

# A weak link in the elementary education chain

India is ignoring the necessity for strong capacity building of the many NGOs engaged in educational improvement



For about three decades now, a large number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are intensively engaged in the task of improving elementary education in the country. A paper (<https://bit.ly/3doEEI3>) in the *Economic & Political Weekly* of May 2005, titled “How Large Is India’s Non Profit Sector?”, estimates about three million paid workers in the voluntary sector through 1.2 million organisations. The paper estimates that 20.4% of this workforce (about six lakh workers) is engaged in education. According to a newspaper report, “India has 31 lakh NGOs, more than double the number of schools” (August 1, 2015), the number of NGOs in the country was more than 31 lakh — more than double the number estimated in the above mentioned paper. With these data, it should be a safe guess to estimate that there are now more than 12 lakh NGO workers engaged in education (even if there could be only 50% of them in school education, and the remainder involved in improving reach and quality). The lower end of the estimated number of NGO staff working for the improvement of quality and reach in elementary education must be over three lakh.



## SCOPE OF WORK

It is most probable that these workers are engaged in direct teaching in classrooms, demonstrating various activities and methods to teachers, conducting teacher workshops and so on. Most NGOs and large foundations believe that these people work as catalysts and influence the functioning of the system. For various reasons, they are supposed to be more effective than regular employees in the government system. There is a lot of discussion around education and the Continuous Professional Development of Teachers (CPDT). These NGO workers have a significant part in the CPDT, for example, in annual in service training and pedagogy improvement workshops. We should be asking ourselves

whether these workers are adequately prepared for this difficult task. As an example, let us take quality improvement, which is currently the biggest concern in education.

Anyone who can successfully contribute to the improvement of educational quality must have some idea of what educational quality happens to be. A very common notion of what good quality school is in our society is based on a high score in the board examinations. Suppose the curriculum is irrelevant to the life of people (as it is often claimed), would it still indicate high quality? Further, suppose that high scoring is achieved by subjecting children to severe punishment and stress, would it still remain an indicator of high quality? If the response to last two questions is negative, then we can conclude that appropriateness of curriculum and pedagogy also need to be considered in defining quality of education. But how do we know what good or appropriate curriculum and pedagogy are? On what criteria can we decide that?

### **KEY DOCUMENTS, FRAMEWORK**

The four documents currently providing a framework of principles, guidelines and legal stipulations to deal with such questions are the National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCF), The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE), the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education 2009 (NCFTE) and the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020). Even if the NCF and NCFTE change in the near future, the new documents are likely to have much in common with the present ones. Therefore, it is worthwhile to assume that any worker engaged in education improvement should reasonably understand these and similar documents. Let us take an example from each one of these documents to see what is involved.

Regarding pedagogy, the RTE, in Section 29(e), recommends “learning through activities, discovery and exploration in a child friendly and child centered manner”. To use this definition in school improvement, the NGO worker has to ask himself questions such as: What is discovery? How and what can children learn through discovery? Does discovery method have any limitations as a pedagogy? Further, the NCF recommends Constructivist pedagogy. What is the constructivist method of learning? Is it the same as recommended by the NCF?

On curriculum, NEP 2020, paragraph 4.23 says “certain subjects, skills, and capacities should be learned by all students to become good, successful, innovative, adaptable, and productive human beings in today’s rapidly changing world. ... these skills include: scientific temper and evidence based thinking; creativity and innovativeness; sense of aesthetics and art; oral and written communication; health and nutrition; physical

education, fitness, wellness, and sports; collaboration and teamwork; problem solving and logical reasoning; vocational exposure and skills; digital literacy, coding, and computational thinking; ethical and moral reasoning; knowledge and practice of human and Constitutional values; gender sensitivity; Fundamental Duties; citizenship skills and values”.

If we want to use this policy, we need to understand what paragraphs such as the above say. One has to note the complexity and profusion of terms used. What do all these words and phrases mean? Is the paragraph internally consistent? Is this paragraph consistent with the NCF? Do the NCF and NEP need to be consistent with each other?

The paragraph from NEP 2020 also highlights certain aims of education: namely, to make all children “good, successful, innovative, adaptable, and productive human beings in today’s rapidly changing world”. Are these aims consistent with each other? Do they have any relative weight age? What if some schools produce children who are highly successful, innovative, adaptable, productive, extremely competitive, and uncaring for others? Would we be happy to call them “good” and consider such an education to be high quality education?

The last example, the NCFTE (page 23), says that we need teachers who “[P]romote values of peace, democratic way of life, equality, justice, liberty, fraternity, secularism and zeal for social reconstruction”. Are these two quotes, one from NEP 2020 and the other from the NCFTE, compatible with each other? Are they emphasizing the same values or have significant difference with each other?

## **NEED FOR DEEP INSIGHTS**

It seems bringing about improvement in the quality of education is not a simple task that one can accomplish just by desire, hard work and interaction with teachers. It seems to require answers to a plethora of questions. Could it be that our attempts for over three Decades have failed, at least partly, because most people working for improvement do not have reasonable answers to such questions?

Just reading these documents may be adequate for a layman not engaged in educational activities and teacher capacity building. But for someone engaged in CPDT, a study of these documents alone will neither answer the questions raised above nor give him/her any better insight into these documents. The positions taken in these and other such documents, as well as in decision making in education, are based on a vast repertoire of theoretical knowledge. A major part of this theoretical knowledge is drawn from the philosophy of education, political theories, sociology of education, psychology of learning

and development, and a contextual understanding of the current needs of our society. Understanding an adequate part of all this and their implications for curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher development, therefore, becomes imperative to be effective in quality improvement or to contribute to good education.

### **AN IMMEDIATE TASK**

If the argument outlined so far is even tentatively acceptable, then a strong programme for capacity building of NGO workers engaged in educational improvement becomes an urgent need. However, NGOs do not seem to be paying adequate attention to this very important area. Nor do universities and teacher education colleges seem to be offering any short term and/or distance learning courses for this sector. If we want to implement NEP 2020 — presently leaving its merits and demerits aside — and really want to see improvement in the quality of education available to our children, we need to pay very close attention to capacity building of this vast workforce engaged in the field. Without adequate preparation, the assumption that the mere appointment of a person in an NGO and being placed in the field will automatically develop the capabilities of these workers is incorrect, and a case of sheer injustice to them, to the education system, and to children in schools.

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The views expressed are personal