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## Turning government schools around – lessons from promising initiatives?<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract:

The author underlines that the access to and the quality of education are interlinked; she explains factors of success of a future-oriented education on the Indian Subcontinent in the area of intersection of formal and non-formal education on the basis of various empirical studies.

### Zusammenfassung:

Die Autorin unterstreicht, dass der Zugang zu und die Qualität von Bildung eng zusammen gehören; sie erläutert Erfolgsfaktoren einer zukunftsgerichteten Bildungsarbeit auf dem indischen Subkontinent im Schnittfeld formaler und non-formaler Bestrebungen auf der Basis verschiedener empirischer Studien.

### Preliminary remarks<sup>2</sup>

For many years now, especially since Dakar educational thinkers and practitioners have pointed out that access to school and the quality of education in the school are two sides of the same coin. Access without learning means little. The biggest challenge facing governments across the world is to make government schools work and ensure children learn. This challenge has been formidable in India. A significant number of organisations in both the government and non-government sector attempted to energise government schools. This paper attempts to synthesize these experiences of small and larger projects to turn the government school system around and make it more accountable to the learning of children.<sup>4</sup>

### Understanding the complexity of educational challenges

The first step towards turning the education system around is to acknowledge the problem in all its complexity. The first lesson that we can draw from successful initiatives is that the government across the board, from the school to the administrative head, need to acknowledge that children are not learning. This was the starting point in Chennai Municipal Corporation (Tamil Nadu) tried to introduce a child-centred and participatory approach to learning. They encouraged teachers and administrators to spend time in schools and explore what and how much were children actually learning. When teachers and administrators were given a chance to officially acknowledge low learning levels then they were more willing to look at alternative classroom processes. When teachers and administrators were convinced of the need for an activity based learning ap-

proach – adapted from the experience of Rishi Valley<sup>4</sup> – was introduced. The success of this initiative encouraged the Government of Tamil Nadu to upscale the Activity Based Learning (ABL) from schools in 260 Chennai Corporation schools in 2005 to 37,486 government and government aided primary schools across the state in 2007.

The Learning Guarantee Programme (LGP) initiated by the Azim Premji Foundation<sup>5</sup> in collaboration with the Government of Karnataka started by looking at the real situation on the ground and getting a clear picture of the scale of the challenge ahead (Ramachandran 2006). Here too teachers and administrators started off assessing themselves what the real situation was on the ground. Similarly, 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 village education committee (VEC), and parents of the students (Patni 2006a).

### Equity and marginalization

The second important learning is the need to plan consciously for equity. 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 problem is particularly daunting in Muslim minority concentration settlements, tribal areas, among communities where child labour is common, new migrants into cities and communities displaced during internal conflict and violence, construction of large hydro-electric projects etc. Starting with the pioneering work of M.V. Foundation of Andhra Pradesh<sup>6</sup> in the early 1990s to the efforts of the Government of Assam in 2005, the national child labour project (NCLP) of ILO through 1990s and 2000 – the strategy was to reach out to the most disadvantaged first, using methods and techniques that are specially designed for them. These programmes provided alternative learning routes such as bridge courses<sup>7</sup> for mainstreaming children into formal schools, 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. The government later adopted the concept of a 'bridge course' and it is now official policy to provide learning or 'catch-up' oppor-

tunities for children who drop out and facilitate their return to formal schooling.

While the role of the state is certainly necessary, affirmative policies and resource allocations in the education field, well-intentioned policies and programmes are not sufficient to make sure every child can realise their right to education. 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 M.V. Foundation tried to bring teachers on board by creating an association of teachers who work towards elimination of the practice of child labour.<sup>8</sup> This is noteworthy because an effort was made to reach out to teachers as citizens, educating them about child rights and empowering them to make a difference in the communities that they live and work in (Patni 2006b).

### **Community based approach**

The third lesson that we can draw is that community-based forums like village education committees or Parent-Teachers Associations (PTA) play a key role in ensuring accountability. Over the years there was recognition that even though these committees exist, they do not have any real power to ensure the school and teacher accountability or better performance (Govinda 2003). The steps taken by the Nagaland Government's Communitisation Programme for devolving powers to local bodies – i.e. tribal councils –, 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/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 self-government institutions. 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 one stroke, the Government of Nagaland both devolved responsibilities and transferred powers to local committees.

The Pratham (means first) programme is an NGO led initiative in Kutch, Gujarat, to work towards empowering existing VECs (Saxena 2006) Initiated after the 2000 earthquake, which left the school system devastated, this Rural Community Approach Programme covered 500 schools in rural Kutch.<sup>9</sup> It operated 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 (Panchayati Raj Institutions<sup>10</sup>) bodies and to overcome any potential conflict with the panchayat<sup>11</sup>, an interface was created between the VEC, panchayats and the larger community through the Shikshan Gram Sabhas.<sup>12</sup> This was a forum where educated older children are invited to volunteer to work with younger ones to improve their reading and writing skills. The perfor-

mance of the children in school is presented in the village meeting in the form of a childwise Dhan Patrak.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

### **Transparent Information Policy**

The fourth (rather obvious) insight we got from analysing good practices was that free flow of information upwards, downwards and laterally and freedom to communicate with decision-makers is 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 of India, the government is required in law to provide information, but the onus of 'demanding' devolves on civil society. 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.

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, recognizing 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. The CLIP (Children Language Improvement Program) in Andhra Pradesh is noteworthy. Despite not accomplishing 'anything new', it effectively geared up the system to do what it was supposed to i.e., monitor the academic functioning of schools (Patni 2006a). The officials were 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 Programme Director publicized 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.

### **Pedagogical Innovation**

The fifth notable learning is related to energising schools through pedagogic renewal. The Activity Based Learning programme in Chennai (Mahapatra 2006), the Rishi Valley Education Programme (Prashanti/Padma 2006), Active Schools in Latur, Maharashtra<sup>15</sup> (Pattanayak 2006a), the Quality Improvement Programme (QIP) and CLIP of Andhra Pradesh (Patni 2006a), the Pratham Initiative in Gujarat (Saxena 2006) and Integrated Learning Improvement Programme in West Bengal (Sen/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 2006b). After a successful experiment in one school, the district authorities expanded it to one school each in 15 clusters and then to 117 schools. Self-learning materials were developed for group activities and timetables reorganised. They introduced Chawdi Vachan<sup>16</sup>, sharing of report cards and discussion with parents on a regular basis. 'Gat sammelan'<sup>17</sup> review the 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.

The Integrated Learning Improvement Programme (ILIP) of West Bengal combined efforts to improve classroom pedagogy with empowerment and capacity building of teachers (Sen/Nag 2006). The aim was to move away from the didactic of monologue style of imparting education prevalent in most government schools and make them realize that all children can progress within a stipulated time, with the teacher facilitating children to learn amongst themselves.

The Interactive Radio Initiative in Karnataka<sup>18</sup> 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.

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; i.e. 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.

## Conclusions

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 teachers are not clear on 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 abstract concepts in 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. This was demonstrated way back in the 1980s and 1990s in the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP) of Eklavya Foundation in Madhya Pradesh where the NGO worked with teachers, inside the schools and also introduced experimentation, exhibitions, science fairs etc. Notwithstanding documented success of the Eklavya's HSTP, the government discontinued the partnership in 2003. Once the NGO partner was asked to exit, the gains made over the years could not be sustained.

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. 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.

## Annotations

- 1 This paper is based on a longer detailed special article Ramachandran/Jandhyala 2007.
- 2 Annotation of the editors: In this article many Indian terms are used, which we have tried to explain those most appropriate for our German readers. Concerning

the reference to Indian states and Union Territories we want to acknowledge that India has today 28 states and seven Union Territories.

- 3 The author along with Kameshwari Jandhyala coordinated the compilation of 17 case studies in 2006/2007 for the Government of India and ILO (International Labour Organisation) and in 2008/2009 the author and the team of researchers from ERU (Educational Resource Unit) travelled around several states of India looking at promising initiatives. Please see [www.eru-india.org](http://www.eru-india.org) for details.
- 4 Rishi Valley is a NGO that was working in Andhra Pradesh.
- 5 Azim Premji Foundation is a corporate CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) initiative based in Bangalore (Karnataka).
- 6 M.V. Foundation is a NGO that worked tirelessly to end child labour and for the right of every child to education.
- 7 Short term residential schools that enable children who have never been to school or have dropped out to learn in an accelerated manner to help them to catch up with their peer group.
- 8 This was initiated through the Bala Karmika Vimochana Vedika (BKVV), which is a Teachers Forum for elimination of child labour.
- 9 This programme was discontinued within a few years of commencement.
- 10 Panchayati Raj indicates a decentralized way of local government structures.
- 11 Panchayat means 'local parliament'.
- 12 Shikshan Gram Sabha describes the general body of village community for education.
- 13 Dhan Patrak means an educational profile of each child.
- 14 The Shiksha Gram Sabha is the Village Learning Committee.
- 15 This is another earthquake affected area where innovative approaches were tried out in the late 1990s and first five years of 2000.
- 16 Chawdhi Vachan stands for reading skill demonstration before community.
- 17 Gat Sammelan means cluster level meetings.
- 18 This is part of the dot-EDU T4 project, a government initiative for Technology Tools for Teaching and training (T4), a USAID funded initiative implemented by Education Development Centres.

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