

Primary Education

Debating Quality and Quantity

A recent workshop sought to identify persistent “trouble spots” in the primary education school system in states of West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. As it appears, top-down assistance is only one factor among many others that distinguishes a better performing school from a non-performing one. Other vital factors that raised the “quality” of schooling related to issues of decentralisation and autonomy, the quality of teaching as well as initiatives taken to educate less privileged children.

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How do primary school teachers view their own professional responsibility, accountability, as well as professional autonomy in making and implementing school-related academic decisions? How do they deal with the challenge of motivating the first-generation learner from whom they often have a huge social distance? In what specific ways do the recent reform initiatives in primary education, such as the DPEP, SSA, the mid-day meal programme, the external evaluation of primary grade students, and the involvement of the neighbourhood/community in school affairs through Village Education Committees (VECs), Ward Education Committees (WECs) and Mother Teacher Associations (MTAs) help the teachers and the street-level education bureaucracy to deal with the task at hand, namely, to improve the quantity as well as quality of primary education? Amidst these diverse decentralisation initiatives, is it possible to envisage a new role for the “centre”, that is to say, for the supra-local officials

at the state and central government levels, in providing necessary professional and other kinds of assistance and inputs to teachers and local officials, without eclipsing local innovations, autonomy and initiatives? Against the backdrop of the recently introduced myriad government school reforms, how do we begin to comprehend the phenomenon of growing popularity of private schools – both “elite” and “budget” – among parents?

These are some of the questions that engaged a number of teachers, (sub-district, district, and state-level) school education officials, elected members of primary school council and local bodies, NGO activists, private school organisers and researchers during a workshop on “Quality and Quantity: Whither Primary Education in Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal?”, organised at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata, on December 21, 2005, as part of an ongoing ICSSR/IDPAD collaborative project on educational decentralisation and its quality/equality effects. The project coordinators set the tone of the debate through a brief presentation of the key

elements of their ongoing collaborative research in Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal and its preliminary results. The main motivation behind this meeting was to elicit voices and views on the above-mentioned themes and questions of those actors and practitioners who are most directly involved in running “the mill of knowledge” – to use Dickens’ pithy description of a school – and those who interact with children in classrooms on a day-to-day basis.

Both research and policy action need to be informed by such “grassroots” perspectives on the quotidian practices that define a typical rural school, the teaching-learning activities that go on inside the classroom on a typical day, the problems and challenges that regularly surface in managing school affairs, and above all the “vision” of education that these frontline actors could offer, gleaned in turn from their hands-on experience. Indeed, during the course of fieldwork, coordinators and their research assistants greatly benefited from the “wit and wisdom” of primary school teachers, parents, district and sub-district level education officials, primary

school council chairmen, members of local panchayats, some NGO activists and private school managers and above all children. Many of them generously gave the concerned researchers their time, patiently answered their questions and gave very useful insights on various dimensions of primary education. The aim of the said meeting was to bring together some of these engaged and inspired people who have been trying, in their respective spheres of activity, to make a difference to the spread and quality of primary education, so that their views and suggestions are heard in a common forum and that there is a face-to-face dialogue between higher level policy-makers and grassroots level practitioners.

Comparisons are always difficult even within the same national boundaries; hence the project does not make any attempts at comparing the primary education system in Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. Both Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal have made significant strides in spreading primary education; still in both these states the task of universalising quality primary education remains

formidable and complex, though for different sets of reasons.

Challenges and Promises

Among patterns of challenges, difficulties as well as promises thrown up by the discussions at the meeting, five stand out. First, there seem to be inequalities in public spending even within a district between blocks, and within a block between schools, when measured in terms of staff strength and other instructional and infrastructural resources. For example, there appears to be an ironical situation of both acute shortage and surfeit of teachers in the primary school system. Indeed, in urban and semi-urban areas some government schools suffer from a shortage of students and surplus of teachers; these are the so-called “uneconomical” schools facing closure. In the less privileged areas/neighbourhoods in contrast, often one or two teachers have to manage single- or double-handedly huge classes and other school-related responsibilities. According to an official estimate, to implement the teacher-student

ratio of 1:40, 73,000 additional teachers will be required in primary schools of West Bengal. Similarly, there is a need for a large number of additional school inspectors in the state, since right now on an average a school inspector has in his charge 80 schools, 300 teachers and 10,000 students. And in all these respects, disparities in public spending across schools in privileged versus backward areas constitute a major trouble spot for the primary education systems in West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. Again, as some participants pointed out, the adequate and timely supply of textbooks is sometimes hampered due to the fact that in some school circles there is an abundant supply of the same, whereas in the neighbouring circles the supply falls far short of demand. Such anomalies could be minimised, a circle officer claimed, with a little more coordination among the concerned authorities and perhaps without spending a lot more money.

Second, dovetailed to the first, there seems to be a need for a “new centre” (i.e., new role for supra-local officials) in this changed environment of educational decentralisation. That is to say, while several school-related decisions and academic choices need to be decentralised right up to the school level, the “central party” – be it the provincial or central government – should not disappear or abdicate its own responsibilities in schooling matters. As it became palpable from the discussion in the workshop, the newly introduced mid-day meal programme in West Bengal has been gradually taking root in different parts of the state after having experienced various initial troubles (especially the nagging “middle class” scepticism about its worth), particularly because a handful of reform-oriented officials at the state government level have made several timely interventions, issued useful general guidelines from time to time, taken a number of midstream corrective steps, and above all, have genuinely encouraged regional variations in the programme, extending strong support for diverse local level arrangements for the supply of cooked meal in schools across the state. While there has been a genuine push from this “new centre” encouraging local actors to accept ownership for this programme and the associated responsibilities, the former has also adopted several innovative strategies to ensure local accountability. For example, phone numbers of concerned state-level authorities were notified in several

newspapers, requesting concerned citizens to contact them in case of any complaints with the school meal programme in their localities.

Third, such fine balancing of the local and the supra-local should perhaps be more vigorously attempted in other core areas of primary education, namely, in curriculum design, textbook selection, student evaluation, pedagogic innovations and so on. Many participants observed that although several experiments and initiatives in teaching practices and pedagogies have been recently introduced under the aegis of the “centre” (at times it is hard to remember the acronyms of such fast proliferating programmes), these are more often than not fixed packages set from above, leaving little room for professional autonomy and responsibility of teachers. That teachers are a professional cadre and therefore need to be given the challenge and the impetus to engage themselves in such core educational activities as designing curriculum, writing and choosing textbooks, professionally interacting among peers about effective teaching methods, setting question papers and evaluating their own pupils, etc, have not entered into policy figurations of supra-local bodies in a major way. And because teachers have not been adequately motivated and challenged to think along similar lines, they themselves are resigned to playing the role of a mere (and rather unenthusiastic and unthinking) implementer of a top-down package.

Local Initiatives

Fourth, some speakers in the workshop, however, gave some inspiring examples of local initiatives and innovative teaching practices that survive and flourish even within such a centralised structure of educational decision-making. One primary school teacher painstakingly narrated how he and his colleagues made use of various creative strategies and teaching practices so that pupils from underprivileged sections of society attended school regularly and got interested and involved in classroom activities. In his deeply perceptive view, for these first-generation learners, the first encounter with an almost alien world of a formal school is usually traumatic unless teachers are sensitive and sympathetic about their special educational needs, and creative in their dealings with them. By and large, some of these children find it difficult to concentrate on their

studies and therefore easily lose interest and become restive. In such circumstances it would be counterproductive, he observed, to act as a strict disciplinarian. On the contrary, teachers in his school follow a creative strategy: whenever a child loses attention in classroom activities, he is allowed to go to a common room and draw pictures of his choice on the board using colour pencils kept in the room. Often these small “breaks” from a fixed routine are reinvigorating and help them regain their concentration as well as interest in their peers, teachers, and in what is happening inside the classroom. He even made a bold suggestion that it is helpful not to use any textbooks in the first two months of a child’s school life. Not long ago this school, catering mainly to dalit children, was on the verge of closure. But due to concerted efforts on the part of teachers, local panchayat members, and the chairman of the district primary school council, the school functioning has improved and transformed itself into a vibrant, functioning school, with the active involvement of its pupils in classroom activities as well as other cultural and extra-curricular programmes. Such is the level of academic and overall performance of its pupils now that many of these first-generation learners regularly top the list of successful candidates in the high school admission test.

Another speaker narrated his experience of running several “non-mainstream” schools in a district in West Bengal that shun the usual practice of rote learning and instead involve students themselves in various pedagogic experiments. For example, students are encouraged to gather information about the history and geography of their immediate locality, the story behind the name of their village, about livelihood patterns and changes therein over time, the structures of old and new houses, the main crops grown in the area, etc. It is an attempt to write the history and geography books pertaining to their own localities before they begin to read the prescribed books on these subjects. They often ask their own parents and grand-parents about these details and thus set out a process of involving the entire community in teaching-learning activities. Often their parents, mothers in particular, participate in such community-wide educational endeavours with enthusiasm. Such moving examples of school transformation and innovative pedagogic experiments give us crucial clues about “what works” in the school system at a

time when we hear so much about “what does not”.

Questions of Evaluation

Fifth, the participants concurred that student evaluation is a complex task, offering no single or simple foolproof method. Several teachers were critical of the existing policy of automatic promotion without examination from one primary grade to another, especially when students are required any way to sit for external evaluation tests at the end of grade II and IV. This of course pushes back the enquiry further and raises a prior question: “What do we wish to evaluate in the first place, and relatedly, what are our educational aims?” As one participant astutely observed, perhaps we are looking for keen and curious students, for those who learn “how to learn”, and not necessarily “what to learn”.

Finally, at the end of this collective deliberation, one is left with the inevitable “so what”/“what next” question. The organisers of the meeting of course did not

have the unreasonable expectation that through this discourse one could radically change the world of education. Yet, if educational research, in some important sense, is “research for [policy and public] action”, and if there is a need to educate ourselves, i e, the public, about public education, then it is possible through such deliberations to take a few modest steps in the direction of identifying the major trouble spots in the school system as well as the appropriate remedial measures. More tangibly, the project coordinators intend to circulate the main findings of the study as well as a summary of the discussions that took place at the meeting among all the schools they have visited during the course of their fieldwork (200 in each of the two selected states). It is hoped that this would help keeping the education dialogue alive. There is indeed no alternative to unceasing, time-consuming, trouble-torn, democratic dialogue on educational purposes and their actualisation.

In this connection, it is well to point out that some “teacher-politicians” and members of certain teacher unions have raised

some doubts about the “political motives” of the researchers conducting this study and even branded them as “anti-government”. As mentioned at the outset, the purpose of this research is not to engage in counter-productive “blame-games”; but smugness about problems that beset the education system is also unhelpful, as it obfuscates rather than aids any attempts to achieve the goal of universal quality basic education. Keeping quiet about serious problems that we need to address with respect to the present-day primary education system is bound to be costly; it is quite a short step from that kind of attitude to a belief that “things are fine on the whole so far as school education is concerned and therefore we have reached the end of policy and public action”. The reality however is that we have many miles to go before we can feel so complacent and therefore debates must continue about various reform initiatives, allowing the full play of “argumentative” and even dissenting voices. **EPW**

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