



The aims of education of providing education of good quality to all children, of preparing children to participate actively and responsibly in the democratic set up of India, to be able to make informed choices, to be able to access opportunities for development and growth, and to lead meaningful and dignified lives have been articulated in various policy documents. And equity has always been an intrinsic part of these aims. The public education system across the country has the mandate of making available to every child the experiences that she/he needs to make these possible, essentially through the structured schooling system. We have been attempting this for over six decades and are still far from achieving the goals we have set out for ourselves.

Over the past two decades the context has been changing rapidly – today we have the RTE, and perhaps more importantly, communities across States and regions have begun articulating their aspirations from education for their children more vociferously and in larger numbers. While we have made considerable progress the pace as well the quality of our initiatives needs to change so as to move toward the goals more rapidly. There are a large number of research studies, projects and programs that are looking for ways to do this in more effective ways. Several of these show us successes that are possible. However, scaling these in appropriate ways has been a challenge and requires a separate discussion.

Our close interaction with the system over the past three years highlights the fact that many of the issues are grounded in the culture. For example, the system has decentralized institutions that have over a period of time become institutions that, by and large, implement decisions and programs that have been conceived of at the State level.

This note attempts to explore the dimension of institutional culture based on experiences of an Education Leadership Development Program (ELDP) that has been implemented over the past three years in Karnataka. This is a program that has been conceived of, designed and implemented by the Policy Planning Unit (PPU) in the office of the Commissioner of Public Instruction, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Karnataka, and Centre for Leadership and Management in Public Services (C-LAMPS). The program has been supported by Azim Premji Foundation, UNICEF and the World Bank.

Briefly, the ELDP has attempted to enhance the leadership and management capabilities of the education functionaries closest to the school. This has been done through the cascade model by developing Management Development Facilitators (MDFs) from within the Department of Public Instruction. The MDFs in turn have trained Block Resource Persons (BRPs) and Cluster Resource Persons (CRPs) in twenty districts. BRPs and CRPs are resource people at the block and cluster level (a cluster is a group of 15-20 schools). In the decentralized structure of the education system these resource people have an important role of providing academic and administrative support to the schools.

The MDFs have gone through a development program spread over almost five months consisting of input sessions, opportunities for field engagements, review and reflection. A similar experience has been made possible for the BRPs and CRPs by the MDFs over a seventeen week period in which the BRPs and CRPs have implemented Quality Improvement Projects within their own role and Circle of Influence.

The Management Development Program and the Quality Improvement Projects provided a framework which provided the CRPs and BRPs with space to examine current processes and identify problems in the context of the vision and values that inform the education process. They then explored process improvement options and solutions with

the participation of the concerned stakeholders. The strong sense of ownership, responsibility and mutual accountability that emerged from this approach has enabled sustainable implementation for change. The relationships that have been forged or strengthened have created an atmosphere of better communication and mutual trust. This has happened with fellow CRPs and BRPs as well as Head Teachers and teachers at the school level.

The framework provided structured opportunities for review, reflection and peer learning. Open sharing of failed attempts without being castigated for it led to learning not only for the concerned CRP/BRP but also for her colleagues. The framework 'gave freedom' to the CRPs and BRPs to innovate and take informed/calculated risks without fear of failure. These structured opportunities for peer learning have led to building trust among them. Collaborations between and among CRPs and BRPs, and with schools, have sustained beyond the period of the project.

Though the program focused on personal transformation, the QIPs have begun a process of cultural change in small but significant ways that have the potential to be replicated. As Deming said, "Nothing changes without personal transformation."

Culture is the set of values, beliefs, norms, traditions, rituals, assumptions etc that an organization /institution builds over time. Specific to the education context, this would consist of a shared sense of purpose and values, norms for continuous learning and school improvement, responsibility for children's learning, and collaborative and collegial relationships among staff and institutions in the system. Culture has been called the "hidden curriculum" by John Capozzi, the Principal of a school in New York. Culture affects motivation among staff, affects productivity and impacts reflective practice (continuous improvement). Research shows that school cultures as well as the types of relationships among institutions in a district have an impact on school performance as well as school development.

The Department is a mammoth organization having a huge mandate and having to deal with pulls and pressures from within as well as without. As we are all aware, the common malaises that affect our public systems are also part of this system. And yet, our close interaction with the system over the past three years highlights the fact that many of the issues are grounded in the culture. For example, the

system has decentralized institutions that have over a period of time become institutions that, by and large, implement decisions and programs that have been conceived of at the State level. This is an experience that everybody working in the system, and with the system, is aware of. One of the causes is perhaps the 'control' dimension of management of organizations. How else does one control an organization that has three lakh teachers, over 50,000 schools, 8,000 other functionaries?

The question that this raises is, if one has to achieve the aims of education, what type of culture do we need within the public education system? If we consider the Department as consisting of several institutions, what type of culture should each of these institutions have that will help us to move towards the vision of education that we have? Every one of these institutions needs to create and nurture a culture that is conducive to achieving the aims of education. This implies that if a child must grow up to be an active and informed participant in the polity of the nation, and lead a life of dignity, she must experience such a microcosm of that society in her school and community. It, therefore, becomes imperative that the school provide her the structures and opportunities for such an experience. The institutions that support the school, i.e. all the structures that are positioned above the school in terms of hierarchy, need to be aligned in terms of this vision, the values that would make the realisation of that vision possible, and conceive and implement systems and processes that would be consistent with achieving that vision. After all education requires a different institutional culture from the Public Works Department!

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An educational institution that relies on control and compliance for effectiveness may not achieve its purpose for education which is about exploration, critical thinking, innovation and creativity, all of which require a certain amount of flexibility and risk taking. Inflexible rules (or rules being interpreted as being inflexible) thwart innovation and creativity. At the cluster level for example, a CRP may look for, and find, innovative and appropriate solutions to problems in her cluster if she feels she has the space to do so. This requires a certain level of trust and strong relationships bound by common purpose, the freedom to explore and perhaps make mistakes, and to learn. The support that she could provide to schools, the type of relationships that she could forge with the school and the community would make it possible to build cultures that are vibrant and buzzing. Yet, if she is running errands as she is doing today, her head and heart do not engage with these. During a candid discussion with a group of educators in the Department, a point that was articulated was that the Department views them as hands and legs and not as people with heads and hearts. Our

experience in ELDP has been that the functionaries at the grassroots have a deep understanding of the issues at their level and are able to garner the requisite resources to bring about change.

A culture of collaboration among institutions and individuals makes it possible to bring resources together that help find appropriate solutions to issues and concerns, draw up improvement plans based on analysis at the local level, and to implement the plans together with responsibility, authority and accountability shared among the functionaries. Improvement cannot take place without some risk being taken at the level where it must take place and without support from the all institutions that work with it. The ELDP experience has in a small but significant way shown us some of the possibilities at the grassroots.

Of course, sustainability requires systemic support. The challenge is to balance centralization with decentralisation for which there are no clear answers.

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