education and are woefully inadequate to facilitate a deeper discourse in education and an opportunity for interdisciplinary enquiry. These programmes offer little scope for professional development and research in key areas of school education such as curriculum enquiry and design, pedagogic studies, epistemological concerns and issues related to school and society. As a consequence, the dominant ethos of teacher education in India remains confined to a positivist approach drawn from mid-20th century classical schools of educational psychology, having little contact with the large later body of interdisciplinary knowledge that examines the relationship between school and society.

Currently, the link between the study of education and postgraduate studies in different disciplines is provided only through the BEd degree. This link serves the exclusive aim of providing enhanced disciplinary knowledge in a given school subject for teaching at higher levels (grades XI and XII) of school education in order to acquire a postgraduate teacher (PGT) scale. An engagement with postgraduate studies in the social sciences in particular, is needed to develop frameworks within which educational theory and practice can be enquired into, analysed and interpreted. Emphasising the need to give immediate attention to the training of teachers in the NCF 2005, Thapar (2005: 10) elaborates that “...teachers need a more intensive exposure if they are to understand the concepts of social science...and to realise the significance of critical enquiry to education, which is said to be the aim of the NCF.” Mechanisms for this need to be created through means such as a provision for integrated undergraduate studies in teacher education, the study of educational and pedagogical theory as an elective subject at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels and a provision for entry into research programmes of education without the prerequisite of a generalist (MEd) degree in teacher education. Such avenues would be especially required for graduates and postgraduates in the disciplines of philosophy, sociology, psychology, economics and political science, subjects that are not offered in schools until the stage of high school and that lay the foundations of the discipline of education.

Options of pursuing postgraduate programmes in education with the facility of choosing course credits across different disciplines of humanities and social sciences is likely to help identify relevant questions for research and promote reflective inquiry in the theory and practice of education. The BEIEd provides an example of a critical opening for undertaking postgraduate studies in a variety of humanities and social science disciplines through the teacher education route. Graduates choose courses in sociology, psychology, history, political science, linguistics, maths and the languages. This has led young professionally qualified teachers to undertake research (within and

outside the university) in areas of children's learning, curriculum enquiry and classroom processes, promoting the creation of a body of knowledge in elementary education within the Indian context.

## Teacher Education and Curricular Reform

### Bridging Gaps

Both pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes need to be redesigned to engage prospective teachers with the perspective espoused by NCF 2005: a larger socio-political context in which education is situated, engage with children in real contexts, critically question their own assumptions and beliefs about knowledge, the learner and learning and positions in society vis-à-vis gender, caste, class, equity and justice. Such processes, unfolded within the frame of critical pedagogy, are likely to promote habits of independent thinking, collaborative learning and develop the capacity of the educational system to adapt to the changing learning needs of children and society.

Redesigning teacher education thus, would essentially mean shifting the focus from piece-meal and ad hoc collation of "lectures" and ritualised practice teaching to a well-planned engagement with social science concepts and issues of knowledge, learner diversity and the process of learning. In this context, continuity between pre-service and in-service education of teachers will need to be forged at the level of institutions that are engaged with these. In-service teacher education would necessarily include the professional development of the teacher along with sustained classroom support.

The panel below presents a set of processes that usually unfold in teacher education programmes firmly rooted in the perspective

briefly outlined above. These have been juxtaposed against "activities" that dominate most current teacher education programmes. The comparison, though theoretically neat, serves to illustrate processes that are likely to empower teachers rather than create 'implementers' of a given curriculum.

## Conclusion

This paper reflects on systemic constraints and processes of conventional teacher education that has disempowered the teacher thereby contributing to the long stagnation of the field of education in India. NCF 2005 articulates a new vision of the school curriculum as an inclusive space that extends beyond the conventional textbooks into the realm of teaching-learning processes. The perspective and design of the NCF necessarily demands the schoolteacher to have an agile mind that can think independently, reflect, discern, make choices and create an environment in which all children learn.

While the new vision of the NCF has the potential to enable education to be a critical catalyst in the process of social transformation; it fails to engage enough with a most crucial link – the agency of the teacher. It is argued that the principles that guide the perspective of the NCF, such as connecting knowledge to life outside school, enriching the curriculum beyond the textbook, taking learning away from mere rote memorisation and nurturing identities within the democratic polity of the country cannot be achieved through textbooks alone. The proactive engagement of the school teacher with processes of curriculum redesign is a necessary condition for its success.

In its present form the NCF 2005 does not take a clear position on the current state of teacher education, the dying cadre of the trained elementary government schoolteacher and the increasing

### Comparison between the Dominant Current Practice and Proposed Process-Based Teacher Education Curriculum Framework

Dominant Practice of Teacher Education	Process-Based Teacher Education
Focus on psychological aspects of children without adequate engagement with contexts. Engagement with generalised theories of children and learning.	Understanding the social, cultural and political contexts in which children grow and develop. Engagement with children in real life situations along with theoretical enquiry.
Theory as a "given" to be applied in the classroom.	Conceptual knowledge generated, based on experience, observations and theoretical engagement.
Knowledge treated as external to the learner, and something to be acquired.	Knowledge generated in the shared context of teaching, learning, personal and social experiences through critical enquiry.
Teacher educators instruct and give structured assignments to be submitted by individual students. Training schedule packed by teacher-directed activities. Little opportunity for reflection and self-study.	Teacher educators evoke responses from students to engage them with deeper discussions and reflection. Students encouraged to identify and articulate issues for self-study and critical enquiry. Students maintain reflective journals on their observations, reflections, including conflicts.
Short training schedule after general education.	Sustained engagement of long duration, professional education integrated with education in liberal science, arts and humanities.
Students work individually on assignments, in-house tests, field work and practice teaching.	Students encouraged to work in teams undertaking classroom and children's observations, interaction and projects across diverse courses. Group presentations encouraged.
No "space" to address students' assumptions about social realities, the learner and the process of learning.	Learning "spaces" provided to examine students' own position in society and their assumptions as part of classroom discourse.
No "space" to examine students' conceptions of subject-knowledge.	Structured "space" provided to revisit, examine and challenge (mis)conceptions of knowledge.
Practice teaching of isolated lessons, planned in standardised formats with little or no reflection on the practice of teaching.	School Internship, students teach within flexible formats, larger frames of units of study, concept web-charts and maintain a reflective journal.

reliance of many state governments on a fast growing cadre of para-teachers. This paper argues that radical change in the school curriculum without changing the central reality of teachers in Indian classrooms can do little to alter educational processes and outcomes. The current exercise of curriculum renewal cannot afford to neglect the simultaneous need of transforming teacher education if its purpose is to convert schools into sites of social transformation for a future egalitarian and just social order as outlined in the NCF.

The creation of structural spaces within teacher education institutions and the convergence of institutional linkages can provide the opportunity to bridge the divide created between the school curriculum and the teacher. Educational planners have to develop the conviction that there is no short-cut to well designed pre-service teacher education programmes as well as on-site support to schoolteachers to enable quality education. In order to revive our state school system of education, and simultaneously facilitate larger goals of social and gender justice and equity, it is important that we enable schoolteachers to become professionals who can undertake this mammoth task with responsibility and commitment. Else it is more than easy for them to slide back into the practice of folk pedagogy or transacting ideologically driven curricula – basic concerns that the NCF 2005 is seeking to address. [EPW](#)

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## Notes

- The following words of Rabindranath Tagore on the ideal teacher continue to reverberate in institutions of teacher education: “A teacher can never truly teach unless he is still learning himself. A lamp can never light another lamp unless it continues to burn its own flame...”
- While acknowledging the substantial rise in the remuneration of schoolteachers as a positive move, Amartya Sen cautions that “...the very big increases in recent years have also made school education vastly more expensive, making it much harder to offer regular school education to those who are still excluded from it.” Amartya Sen, ‘Introduction’, *The Delivery of Primary Education: A Study in West Bengal*, The Pratiche (India) Trust, 2002, pp 3.
- “The old Indian view of the teacher-pupil relationship was based on the notion that the teacher is supreme...The pupil’s role was to be modest, obedient and receptive. Several ancient texts describe the supremacy of the teacher...” See Krishna Kumar’s *Political Agenda of Education*, Sage Publications, 2nd edition, 2005, pp 73-94 for an analysis of how the culture of education in India has evolved as a result of colonisation and its association with the older traditions of teacher-learner relationships.
- ‘Feasibility Study for a Professional Degree Programme in Elementary Teacher Education at Delhi University’, MACESE, Central Institute of Education, 2001, pp 20.
- In recent years there has been an indiscriminate mushrooming of BED programmes to meet the exponential growth in demand for teacher training. A survey, undertaken in July 2002, of 40 self-financing institutes (SFIs) in Delhi and UP offering teacher education with NCTE recognition reveals that the owners of SFIs came from occupational groups such as builders and colonisers, businessmen, politicians, industrialists, advocates and other professionals. See L C Singh, ‘Commercialisation in Teacher Education’, presented at the First National Conference on Self-Appraisal and Accreditation of Teacher Education Institutions, Pune, December 22-23, 2002. [www.ncte-in.org/lcsingh.htm](http://www.ncte-in.org/lcsingh.htm)
- The Pratiche (India) Trust Report (2002) makes a mention of how “...Not only the rural residents in our study areas (West Bengal) but also many political leaders admit that primary teachers have amassed immense power to govern and determine rural politics.” Also see Geeta Kingdon’s study in UP which focuses on the extent and reasons for teacher’s participation in politics and draws out implications for the functioning of schools. Kingdon Geeta Gandhi and Mohd. Muzammil: ‘A Political Economy of Education in India: The Case of UP I’ (2001): *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XXXVI, No 32, August 7, 2001.
- The concept of folk pedagogy derives from the term folk psychology, a (rather condescending) name given to everyday intuitive (lay) theories about how other minds work. According to Bruner (1996), “...Folk psychologies reflect deeply ingrained cultural beliefs about the mind... (and) notions about how the child’s mind learns.” He further argues that “...just as we are steered in ordinary interaction by our folk psychology, so we are steered in the activity of helping children learn about the world by notions of folk pedagogy.” See Bruner (1996) *The Culture of Education*, Harvard University Press, pp 44-65.
- See Sahmat Publications on ‘Against Communalisation of Education’, ‘Saffron Agenda in Education: An Expose’ and ‘The Assault on History’ 2000 for a critique of the NCF 2000, on the issue of communalising education.
- This idea is reflected in the perspective outlined by the *National Curriculum Framework*, NCERT, 2005, pp 2.
- Studies reveal that the training programmes organised under the SOPT and DPEP rarely addressed the needs of teachers and the transactional approach adopted in majority of INSET programmes has so far remained confined to the lecture method with little scope and opportunity for teachers to actively participate in the training process. See A B L Srivastava, 1999, ‘Study of the Support System and Process which Underpins DPEP’s Pedagogical Strategy in Six States: A Synthesis Report’, Ed Cil, New Delhi and Mehindernath Sethi, 2001, ‘A Study of Management of Multigrade Teaching Practice in Primary Schools of Keonjhar District and the Impact of Teachers Training on Multigrade’, Orissa, DPEP, Keonjhar.
- The Curriculum for the Ten-Year School: A Framework (1975), in its section on ‘Implications for Implementation’ discusses the need to “...revise the curricula of elementary and secondary teacher education so as to reflect the new demands of the school curriculum...short-term and long-term courses for teachers will have to be planned to acquaint them with proposed changes in various school subjects...” Similarly, the National Curriculum for Elementary and Secondary Education (1988), states that “...The introduction of new generation of instructional packages should be supported by training teachers to facilitate the implementation of the NCF, to better equip the teachers to handle the new generation of instructional packages and to acquaint them with innovative practices related to teaching-learning and evaluation processes at the school stage.”
- See Vinod Raina’s Comment on The National Curriculum Framework (2005), Seminar, August, 2005.
- EPW editorial, ‘Education: New Curricula Framework’, June 18, 2005.
- See the argument for advocacy against multiple textbooks in Arjun Dev, (2005) ‘National Curriculum Framework 2005: Reversing the Main Thrust of the National Policy on Education in Debating Education: A Critical Appraisal of NCF 2005’, Sahmat, New Delhi, 2005.
- Giroux urges educators to redefine their role from servants of hegemonic power to public and “transformative intellectuals” that reject dominant forms of rationality or “regimes of truth” and commit themselves instead to furthering equality and democratic life. See Giroux, Henry, A (1997) *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope: Theory, Culture and Schooling*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO.
- Krishna Kumar argues how “...the concept as well as the content of teacher training have remained remarkably stable over a century...The model lesson and the norms of supervision of the lessons given by the trainee are almost exactly as we find them described in nineteenth century reports. Little wonder, then, that the focus of teaching continues to be where it was under colonial rule.” See Krishna Kumar, *Political Agenda of Education*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2005, pp 87-88.
- Exhaustive interviews held with individual primary schoolteachers under the DPEP Programme during an Evaluation of Pedagogical Interventions under the Phase I Programme of DPEP in the state of Haryana, provided insights into teachers’ perceptions about teaching, teachers and children in the schools they taught. Unpublished Report

- of the Evaluation of Pedagogical Interventions under the Phase I Programme of DPEP in the State of Haryana, RSPEE-MACESE, CIE, Delhi University, December, 2002.
- 18 M S Yadav argues that "...the theory of education as taught through courses in Teacher Education is not integrated with practices of schooling" See M S Yadav, (2002) 'Current Transaction for Quality Teacher Education: Few Considerations', presented at the First National Conference on Self-Appraisal and Accreditation of Teacher Education Institutions, December 22-23, 2002. [www.ncte-in.org/msyadav.htm](http://www.ncte-in.org/msyadav.htm)
  - 19 Comment by teacher trainer at the NCF 2005 Review Meeting in Jaipur on the 26 and 27 of July, 2005, Minutes circulated on email by Azim Premji Foundation, Bangalore.
  - 20 Using the framework of a comparative international perspective, it has been asserted that teacher costs can be significantly reduced "by employing unqualified personnel and still achieve good quality learning, (with) much of the savings invested in development of curricula and support materials and in in-service training." This has been justified on the ground that "experience suggests that in-service programmes using a combination of distance and contact education are far more cost effective than institutional pre-service training..." For a detailed analysis of strategies for managing teacher costs, see Santosh Mehrotra, Peter Buckland, 'Managing School Teacher Costs for Access and Quality in Developing Countries: A Comparative Analysis', *EPW*, December, 2001, pp 4567-79.
  - 21 See R Govinda and Y Josephine for a comprehensive review of 'Para-Teachers in India', *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, Volume 2.1 Spring 2005, pp 193-224.
  - 22 EGS refers to the Education Guarantee Scheme, started as a learning centre, alternative to the formal school in Madhya Pradesh under the DPEP, The EGS has become a model for many states to emulate because of its cost effectiveness towards the goal of Universalisation.
  - 23 Data source: MHRD as announced in the Times of India, September 5, 2005.
  - 24 Evaluation studies of the pedagogical interventions undertaken during the DPEP reveal that most BRCs and CRCs are not able to provide academic support to practicing teachers as had been envisaged. For details see 'A Review of Educational Progress and Reform in the District Primary Education Programme (phase I and II)' South Asian Human Development Sector. Discussion Paper Series, 2003. The World Bank, pp 35. While acknowledging this, the NCF 2005 states that "...The DPEP also brought in the block and cluster resource centres and made in-service teacher education and cluster level school follow up the main strategies for pedagogic renewal. In spite of the wide spread efforts...by and large the in-service inputs have not had any noticeable impact on teacher practice," pp 106.
  - 25 The BEIEd is the first four year integrated degree programme of elementary teacher education offered by Delhi University after class XII. It is currently being offered in six undergraduate colleges of the University of Delhi. See *The Bachelor of Elementary Education: Programme of Study*, MACESE, Central Institute of Education, University of Delhi, 2001, for detailed curriculum, norms, ordinance and vision statements.
  - 26 The Working Group of the X Plan on Teacher Education acknowledged the BEIEd as an important innovation. X Plan Working Group Report on Teacher Education (2002-07), pp 101.
  - 27 The National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) established in 1995, is an accrediting body for maintaining teacher education standards and norms in the country. The NCTE has no academic capacity of its own and hence relies for academic and research support on institutes of higher learning such as NCERT, NIEPA and University-based Departments of Education.
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