

The last six months have been an educative experience. I am part of a group of researchers who were looking for good practices in decentralised school management for quality inclusive education in government schools. We were informed that the Communitisation initiative in Nagaland is a good model whereby the day-to-day management of the elementary school (and other social sector programmes in health and child development) have been delegated to the community, as represented by the village council. Our first stop was a school not far from Dimapur to meet with a group of people led by the head of the village council, a few parents, the headmaster of the school and other local leaders comprise of the Village Education Committee (VEC). We were informed that the communitisation process has empowered the VEC to manage the school. They disburse salaries and grant casual leave to teachers and the staff of the school, procure furniture and stationery and appoint substitute teachers against long-term vacancy. They are also authorized to enforce no-work-no-pay rule and absence without proper application or reason could lead to withholding the salary for the days absent. They work with the Headmaster to ensure universal enrolment and retention of children. They also manage the school funds and where necessary mobilize additional resources in cash and kind. It is, however, significant that they do not see themselves as providing leadership in academic matters. What was interesting is that the VEC chairman and the Headmaster work together as a team – they provide leadership to the school. The Nagaland Government Communitisation Act provides the legal framework for devolution of powers.

Field visits to well-managed schools in other states also reveal that the Headmaster is not able to act alone. He/she can become an effective leader when (a) they have the administrative mandate to manage teachers – including ensuring their regularity, granting leave and streamlining additional duties; (b) have a good working relationship with an active VEC or School Development and Management Committee (SDMC) that is responsive, (c) has the support of the administrative oversight bodies like the Block and Cluster Resource Centers and Block Education Officer, (d) receives the funds regularly and all the incentives meant for children are delivered on time and (e) most importantly can ensure teachers get academic support when needed and are able

to determine their capacity building needs.

Leadership at the school level is a complex issue – a highly motivated and creative headmaster could do a lot to make sure his/her school is a well integrated institution and that the children are cared for and taught in a nurturing environment. However, such leaders are few. In the absence of a supportive environment and required administrative authority – most head masters say that they are not able to do much.

Many teachers we interviewed said that they could at best ensure that teachers are present – but are at a loss in making sure that they teach, or prevent them being allocated other duties. For example, before the passing of RTE Act, we found that teachers in Rajasthan were given additional work by the district administration and some were even asked to monitor self-help groups. Teachers in West Bengal were preoccupied with political party work. Teachers in many states were absent and found to be engaged in private businesses. Therefore, even when teachers were present, teaching time in schools was limited. The headmasters also said that – given the informal system of power and patronage, they could do nothing if teachers spent time chatting on their mobile phones. The problem of teacher absenteeism and lack of motivation is rooted in the management ethos of



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a given state. As Rashmi Sharma points out “Teacher motivation needs to be seen against the signals that were being given to the teacher through supervision that had little to do with the teaching-learning process, meagre academic

resource support, and in the case of Rajasthan, the threat of transfers.” (Sharma and Ramachandran, 2009)

The Nagaland example is one of its kind. The basic issue is that systemic improvement through decentralization and increased community participation has been recommended time and again. The hard fact is that the space for people’s participation is intimately related to administrative and political practices in the states. Equality, making the schools functionally autonomous with a leader in-charge is also related to the larger administrative and political environment. Where the formal system promotes centralization and the informal sub-system exacerbates it – thereby sidelining the headmaster and community-based institutions. Similarly, where the formal system delegates powers to the headmaster, it could be undermined by an informal system that makes sure the headmaster has little authority over the teachers or any other critical input like granting leave, ensuring attendance, ensuring adequate teaching time and of course teacher training.

The education system as a whole needs to be geared to create space for autonomous working at different levels. Given the legacy from the pre-independence period, the force that has driven the system is centralization and control. Even after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment devolving powers to local self-government institutions, the school as an institution has remained outside the ambit of the panchayat. The teachers and headmasters continue to be seen as government functionaries who are accountable to their bosses in the district and state administration. They have a fixed place and status in the hierarchy and as so many studies have shown, they have little say in the way the school is run. Almost all aspects of the school are decided at higher levels – leaving the headmaster and his/her teachers as implementers of government directives.

Can The 2010 Right To Education Act Make A Difference On The Ground?

This new constitutional right to education proposes far reaching changes in the way our schools are run. First, the Act defines what a school is and also clearly stipulates the appropriate authority at different levels. The local authority – (Municipal Corporation/Council, Zilla Parishad, Nagar Parishad and the Panchayat) is to ensure availability, admit all children into the school, maintain records of all children in their area, even decide the local calendar and

ensure adequate number of teachers in accordance with the RTE Act. Interestingly quality assurance is left to the local authority. However, the school itself is expected to adhere to the norms of RTE Act while admitting children, ensuring age appropriate admission, organize special training, refrain from all forms of corporal punishment and provide a child friendly learning environment. The Act then goes on to stipulate the responsibilities of the School Development and Management Committee (SDMC) – and its main task is to prepare the School Development Plan.

The RTE Act seeks to promote leadership at the school level by giving the SDMC the task of preparing the school development plan, which essentially means that all the needs of the school – infrastructure, teachers, facilities, library, play ground, books, mid day meal, sanitation and water – has to be reflected in the plan. Yet, interestingly, the teacher’s appointment continues to be done by the government and they are not brought under the ambit of the SDMC.

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There Are Still Many Unanswered Questions.

- Who will provide school level leadership: the SDMC Chairperson or the headmaster?
- Will the SDMC be an appointed body or will it be elected?
- If it is appointed then who will be the nominating authority? Will the Panchayat have a say? Or will the block/or cluster level education administration nominate them?

- Will the headmaster and teachers come under the purview of the SDMC or will they be independent of it?
- Who are the teachers answerable to? The headmaster? The SDMC? The local administration?

Ultimately the question of school leadership is inextricably linked to the larger system. Travelling across several states and speaking to teachers has only raised more questions in my mind. The education system does not look towards the headmaster to provide leadership – in fact most of the headmasters we spoke to said they received almost no specialized training to manage the school. The RTE Act and administrators look towards the SDMC to provide leadership. However, in almost all the states the SDMC chairperson and majority of the members did not send their children

to the local government school. This was also the case in Nagaland. Given that the government school caters to the very poor and given the power relations in our community – the leadership of the SDMC would have really no stake in enhancing the quality of education in the schools. At best, they may try and manage the infrastructure and facilities with greater transparency.

Somewhere the issue of leadership has got lost in the larger rhetoric of decentralization and devolution of powers. Unfortunately, even the RTE Act is not clear on this. Only NCF 2005 underscored the importance of teacher agency and autonomy – but we have not heard much about it since then. All this does not bode well for our schools or for leadership.

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