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School Education in the Draft National Education Policy 2019: A Preliminary Review

Abstract

This article is focussing on some specific aspects of school education, ECCE and teacher education of draft NEP 2019. It in turn tried to flag certain issues of learning gaps, conducting repeated assessments as a solution for that and expressed the need for decentralisation. The article also appreciates the importance placed on pre school education. Further the author expresses an urgent need to develop a comprehensive teacher management policy.

A lot of people have responded to the Draft National Education Policy 2019. At the outset, it is important to acknowledge the reality that policies are only as good as its implementation. Well drafted policies, with all the right concepts and phrases are meaningless if they remain on paper. We, in India, have drafted excellent policies since the early fifties. Often, we say the same things over and over again. For example, the idea of school complexes, parity of pay and status among teachers, reducing the accent on memorisation and so on. In what way is this policy different — if it is indeed seen as a departure from 1968 and 1986? This brief article is not a comprehensive commentary on the draft NEP. It is selective, and focusses on some specific aspects of *school education, ECCE and teachers*.

The first "departure" that strikes the reader is the concept of the foundational stage and the inclusion of 3 to 6 years into it. This is indeed a welcome recommendation. Researchers and people working with young children have pointed out over and over again – through innumerable evaluations on ICDS and also on primary school – that the pre-school education component is weak in ICDS and in many states it is ignored on the ground. There is also considerable research based scientific evidence on the importance of the early years in cognitive development of children. Not withstanding compelling evidence and agreement across the board, the long-standing turf battle between the two ministries – namely Department of Women and Child and Department/Ministry of Education – has kept different stages in a young child's life in silos. If this policy is to make a dent, then this turf issue needs to be sorted out by the government on a priority basis. Children cannot and should not be held hostage to bureaucratic turfs and departmental budgets.

The content of pre-school education as it is being delivered both in government as well as private sector needs serious attention. Exposing children to mindless repetition of alphabets and numbers and expecting them to write alphabets and words needs to be discontinued. Equally, while handing over the mandate to NCERT/SCERT is welcome, what these institution need is an injection of new ideas and people who have demonstrated ability in this field. India has a rich resource pool of Montessori system based and other child-focussed experiential learning practitioners. Tapping into this

network would be essential to break out of the current system of pre-school education that is prevalent in many parts of India today.

When I was discussing the draft policy with colleagues in Mobile Crèche – they reminded me that health and nutrition of children of 3 to 6 years should not suffer. The ICDS programme has to continue to provide nutrition and monitor the health of children up to the age of 6. Inter-departmental consultations are essential to work on the details of how pre-school education would be provided in schools and health and nutrition continues to be monitored by the ICDS worker. This mechanism – if done with care – should ensure that children of 3-6 years get breakfast and lunch, additional supplementary nutrition to those who need it, regular growth monitoring, deworming and other health related interventions from the ICDS programme. There is a danger of this falling between the cracks if ground level coordination mechanism is not worked out and any departmental issues related to budget, staff management and prioritisation are not ironed out.

The part on foundational literacy and numeracy of the draft policy has attracted a great deal of attention – not only among the educational community, but also among ordinary people and in the media. Why is this so? Since the early 2000, and especially since 2005 (when ASER's first survey was done) the debate on what and how much are our children learning has been polarised. The NAS done by NCERT evinced a great deal of interest and the findings were taken quite seriously by many state governments. Similarly, assessments done in private schools by Educational Initiatives also turned the spotlight on the "learning crisis" in India – not only in government schools but in all kinds of private, aided and government schools. The tragedy is that administrators and teachers often blame the children, their family background, their irregularity and their overall health status for poor learning. We need to move beyond blame game and try to understand why learning remains a challenge in India (and indeed in many other countries across the world).

The draft policy gives four reasons for the "learning crisis" – namely lack of school preparedness, little focus on foundational literacy and numeracy, teacher capacity, teacher deployment and poor health and nutrition. While, as a start, the above points may tell us something about the issue; the hard reality is that these reasons (or excuses) ignore what is happening inside our schools. My own work spanning over 30 years has taught me that all children, regardless of economic status or location or community or gender will learn if they are taught at their own pace and if we start at their level. Therefore, it is high time we acknowledged that it is our own inability to teach children at the right level, starting from where they are, is the most important factor affecting learning. This is well known and we have seen so many different initiatives in the country where children are taught in small groups at their pace and starting from where they are. Several state governments tried their hand at the Rishi Valley inspired activity based learning – like Nali Kali in Karnataka and ABL in Tamil Nadu. But many of them either abandoned it very soon or reverted to time tested textbook driven methods. Equally, as pointed out by many researchers and practitioners (especially teachers) – rushing to finish the curriculum takes precedence, thereby leaving many children behind.

What constitutes foundational skills/ knowledge? Is this only limited to language and arithmetic or does this also include other dimensions of "foundational skills"?It is important to articulate what this constitutes and how it would be integrated into the curriculum of pre-school education and Classes 1 to 3. The value of music, games, art, environmental studies and most importantly, appreciating diversity and differences.

How will we – a diverse country – drive the change? Can NCERT and their sisters SCERT do it all? Or will we – finally – involve teachers

to drive the change. The idea of school complexes as the basic unit for planning, training, monitoring and experimentation – needs a massive push. It is almost as radical as the PRI amendment that was set in motion in the 1990s. Yes, it is high time we handed over / delegated sufficient authority, responsibility, budget and other resources to school complexes. Let institutions like SCERT, DIET, BRC, CRC, IASE, CTE and similar bodies support and respond to the needs of school complexes. Empower them with resources so that they can access the best expertise and the best resources. One national template has not worked and will not work in the future. Specific challenges faced among migrant communities, street/ working children, multi-lingual classrooms (especially in urban / peri urban areas, tribal areas) in border areas (between states) need context and situation specific strategies. Empowered school complexes can provide space for much needed contextual planning.

Since the mid 1990s, when DPEP was launched alongside many other state specific basic education programmes; community participation has been the magical buzzword. Yes, parental participation is important; however, we need to keep in mind that schools located in poor areas / among disadvantages communities may not be able to access resources the way schools in high end areas where high fee-paying parents are located. The educational status, financial abilities and other social capital related resources are unequally distributed. Qualitative research done by me over the last 30 years reveals the limited impact parents have on monitoring/supporting learning in schools. They may be able to monitor teacher regularity, infrastructure related issues and to some extent overall school environment – but parents support to teaching and learning has been quite limited. Therefore, the policy should acknowledge the need for additional support – either through local non-governmental organisations / philanthropic groups, retired teachers etc. – in resource poor areas.

Let's now turn our attention to dropouts and the challenge of reintegrating children into formal stream of education. This is a welcome addition to a policy document – many children continue to drop out at different levels and an even more serious problem is that enrolled children may not actually attend school or attend irregularly. Governments need to be aware of the magnitude of the problem across all levels, geographic areas, as also the social groups/ communities which have a larger share of drop-outs. Migration has been known to contribute to both long absence as well as dropping out.

The concept of bridge courses (residential as well as non-residential), accelerated learning programmes have been with us since the early 1990s and reached its pinnacle during the DPEP programme. However, with the coming of Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (an amalgamation of SSA, RMSA, etc.) budgetary allocation for bridge courses was withdrawn and the RTE mandated special classes (for age appropriate admission) were introduced. The special classes have not taken off as there is no clarity on who will do it and how it would be done. Even schools / hostels catering to the most disadvantaged (like street children, ex-child workers, children who have been victims of violence / abuse) have not been allocated resources for long-duration (12 to 18 months) bridge courses to help them reach their age appropriate class. A mention needs to be made to ensure flexible funding for situation specific programmes to reintegrate dropouts.

There is a wide variety of learning needs of children who wish to get back into the formal educational stream. For example – a child who dropped out in early primary and is now 11 or 12 years, would need at least a 12 to 18 months "bridge" programme; on the other hand, a child who dropped out for just one year may need a shorter programme before she re-enters the formal stream. There cannot be any one template for a model.

KGBV under SSA was envisioned as an accelerated programme (now popularly

renamed as second chance) for girls who had dropped out during the primary cycle. However, recent evidence points to the utilisation of KGBV as yet another residential school for high achievers. Some states even conduct entrance examinations for entry into KGBV. The KGBV programme needs to be restored to its original design and could become an important vehicle for reintegrating dropout girls.

Another serious issue has to do with the idea of a national programme for tutors – one that will draw upon the student community, parents and others in the community. Segregating students on the basis of "bright" and "poor" goes against the basic ideals of equality and the purpose of school to enhance the self-esteem and self-confidence of children. What is needed is a well thought out multi-level teaching pedagogy in every school to cater to the learning needs of children who may be at different levels. Some may need support on a regular basis before or after school hours and there may be those who might need a short term bridge course to enable them to "catch up" with their peers. Some others may need more intensive inputs over a longer duration – especially if they did not attend school – for example street children and children who were working / in bondage and so on. Giving this responsibility to peers (other students), parents or volunteers need to be seriously reconsidered. The teaching community has to take primary responsibility for learning and not volunteers. Yes, peer learning and peer support is very valuable but that should not become the mainstay for remedial education.

Assessment, something which NCERT is closely involved with, has been both a magic bullet propagated by the large scale assessment industry as well as a bad word among the progressive education community. Both ends of the spectrum of views agree that assessment has to shift away from memorisation. The recent debate on no-detention policy is illustrative of how little we know about learning and the misconception about examinations as the only sure way to promote learning. We are a long way away from developing a new paradigm (as recommended in the draft NEP). May be India should seriously look at global experiences carefully and also the assessments done in schools that follow a different approach. One agency – the NCERT alone cannot pull this off. Wider consultation is needed to bring on board the wealth of ground level experiences in India.

The draft policy explains that NCERT will continue to conduct NAS and that "*the cycle of assessment will be a minimum of 3 years. The assessment will cover the entire range of curricular and learning domains, including knowledge and skills that are specific to disciplines, and generic capacities… This survey will provide an educational 'health check-up' of the system and thereby should be based on a sample and should not venture into a full-scale census assessment…*" Yet in another part of the same draft, there is a mention of Census-based assessment. The draft clarifies that "*States may conduct a census-based assessment of student learning at the class and school level similar to the NAS periodically – called the State Assessment Survey (SAS). This may be considered for Grades 3, 5, and 8…"* Why is it necessary to have so many assessments?

Assessments are valuable only when teachers are able to see the answer papers of the children, analyse them and understand what and how their students are learning. A national assessment to create a data bank may be desirable as a health-check-up; but we should keep in mind that assessment data cannot change anything – until and unless we follow it up with concrete interventions. Assessment makes sense only when they inform ground level practices of teachers, HM and the school complex. While the draft has recommended a vibrant school complex that would be the basic unit for teacher deployment; it needs to be a holistic space that is the fulcrum for teacher capacity building, student assessments and informed strategies to enable all children to learn at their own pace.

Policies related to teachers – their preparation, their deployment, academic support for them, professional growth, career advancement and teacher appraisal have remained highly contentious issues in India. Most valuable recommendations related to teachers made in 1968 and 1986 policies have remained unimplemented. Equally, many practices have crept in that have had no policy level sanction. The system of contract teachers / para teachers; centralised training regime using one template or all (and the infamous hot spot approach), ad hoc teacher recruitment and deployment practices, multiple salary scales among teachers, restrictions on mobility of some teachers (women, SC or ST) to posts of head teachers or educational administrators – all these have been highlighted in the media over the last three decades. Similarly, the mushrooming of poor quality teacher education institutions since 2003 has received the attention of the government as well as the media. The fact is that the exiting teacher related systems and practices need to be overhauled.

What does the new draft policy say about teachers?

At the out-set I wholeheartedly welcome the opening statement regarding teachers and the sorry state of teacher preparation, recruitment, deployment, service conditions and teacher agency / empowerment. This is also extended to the unequivocal statement regarding removal of the unequal system of contract teachers / para-teachers at all levels, from primary right up to colleges and universities. The document also recognises the need to unburden teachers of non-educational duties, facilitating vibrant professional communities and giving them more autonomy in the classroom. The draft NEP acknowledges the dire state of our teacher education institutions and the presence of poor quality institutions that have mushroomed over the years.

I am happy that this draft policy reiterates many of the valuable recommendations of earlier policies, the Justice Verma Commission report and recent committee reports on teacher education. The last decade has also seen a number of state-level initiatives to enhance the professional capabilities of teachers and also foster learning communities. While some of the learning of earlier policies / committee and commission reports find mention in this draft policy – we need to acknowledge that these ideas and suggestions were not implemented because we did not have a road map to transform the way teachers are positioned in the education system. Equally distressing is the fact that teacher related reforms have not attracted the attention of political leaders and administrators.

Each and every state government needs to develop a comprehensive teacher management policy, one that includes a clearly laid out recruitment protocol, transfer regime, and clear guidelines for related matters, like teacher deputation to non-education administrative positions, education-related duties (such as working with the District Institute of Education and Training (DIET), Cluster Resource Centre (CRC), or Block Resource Centre (BRC), as a key resource person) and promotion (as headmaster or head teacher). In some states there is an unwritten practice of not promoting women as headteachers / headmistresses in boys' schools / co-educational schools. Such discriminatory practices need to be reviewed and abolished. A comprehensive policy is not enough; it needs to be supported by structures that allow practice to be followed in a transparent manner, reducing the stress, delays, and confusion associated with non-transparent processes. This is essential to enhance the morale of teachers and address the overall motivational levels of teachers and remove deep rooted prejudices and stereotypes about teachers in the minds of administrators, political leaders and the larger community.

One issue that has remained unaddressed is to do with shortage of qualified teachers, especially women, in Science, Mathematics and Economics / Commerce. Since the time

of the Kothari Commission report of 1965 – successive policies and committee reports have recommended a time-bound and intensive programme to enhance the pool of teachers in the Sciences/Mathematics; among women, among tribal communities and in resource poor areas.

If we are serious about encouraging teachers to work in rural / remote areas – the recurring recommendations of earlier policies (1965, 1896) to provide accommodation needs to be implemented seriously. Equally, it is also necessary to incentive teachers by giving them a rural / remote area stipend as well as transport allowance (instead of a city compensatory allowance). I have interacted with teachers over the years and the hard reality is that majority of them commute from urban / peri-urban centres to rural schools. Given the aspirations of the middle classes, this is not likely to change. Therefore, offering transport allowance could encourage them to work in difficult to reach areas.

Subject knowledge of teachers has been a contentious issue – many studies show that (given the pool from which teachers are drawn) mastery over basic concepts, facility with language of instruction and overall academic competence – needs serious attention. In this context, making sure subject mastery is made an integral part of the 4-year bachelor's degree is a welcome step. This emphasis needs to continue even at the master's level, so that teachers who are being trained for secondary and higher secondary levels are able to hone their subject knowledge.

Needless to add, empowering and strengthening school complexes as the unit for ongoing teacher education and teacher professional support needs to be ensured. For this to become a reality – sweeping administrative reform is called for. This idea has been resisted for many decades now and the government would not be able to manage the transition to decentralised educational planning and administration without strong political will.

Integrating the teacher education institutions into higher education centres (universities and colleges) is a positive step. However, given that majority of government and private teacher education institutions stand alone or are linked to other similar institutions; a lot of careful (state-specific) planning is necessary to decide on the accreditation /affiliation / integration. This should not be done in a hurry and the NCTE alone should not be given the mandate to restructure the teacher education system.

Reforming teacher recruitment is urgently required – as stated in the draft policy. Most states in India do not have a clearly laid out policy to select the right teachers for the right schools. While the TET (national and state) has introduced academic standards, final confirmation through Block level interviews is being suggested. The draft policy suggests appointment of teachers to specific schools / school complexes – so that the time-tested transfer/posting lobby is neutralised. If teachers are not interested in working in rural areas, they could be eliminated at the interview stage. The silver lining is that – with rapid improvement in infrastructure and better connectivity – the rural school may be more attractive with special allowances to serve in rural / remote areas.

School complex level estimation of teachers required by subject needs to be done rigorously. Equally important is to ensure women teachers are appointed to every single school. My own work on secondary schools in several north-Indian states reveal that this is a big issue and needs to be addressed urgently.

For teachers to perform effectively, they must know that there are systems in place to protect their professional interests and aspirations. The Government – state as well as central – could initiate a nationwide dialogue on grievance redressal mechanisms by drawing on good practices in the states, and encourage states to adopt these good practices.

Teacher appraisal is, perhaps, the most underdeveloped but also the largest missing piece in state systems of teacher management. What is expected of a teacher

remains ambiguous. In the absence of clear expectations by way of teaching-learning processes, learning outcomes, and nurturing a non-discriminatory environment for children (among others), teacher appraisal remains an undefined and weak area. The lack of an effective appraisal system means that teachers get no feedback on how they are performing and, thus, no guidance on what their professional development needs are; and system administrators cannot design or contract for necessary training programmes. An appraisal system would also enable promotions to be a reward for good performance rather than simply time served.

Another important requirement is a robust teacher information system that could address several issues, namely (a) delays in promotions, increments, and transfers due to administrative inefficiencies, like maintenance of service books and teacher records; and (b) deputing teachers for training on the basis of their needs and past training experience. The system could also enable the government to include information that could be used for teacher appraisal, thereby bringing more clarity to whom and what teachers are accountable.

Gender issues are presented – rightly so – as a cross cutting theme in the draft policy. Similarly, "promoting" inclusion is also discussed. While social / cultural mind-set is a serious issue; the government needs to adopt a positive and proactive approach to promote inclusion and foster equality at all levels. Yes, it is important to enhance representation in educational administration and it is also important to ensure curriculum and textbooks give space to regional / linguistic / community identities in the textbooks. This draft policy document – like its predecessor 1986 policy – says a lot. The challenge has been in the realisation of well-intentioned policies.

Acknowledging the persistence of caste / gender / community based discrimination is the first step towards addressing it. All teachers and educational administrators need to adhere to the constitutional mandate of non-discrimination. Any violation of this in practice has to lead to action – either through administrative channels or through the justice system. Sexual abuse of boys and girls inside schools, verbal abuse using caste / community slurs; physical abuse in the form of corporal punishment; exclusion from touching water sources or during meal times – all these needs to be brought into a code that is prominently displayed in all schools / colleges / universities. This public display of a code should be accompanied by phone numbers / address for complaints and also provide students the opportunity to register complaints in confidence. Beautiful statements in policies mean little unless they are followed up with concrete administrative measures with a robust grievance redressal mechanism.

There is a need for a systematic induction programme for teachers and educational administrators – where they not only learn about their roles and responsibilities, but are made aware of the importance to adhere to constitutional values of equality and non-discrimination. Teachers who are already working need to go through a special module on inclusion, gender and equity. This needs to be done by each state in the school complexes – with a clear message that discrimination / abuse / violence will not be tolerated in any educational institution.

The draft policy would perhaps go through several iterations before it is finalised. Judging from articles in magazines and newspapers, many people and organisations have come forward with their comments and suggestions. On the whole, the response has been cautiously positive. I am worried about the silences – especially on the private (for-profit) sector which has been growing rapidly at all levels. It would be valuable to include a clear articulation of government's policy on the private (for profit) sector, how it would be regulated and monitored. We are all aware of the grim situation with respect to private teacher education institutions that mushroomed in the 2000s. While I am

not blindly anti-private sector, ensuring adherence to basic quality indicators should be non-negotiable. Equally, children from poor households / communities need a robust scholarship system to enable them to access the next education that we have. As it stands today, the five star private universities, colleges and schools remain out of bounds for the poor. Ensuring a level playing field for all children is a must.