

Energising Government Schools for Meaningful Access

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When we speak of access to education it means that children are going to school and learning. It may be more appropriate to use the term “meaningful access” encompassing enrolment, regular attendance of children and teachers, availability of books and other learning materials, a learning environment in a functioning school. This paper attempts to synthesise the experience of small and larger projects of the government and non-governmental organisations to address the issue of learning in the government school system.

In the 1990s, the government’s primary objective was to enhance physical access to primary schools with the intention of moving on subsequently to issues of learning. When the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) was at its peak, the ground evidence was disturbing, prompting the realisation that the government alone cannot bring about the desired change. As DPEP gave way to Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the old tension between access and quality resurfaced. The first goal of SSA was to achieve universal access and bridge gender and social gaps in enrolment by 2003. This led many commentators to raise the issue of quality of education and learning. The Pratham sponsored Annual Survey of Education Report (ASER 2005 and 2006) highlighted the dismal state of learning in schools. Organisations like mv Foundation, which were instrumental in getting children out of work and into school, raised an alarm about high dropout rates among mainstreamed children. Some state governments took the initiative to start quality improvement programmes; international agencies working in collaboration with the government also underscored the importance of improving the quality of education.

Yet, as enrolment increased, dropout rates continued to remain unacceptably high, with close to 52 per cent of boys and 53 per cent of girls dropping out before reaching class eight [GOI 2006]. Administrators admitted that given persistent difficulties in teacher motivation and accountability, impressive enrolment figures notwithstanding, most children leave government primary schools without basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. Apprehension grew, realising that formal enrolment did not necessarily translate into regular attendance. Long spells of absence from school are attributable not only to poverty and work burden of children but also to the schooling experience. Poor families find little value in continuing their children in school if they cannot even learn to read and write; children themselves often do not find school a stimulating environment.

Attempts at energising the government school system were undertaken by a wide range of people in government and non-governmental organisations. This paper attempts to synthesise these experiences of small and larger projects to turn the government school system around and make it more accountable to the learning of children.

Revisiting Ground Realities

When people or organisations outside the education system collect data independently, the gap between what official statistics claim and ground reality becomes an area of contentious debate.

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However, it has impelled innovation. When the Jan Shikshan Abhiyan of 1996 recorded a much higher number of out of school children than officially admitted, the government of Madhya Pradesh (MP) decided to introduce the Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS). Other states, notably Andhra Pradesh, emulated this experience. Household survey data became an integral part of educational planning in SSA – which introduced it as a mandatory input into planning. Unfortunately, due to a systemic inability to come to terms with existing ground realities, people working at lower levels were wary of communicating the real situation – especially if the data on enrolment, retention and transition contradicted what they may have reported to the higher echelons over several decades. Despite the empathetic response by some officials in both union and state governments, acknowledging the problem in all its complexity and imperfections represents a cognitive break with the past. We came across three approaches to solve this issue.

One, the Chennai Municipal Corporation looking at learning levels in corporation schools, started a participatory exercise where the education administrators identified “maladies” in the education system [Mahapatra 2006]. This revealed that the teacher by dominating the classroom made little allowance for children to learn or develop on their own – assuming that all children learn the same thing at the same time and in the same manner, thus failing to address the multigrade and multi-level nature of a classroom. The exercise revealed that the teacher depends purely on conventional modes of teaching, teaching-learning material is rarely used, most of the materials used do not facilitate self-learning and the syllabus is “covered” by the teacher but not necessarily by the child. Similarly, in Karnataka, testing by an independent agency followed assessing learning levels of children by teachers. The results of the independent assessment were discussed with teachers, administrators and the community (as represented by the Village Education Committee (VEC) or School Education Committee (SEC)). The Learning Guarantee Programme (LGP) initiated by the Azim Premji Foundation in collaboration with the government of Karnataka started with a clear picture of the scale of the challenge ahead.

Two, enable the supervisory mechanism – meaning the block/cluster/mandal level academic resource persons – to directly test children and assess schools for themselves. Sharing this information at different levels highlighted both the scale of the problem as well as the need for a collective engagement with reality. The Andhra Pradesh Quality Improvement Programme (QIP) and Child Language Improvement Programme (CLIP) enabled both teachers and administrators to move away from impersonal numbers, grapple with learning levels of children in schools and share lessons with each other, including the VEC/parents [Patni 2006a].

Three, encourage teachers and administrators (district and block levels) to assess the quality of school infrastructure and facilities and upgrade children’s learning levels. Based on these profiles, schools are graded on a five-point scale to identify the extent of support required by each category of school. Again, like in AP, the effort in the School Monitoring Profile Programme of Uttaranchal was to enable local level officials and teachers to face the situation on the ground and use that as a point of departure

in the planning process and to inform monitoring [Mehrotra 2006]. The results were mapped visually and used as an effective communication tool.

These approaches stem from a recognition that the malaise in the school system could (among other factors) be attributed to the separation of “hard data” on matters like enrolment, number of training programmes, number of teachers and so on from the “outcomes” as seen in the learning of children. Statistics are often compiled to provide a macro picture of the state or district while what the above practices show is the need to look at not only each and every school but ensure that the focus is the child.

Assuring Equity

The Constitution and all official documents foreground the notion of equity, it has been central to educational planning in India since the mid-1950s. Yet, making sure that every single child has access to a functioning school with sufficient allocation of financial resources remains elusive. A fact attributed to lack of political will. With the 83rd Constitutional Amendment making education a fundamental right, one could argue that political will is now evident. Equally, the introduction of a 2 per cent education cess and enhanced allocations for elementary education has brought us closer to the goal of 6 per cent of GDP for education.

Nevertheless, as the recent debate on the Right to Education Bill highlights, three major problem areas remain:

First, the school system is highly differentiated and the poorest of the poor – especially in rural and tribal areas, in peripheral urban settlements and in sparsely populated regions – get far less resources than better-endowed areas. The continuation and proliferation of different forms of alternative schools also challenges the notion of equality. One set of interlocutors wants the bill to provide equal schooling for all children by introducing a common school system – wherein all schools are declared neighbourhood schools. Others argue that given the political reality, this may not be possible and advocate reserving at least 25 to 30 per cent of seats in all private schools for children from disadvantaged communities. The debate focuses on the issue of para teachers – with most experts arguing against the practice as they are paid less than regular teachers for comparable work. They are also critical about dilution of teacher qualifications, especially in a situation where para teachers cater to more disadvantaged children.

Second, the challenge concerns the considerable evidence that poor Muslim children – especially girls – are not accessing elementary education. The equity debate centres on the responsibility of the formal system to create an environment where religious schools could provide secular education enabling children, especially girls, to access education in addition to religious instruction.

The third area relates to tribal areas and the role of dialects and languages in the pedagogic process. Despite efforts by state governments, good quality education for tribal children remains a challenge – especially in view of the fact that tribal areas are not well connected and people speak their own language – posing a huge problem for young children forced to learn in the region’s majority language.

The Assam DPEP/SSA initiative points to how commitment to affirmative action needs backing by affirmative oriented planning

and resource allocation [Das 2006]. The Assam effort, started with identification of areas and groups that needed urgent attention such as physically isolated regions, char and riverine areas, forest areas, flood-prone areas, tea gardens, areas of conflict (relief camps), girls, Muslims, urban deprived children and migrant children. Concurrently social groups that needed special attention and areas that were disadvantaged because of location or agro-climatic conditions were identified. A detailed list of underprivileged areas and groups was drawn up. The next stage in planning and budget preparation involved ignoring broad unit costs and universal normative allocations, ensuring flexibility in norms and designing special packages to meet the specific requirements of these disadvantaged pockets.

The Indus project in Virudhnagar is an initiative that addresses the very thorny issue of child labour working in hazardous industries [Murlykrishnan 2006]. The current tendency to define all children out of school as child labour has tended to reduce attention to children working in hazardous industries. The Virudhnagar project has adopted an integrated approach by providing alternative learning routes such as transitional education centres for mainstreaming children, providing cash incentives, launching intensive social campaigns to reach communities as well as employers and above all address the livelihood concerns of the families concerned, through convergent support from related departments. Here the agency of key officials such as the district collector has been instrumental in the project being effective and children actually being withdrawn from work.

One outcome of this project has been that child labour in the project area has gone out of the public domain into a private space. In Sivakasi, children have been withdrawn from match factories and now do the same work within homes of employers. This underscores the need for a deeper understanding of the varied and new forms that child labour takes and the need to move away from generic definitions of child labour to a more nuanced understanding of the problem.

In some states, the efforts made under DPEP to reach out to Muslim children through working with 'Maktabs' (neighbourhood school attached to a mosque) in particular the MP government, are noteworthy [Rajagopal 2006]. The government recognised the critical role of the madrasa board in reaching out to Muslim children and evolved a partnership of mutual trust and respect with the existing madrasa board. The mutually agreed upon strategy was to add the formal mainstream curriculum to the 'deeni talim' (religious instruction) of the madrasas. While there is so far little authentic information on the impact of this initiative on learning levels of Muslim children, the efforts to reach out to madrasas across the state, represents a positive move.

While the role of the state is certainly important in terms of affirmative policies and resource allocations in the education field, well-intentioned policies and programmes are often diluted. It is here that the agency of the individual comes into play; macro strategies to ensure equal access and quality fail when there is low teacher motivation, negative teacher attitudes and prejudices coupled with insensitivity of key players.

In this context the MV Foundation initiative to create an association of teachers (Bala Karmika Vimochana Vedika – BKVV

Teachers Forum for elimination of child labour) is noteworthy [Patni 2006b]. Reminiscent of the Adhyapika Manch (a forum for women teachers) under the Lok Jumbish, this programme motivates teachers to make them more empathetic to the specific needs and situations of child labour.

Empowered Communities

The role of community-based forums like village education committees or parent-teachers associations in ensuring accountability is recognised. Particularly post-National Policy on Education 1986, this became a sine qua non of a good education system. School committees were considered essential components of all the EFA projects (Bihar Education Project, APPEP, Lok Jumbish, UP Basic Education Project, etc), the District DPEP and now SSA. Several states have made statutory provisions for such committees. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment has devolved powers to panchayati raj institutions, which also provide for education committees.

Though all these committees exist on the ground a review of the nature of community involvement in primary education reveals that in spite of entrusted responsibilities, the committees rarely have any real power to ensure school/teacher accountability or better performance [Govinda 2003]. Under some of the projects and definitely under SSA these committees have played a key role in infrastructure development, but if the schools are to be answerable for the child's learning ability then these local committees need to have the power to ensure and demand accountability of the school system. The National Curriculum Framework 2005 pointed out the possibility of tensions and conflicts arising between panchayats and their school committees as well as between the local committees/local bodies and the education administration.

The steps taken by the Nagaland government's communitisation programme for devolving powers to local bodies, serves as an excellent example of achieving the objective of promoting government-community partnership for education at the grassroots level through local bodies and committees [Singh and Matum 2006]. The objective was to give teeth to the goal of empowered community involvement.

For the first time the concept of community participation went beyond devolving of responsibilities to actual transfer of power to local bodies. Under this programme, the community was empowered through delegation of powers to the VEC to manage and supervise government schools, and ensure accountability of government employees. Under the Communitisation Act, VECs now disburse teacher salaries, and can invoke the "no work, no pay" principle and take appropriate disciplinary action against erring teachers. Using these salary deductions, the committee funds other school-based activities.

In a communitised village, the village council constitutes a VEC, which now spans a wider group of stakeholders. The council selects the VEC chairman and members are drawn from the community, the school, and from specific local institutions, with a certain number of seats reserved for women. In one stroke, the government of Nagaland both devolved responsibilities and transferred powers to local committees. This radical step was

confined not only to devolution of powers in the education sector but included public utilities – water supply, roads, forests, power, sanitation, health and other welfare/developmental schemes. *This is the key – efforts in one sector are unlikely to succeed unless the larger environment is conducive to the programme.*

The Pratham programme is an NGO-led initiative in Kutch, Gujarat, to work towards empowering existing VECs [Saxena 2006]. Initiated after the 2000 earthquake left the school system devastated, this Rural Community Approach Programme covers 500 schools in rural Kutch. It operates on the premise that creating a committee is insufficient unless these committees become proactive and provide the VECs sustained inputs to enable them to play this role

Recognising the importance of the role of elected PRI bodies and to overcome any potential conflict with the panchayat, an interface was created between the VEC, panchayats and the larger community through the Shikshan Gram Sabhas. The gram sabhas are the forums where educated older children are invited to volunteer to work with younger ones to improve their reading and writing skills. The performance of the children in school is presented in the gram sabha in the form of a child-wise Dhan Patrak (educational profile of each child). The Dhan Patrak enables parents to track children's progress. The Pratham experience shows that information on every child can become a powerful tool in the hands of parents and the larger community as represented by the Shiksha Gram Sabha.

Facilitating Two-way Communication

If the government and all other stakeholders truly believe that Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE) is possible only with the active support and involvement of parents and the larger community, improving information flow and communication becomes a priority. Free flow of information upwards, downwards and laterally and freedom to communicate with decision-makers becomes an important dimension to counter public perception that government and large NGOs are not transparent about their intentions, plans, and actions. Under the Right to Information Act, the government is required in law to provide information, but the onus of “demanding” devolves on civil society.

Issues of communication within the government system – between high-level policymakers and implementers, between supervisors and teachers and between the academic wing and administrative wings are only now receiving some attention. Recent public debates on transparency and communication have tended to focus on civil society's access to information.

The Nagaland communitisation programme was successful in creating a broad base of support by systematically communicating the programme and linking it to traditional systems of local governance. Between evolving the concept in January 2001 and the promulgation of an Ordinance in March 2002, the government made efforts to systematically communicate the main objectives and working mechanisms to the administrative system and local government institutions. This “broader” consensus building was instrumental in blunting any opposition from teachers unions or the administration.

Assessment has always been a contentious issue feared by both teachers and administrators given its potential to “expose” the

real picture. Concurrent assessment of learning outcomes is integral to monitoring quality. It is in this context that the Azim Premji Foundation's Learning Guarantee Programme (LGP) strategy of communication provides useful lessons [Ramachandran 2006]. It evolved a communication strategy with the help of professionals, recognising that communication was essential to build trust, especially when working in partnership with government on the one hand and local communities on the other and simultaneously reassuring all stakeholders that participation in the LGP was purely voluntary.

In this regard, the CLIP programme in Andhra Pradesh is noteworthy. Despite not accomplishing “anything new”, it effectively gears up the system to do what it is supposed to, i.e., monitor the academic functioning of schools [Patni 2006a]. The officials are expected to spend the entire day in the school and stay back to share their experience with the school committee and the panchayat. The state project director (SPD) publicised his mobile phone numbers to all the schools – including the children. Anyone from any part of the state can call and share an experience or draw attention to a problem.

Transforming Classrooms and Schools

The notion of energising schools has long been a key focus area in elementary education and has received unprecedented attention in the last 15 years. Most UEE programmes have paid attention to teacher training, TLM, child-centred pedagogy, improved infrastructure, etc. The effort at transforming attending school into a joyful experience includes pedagogic renewal programmes, making the classroom child friendly; and developing activity based learning material and teacher support materials. The DPEP programme made special efforts to en-gender the teaching-learning process by addressing the concern in textbooks, teacher training and in the overall school environment and facilities.

An important criticism of initiatives like the DPEP is that these strategies were implemented in a modular fashion – for example, teacher training was not always linked to textbook development. The various dimensions of quality are rarely woven together, viz, the ability of a teacher to teach creatively and make the classroom child friendly is not about teaching-learning materials and textbooks alone. It is inextricably linked to the teacher's status in the system, the autonomy he/she enjoys and the sense of accountability to children and parents. Not seeing the entire education process as an organic whole is a big handicap.

The Activity Based Learning programme in Chennai [Mahapatra 2006], the Rishi Valley Education programme [Prashanthi and Padma 2006], Active Schools Latur [Pattanayak 2006], the QIP and CLIP programme of Andhra Pradesh [Patni 2006a], the Pratham Initiative in Gujarat [Saxena 2006] and ILIP in West Bengal [Sen and Nag 2006] all foreground the agency of the teacher in bringing about change. Working with the teacher as the lynchpin in the process of change demands going beyond formal training and material production – it starts with kindling self motivation and enthusiasm of teachers by appealing to their creativity and desire for satisfaction in their work.

In the Active Schools programme in Latur, Maharashtra, the district authorities exposed selected teachers to good practices in

different parts of the country and then encouraged them to conceptualise their own strategy [Pattanayak 2006a]. After a successful experiment in one school the district authorities expanded it to one school each in 15 clusters and then to 117 schools. Expansion throughout the entire district is now under consideration. As a first step, teachers mobilised parents and other community members to participate in school improvement. Self-learning materials were developed for group activities and timetables reorganised. They introduced 'chawdi vachan' (reading skill demonstration before community), sharing of report cards and discussion with parents on a regular basis. 'Gat sammelan' (cluster level meetings) to review progress and share experiences followed, providing opportunities to use locally available material and to both review progress and share experiences. Teachers played a key role in designing this intervention, resulting in a high degree of ownership and the results are just beginning to show. Reports indicate that learning outcomes are comparatively high in the Active Schools as compared to other schools and that children from private schools are moving to government schools.

Quality Improvement Programme

The Quality Improvement Programme, a precursor to the CLIP programme in Andhra Pradesh, used the accelerated learning method similar to the "learning to read" programme of Pratham Education Initiative, whereby a time-bound 45-day programme was introduced to enable children to learn to read and acquire basic numeracy and arithmetic competencies [Patni 2006a]. The drawbacks of this approach were soon evident. As the SPD, SSA explained, "There was no visible change in the mindset of the teachers after the 45-day period of intervention. Further, it was also back to normal business for everyone in the system as soon as the 46th day dawned! What was required was a seamless and continuous intervention during the academic session."

Essentially the CLIP programme moved away from a time-bound mode to one where teachers had to use the techniques they had learnt in QIP. The object was to focus on developing the language skills of children in classes 1 to 3. Rigorous monitoring wherein all supervisory and allied academic institutions were expected to continuously visit schools to monitor what was happening inside the classroom provided support. The important lesson from this is that pedagogic creativity does not lead to appreciable change unless backed by systemic efforts to monitor learning rather than merely generating data on enrolment and transition. The message from CLIP is clear – sustained interest and personal involvement of district education officers (DEOs), dy DEOs and district institutes of education and training (DIET) Principals makes the difference in the field.

The Integrated Learning Improvement Programme (ILIP) of West Bengal combines efforts to improve classroom pedagogy with the core strategy of empowerment and capacity-building of teachers [Sen and Nag 2006]. The aim is to move away from the monologue style of imparting education prevalent in most government schools and make them realise that all children can progress within a stipulated time, with the teacher facilitating children to learn amongst themselves. Existing textbooks were

used as workbooks, spelling out the competencies required through a set of learning tasks and teachers and children given freedom to improvise. Evidently, teachers have responded positively as Moushami, a schoolteacher put it "using these worksheets impacts the processes in the class".

Challenge of Remote Areas

Reaching children and schools in remote areas has been a major challenge. In recent years, the efforts to use the broadcast media such as radio as a tool for teacher training as well as classroom instruction merit attention. The Karnataka state government has aired the radio programme, *Keli Kali* since the year 2000. The *Chukki Chinna* programmes of Education Development Centre Inc India (EDC) have replaced the *Keli Kali* programmes from classes 1-5, and the *Keli Kali* programmes for classes 6-8 are continuing. CLR, Pune too has developed strategies for English language instruction using radio. In Jharkhand, radio use strengthens aural comprehension through a storytelling programme.

The Interactive Radio Initiative in Karnataka (part of the dot-EDU T4 project of the EDC) is a distance education programme targeting students in classes I to V and focuses on mathematics, science and social studies instruction. Started as a pilot project for classes IV and V, in 2005 the programme expanded to include classes I to III and today reaches 50,000 primary schools in the state [Vedant 2006]. Both teachers and students are engaged every day for about half an hour in a series of radio instructed activities that encourage interaction between students and teachers and amongst the teachers. The radio lesson becomes the point of departure to enliven a classroom experience that could otherwise be quite dry. Radio programmes are shaped to strengthen and support the teacher in her role as a facilitator and provide pivotal guidance to learning in the classroom. The content ensures higher learning gains among children and the activity-based format of the programmes are a regular source of teacher training. Hence, the programmes have a "dual audience" approach – targeting both child and teacher.

However, it is important to remember that radio is no substitute for a teacher. For every radio programme to translate into an effective learning process, the preparedness of the teacher for transacting the broadcast becomes critical. It is perhaps premature to assess the impact of this initiative, nonetheless, preliminary indicators suggests that student attendance and attention during the radio lesson has improved significantly. Besides, a shadow audience of parents, shopkeepers, school development and monitoring committee (SDMC) members and generally all radio users is in the making. Once again, like all good ideas, the overall drawbacks in the system could undermine the best of innovations – lack of space and crowded classrooms, teacher absenteeism, lack of sustained monitoring particularly in remote areas.

Generally, quality improvement interventions tend to limit themselves to improving basic language and arithmetic skills of children at the elementary level. It is in this context that Agastya Foundation's work in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka provides valuable insights into how schools can be energised from the outside using science education as a platform [Sharma 2006]. It is widely acknowledged that learning science is a creative and fun

way to dramatically stimulate children by addressing the child's desire for exploration.

Agastya Foundation decided to concentrate on government schools, to make education more interesting for poor children/disadvantaged groups. To this end, they worked to wean them away from rote learning and discover the joy of creativity. They did this by addressing curricular issues outside the classroom through science centres, mobile labs, science fairs, library and activities. The foundation drew upon a resource pool of renowned scientists who were involved in planning the intervention and at the local level encouraged retired science teachers and others interested in science to help the initiative.

The impact of the Agastya Foundation interventions need to be viewed in the overall context of government schools, where the standards of science teaching are often low, and even teachers are rarely clear on all the concepts. In fact at the upper primary level, teachers who have not studied science at the high school level often end up teaching science. Student capacity to benefit from the intervention depends upon understanding of basic concepts. One mobile lab instructor admitted that while children could understand basic things such as the difference between domestic and wild animals, they found it difficult to understand the numerous principles of science, despite the very high quality of instruction in the mobile lab. Therefore such a programme needs to be dovetailed with improving science teaching inside the classroom, as has been ably demonstrated through the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme of Eklavya in Madhya Pradesh.

The ability of the Agastya Foundation to involve eminent scientists in teaching science in schools underscores the importance of taking a hard look at the content of science as well as of science teaching in schools. It reflects how the government can forge partnerships with institutions of higher learning and science research establishments to energise education. In today's India where many new industries are knowledge based, this issue acquires urgency.

While under SSA, education of children in urban areas is receiving attention, there are not many examples of successful efforts to overcome the complex realities of urban poor children. Sharp class divisions, perceptions of formal education as irrelevant in the life of a poor working child, and the uncertainty of life in general, make school the last choice for a poor family and often pushes children not only into work but also into petty thieving and drug abuse.

Taking this harsh reality head-on, the government initiative of offering skill-based education at the elementary level in urban Chandigarh schools is a bold one even though it goes against the conventional wisdom of not introducing vocational education at the elementary level [Pattanayak 2006b]. The Chandigarh initiative demonstrates how through introduction of skills, identified through community consultations that a community perceives as relevant, the schools have managed to score on several levels. Never enrolled and school drop outs have been brought into schools, skill training has led students not only to learn a skill and competently apply it in practice, but also created the environment where basic learning skills of reading, writing and numeracy

have been enthusiastically acquired by children. Children and teachers have been able to explore their expressive interests and inadvertently this initiative has contributed to a more holistic education for children as well as ensuring a more meaningful teaching learning experience for teachers. The challenge is to make sure that all children in this programme gain the basic elementary level competencies, and that their families do not compel the child to work. In a rapidly urbanising situation, strategies of mainstreaming children needs to be varied and the Chandigarh initiative offers an example of how a conventional formal school can adapt itself to meet the learning and skill development needs of urban poor children. The key elements here seem to be willingness to experiment and centring the initiative on the lived realities of the urban poor.

In an effort to provide regular academic support to teachers, several types of institutional mechanisms exist. The DIETs that were set up in the 1980s and the block and cluster level resource centres that came up in the 1990s are part of this endeavour. A precursor to these was the Goa School Complexes programme set up in the 1970s to provide sustained academic support to schools and teachers to enhance both teaching and school performance [Sheshagiri 2006]. While the core initiative was to establish an organic support system between different levels of schools, the in-built hierarchy in the education system seems to have taken over, with lead schools seeking to guide rather than support, and often guiding with little or no understanding of the needs of the primary school. Further, teachers tended to interpret the school complex scheme as one that brought in more rigid school inspection instead of support. Their constant refrain remained: why should we be "cross-checked" by teachers and others who are working in different institutions? It points out the inadequate mental, intellectual and emotional preparation needed for collective work. Schools require sustained academic support, but the experience of the Goa School Complex shows how the form can overtake the spirit of an initiative. Essentially, unless a shared vision of long-term objectives is built among the different players, and processes that allow for democratic sharing of knowledge are put in place, goals cannot be attained.

Monitoring and Assessment

There are 7,12,239 primary schools and 2,62,286 upper primary recognised schools in India reportedly catering to 128.3 million children at the primary level (of whom 23.12 million are SCs and 12.51 million are ST children) and 48.7 million at the upper primary level (of whom 8.07 million are SC and 3.66 million are ST children [GOI 2006]). The sheer scale of the Indian school system is mind-boggling. Monitoring such a vast system can prove to be a nightmare for any government. Even so, in the last 20 years the government has introduced national as well as state specific data gathering mechanisms. Though commendable, these data gathering mechanisms have been gradually divorced from monitoring and assessment. The numbers collected and collated – at best – give us a glimpse of scale rather than quality of the initiatives. This realisation has led some state governments to move towards a decentralised system that not only captures numbers of schools

and children in school but attempts to introduce parameters that could help them assess quality.

Developed to categorise schools according to physical facilities as well as learning outcomes, the Uttaranchal School Monitoring system is an interesting initiative (albeit fairly new and still evolving).¹ An additional innovation in Uttaranchal is the generation of school performance maps at state, district and (sub-district) taluka levels. This visualisation works as an effective communication tool, as it “has great value in creating an immediate impact on any audience – because it gives a clear picture of the educational scenario within any geographic boundary” [Das 2004]. The government has just begun to use the data for strategic planning, however, it is too early to comment on the outcomes. Government of India is also highlighting the school grading system as a possible model to weave in some quality parameters. The positive fallout is that officials at all levels of the bureaucracy talk about this and – ‘Koti karan’ (grading) – has become a buzzword.

ILIP of West Bengal tried to give substance to the idea of continuous and timely assessment. Since teaching and competency building have been broken down into a set of teaching and learning tasks, evaluation follows a similar logic. The pattern is instantaneous evaluation at the end of each task, recapitulation at the end of every day’s lesson, weekly/periodic evaluation, terminal evaluation at the end of a specified module, capped by a final evaluation at the end of the academic year.

Principles of Going to Scale

How does a local specific innovation go to scale? The Rishi Valley Institute for Educational Resources (RIVER) programme of Krishnamurti Foundation of India is an example of how an innovation that started by responding to local specific needs developed into a “model”. The experience of working in 13 schools in Rishi Valley helped develop a mechanism for multi-grade and multi-level learning. The Rishi Valley experience inspired the Nali Kali programme in Mysore District of Karnataka in 1992. Subsequently the generic lessons from the RIVER programme have been adapted in different parts of the country [Prashanti and Padma 2006].

Rishi Valley was clear that what was being scaled up was not their “model” but the broad framework and generic principles.

The principal characteristic of this process is the flexibility and the freedom to transcreate to suit different contexts. The process of scaling up created challenges of acceptability and ownership. There was resistance to the idea of adopting a model. Clearly, it is difficult to accept a model designed by others, but taking the framework and revitalising it with a local flavour gives ownership both to the teachers and the learners.

Conclusions

The overarching message from this exercise is that interlocking elements formulate the education system and sustainability hinges on the ability of the pioneers to systematically weave in practices and processes into the fabric of the system. Teacher training alone cannot improve teaching and learning processes. Addressing administrative, personnel and other issues alongside accountability systems could help us turn the corner. A systemic, not a piecemeal approach, is needed even though we may start from one point. A virtuous process needs to be set in motion where an innovation – even if limited – demonstrates tangible outcomes resulting in improvement in the input processes in the next round and the initiative gathers greater support within the system. The second round could take the practice to a higher level, further improving outcomes and gaining more champions in the system. This could – if managed right – set in motion a virtuous spiral of change.

Sustaining innovations or going to scale is not just a techno-managerial exercise. It is inherently political. Negotiating with people who have entrenched stakes in maintaining the status quo cannot be underestimated. When “innovations” are allowed to fade away the education community watches with dismay. The inability of the pioneers to negotiate with the larger system and build in a sense of ownership is partly responsible for the demise of promising practices. Equally, excessive dependence on the agency of one individual as the driving spirit also erodes credibility. We have a lot to learn from failures, unfortunately, the trajectory of failure is rarely documented. Perhaps the time has come to seriously analyse why innovations with promise collapse and what happens when programmes are taken to scale without adequate preparation. Such an exercise may give us greater insight and help government and non-governmental players to take promising practices to scale and ensure sustainability.

NOTE

- 1 The Uttaranchal School Monitoring programme dates back to the UP DPEP effort to grade schools according to physical facilities and teacher availability at the cluster level. This was modified by Uttaranchal in 2003.

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