

Quality of Education: Ideas and Reality

**A Report on Pratiche (India) Trust's Annual
Public Discussion Workshop**

2013

Quality of Education: Idea and Reality

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27-28 December 2013

In association with

Birbhum Zilla Prathamik Bidyalay Sansad

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Malancha Prathamik Shikshak Shikshan Kendra, Shantiniketan

Organised by Pratichi (India) Trust

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1. The significant success in enrollment in primary schools has ensured the first step towards imbibing quality education. Considerable improvement can be witnessed in matters concerning the running of schools as well.
2. With these successes, the learning capability of children has also been heightened to some extent. Yet it would take some more time to achieve success in reaching the minimum desired level of education. There are marked differences between schools and also between students of the same school when it comes to quality of education which is indeed thought provoking.
3. To find a working solution to such problems these are some of the way-outs that have been discussed
 - Since the children come to the primary schools from diverse socio-economic backdrops hence in changed circumstances there should be significant changes in teachers' training. The training mechanism should not mechanically aim at target appropriation rather more importance should be attached to interactions with teachers.
 - The teachers from different corners of the state are using different innovative techniques to impart knowledge; these innovations should be incorporated within the training in order to universalize best practices.
 - Experiences on activity-based-learning, usage of appropriate TLMs, relationship between teacher-student has already reached considerable proportions, a connection between the lowest and upper levels of knowledge can add to this enrichment.
 - The inspection system needs strengthening. Without an effective inspection system it is virtually impossible to bridge gaps between different levels and branches of the system.

- To ensure comprehensive improvement of the school it is essential for the teacher to develop cordial and amiable relationship with the parents and other members of the community. It is important that there is regular communication between the parents and the teacher about their ward's progress.
 - Proper evaluation is essential in order to ensure that each child reaches the desired level of excellence. In order to develop a child-wise planning system it is important that the teacher knows what and how much the child is learning. This makes evaluation so important. There should be daily and phase wise evaluation along with an impartial, realistic external evaluation.
 - While framing the evaluation system it should be kept in mind that in case of a child's failure the responsibility does not lie with the child alone rather the entire schooling system has a part to play in it. Not only teachers but the educational authorities should also be held accountable for this. It should never be forgotten that it is the school's responsibility to help the child learn not to reject him/her as failure.
4. The school system has scaled considerable heights yet there are more that has to be achieved. The future course of actions should be decided upon by mutual dialogues and discussions.

The Public Discussion Forum: A detailed overview

Pratichi (India) Trust has been devoted to the cause of academic research on education, health and gender equity ever since its inception way back in 2001. Pratichi Institute took shape in 2011 with the mission of taking research venture further in a wider and more diverse perspective. Pratichi has always believed that in public dialogue and discussion being the core component of social research. Time and again public discussion has given effective cues for future research to Pratichi leading on to publication of state wide reports on education and health. These reports had generated enthusiastic response from every section of readers which in turn had its impact on State policy making endeavours. Thus holding public discussion at regular intervals has always been an important prerogative for Pratichi Institute. Prof. Amartya Sen, Chairperson Pratichi Trust has made it a point to take time off from his busy schedule and attend these annual workshops enriching everyone present with his valuable insights.

Pratichi's Annual workshop has a tradition of providing a leading platform regarding discussion related to education. Pratichi's 12th Annual workshop held in Shantiniketan was in no way an exception. Pratichi Institute's annual workshop 2013 was held in Malancha Prathamik Shikkhak Shikkhon Prangon in Shantiniketan, Birbhum. There were about 200 participants most of whom were primary teachers. Secondary teachers, college professors, teacher-trainers, teachers from destitute homes, education officials, elected representatives also formed significant part of the participants. The subject of discussion was "The Quality of education: Ideas and Reality". The workshop was scheduled for two days. The first day was dedicated to workshop activities. The participating teachers were divided into eight groups each led by a group leader. The group leaders were Ila Paira, Tapan Pramanik, Krishna Sarkar, Bibhash Das, Tilak Mukherjee, Ashok Mukherjee, Nanda Sinha and Sunanda Bhaumik. The groups discussed the about "Quality of education" from different perspectives and made their presentations at the end of the day.

The second day was more of an open forum where the teachers', academicians, member of teachers' organisation and other education officials walked up to air their views, confiding in about difficulties, spelling out solutions and generally sharing their vision about the future of their schools and the education scenario in the larger context. The valedictory address was delivered by Prof. Amartya Sen, chairperson Pratichi (India) Trust. He adroitly summed up the problems faced by the Indian elementary education system and suggested possible solutions to the problem of maintaining quality in primary school education and evaluation system. His speech emerged as an effective and workable turnkey to all the bottlenecks plaguing the state run

primary education system that had been discussed in the course of the two day long interaction. The focal point of Prof. Sen's speech was importance of primary education in the larger context of development and prosperity of the state.

The Initiation

Saumik Mukherjee from the Pratichi Institute delivered the opening address welcoming all the participants to the Annual event. Gautam Ghosh, member of the advisory board of the Pratichi Institute elaborated the institute's role in the contemporary education scenario. He expressed the desire to know more what the teachers and education officials felt about that the issues of evaluation, teachers' accountability and solutions related to the problems related to the implementation of comprehensive and continuous evaluation. Then the members of the Shantiniketan wing of the Pratichi Institute related their experience while working with the primary schools in Birbhum from very close quarters. Swagato Nandi elaborated how working with 130 primary schools had made him feel that the evaluation should be entirely childcentric. Piyali Pal felt that a child's own universe should find its way into curriculum, teaching methods and evaluation. Shakila Khatun expressed happiness at the success of the book reading festival and wall magazines in different schools which has made a difference in children's learning ability and interest in studies. Marium Begum and Sujata Gupta spoke about the teachers' role, trials and tribulations that they face while running a school and implementing various practices. The opening session was concluded by Kumar Rana, Project Director of the Pratichi Institute. He clearly demarcated two streams of thoughts and ideas that dominate the current education scenario. The first demonstrates tremendous efforts on the part of the teacher to make the school a success and the second is a negative approach where the teacher can see nothing but problems. In fact the teacher's attitude can create a sea of difference in similar schools with identical infrastructure. He also pointed out the that the vicious cycle of blame game that runs steadily between teachers, parents and education officials perpetrates havoc for the children. He noted that it was interesting that children never ran out of interest to learn. He also commented that a discussion on children's evaluation will be welcomed.

The Public Discussion Workshop

The public discussion took the form of group discussion and presentation in the first day. The teachers and other officials present there were divided into eight groups who discussed the topic of "Quality of Education: Ideas and Reality" and presented their views on the same at the end of the same. The presentation was not limited to mere speeches. The opinions of the teachers were vibrant with excited opinions, songs, demonstration of TLMs and cross questioning.

In the course of the discussion there emerged several pivotal factors which exercised enormous impact on the quality of Government run primary school education in West Bengal.

They were

- Teachers' Role
- Parents' Role
- Importance of TLMs and other innovative teaching methods
- Evaluation
- Inspection
- Health and hygiene awareness

The discussion was fraught with multiple opinions, problems and solutions yet a somewhat distinct guideline evolved during the course of discussion and the public forum which is being detailed below.

Teachers' role

The major problems that had been ailing the primary schools for the past few decades, like low enrollment and irregular attendance, have somewhat been solved. Massive enrollment drives across the State have ensured that most of the children in the school going age group come to the local primary schools. There has been considerable rise in parental awareness as well since almost every parent cutting across the divide of class, caste and economic status now want their children to go to school, to study. Moreover implementation of the mid-day meal programme has been successful in casting a positive impact on attendance. Sarva Shiksha Mission has aided in infrastructure building of schools which has made the school atmosphere more conducive to teaching-learning making it easy and comfortable for both the pupils and the teachers. Though absenteeism remains, but it the teachers have mastered ways to combat it. Now that the students are regular in school the next milestone seems to be imparting quality education. It has often been noticed that schools with identical infrastructure and other facility have difference in outputs when it comes to the pupils' evaluation. It is here that the teachers' role becomes supremely important. The teachers solely by their effort can create a marked difference in children's lives.

As many of the teachers have aptly pointed out that "quality" is a thoroughly relative term which spells itself differently to each individual. While one teacher may feel that it is important that the children know their lessons by heart, another may consider value education of utmost importance. Despite these differences, the target of primary school education is that the children become conversant with the basics of three "r"-s---reading, writing and arithmetic. Helping the children learn their first alphabets and numbers is a difficult job but teachers have discovered innovative ways to scale difficult heights. All the teachers agree that to make the teaching-learning method joyful activity based learning and TLMs are much more effective than

textbooks. Bibhas Das, a primary school teacher from Dakshin Dinajpur has composed a song which help children learn alphabets as well as put across a message about the importance of being regular to school. Kamal Krishna Paik from a primary school in Swarupnagar circle in North 24 Parganas has his own collection of TLMs which are made out of cardboard, strings and colours. From teaching the children the basics of hygiene to multiplication tables, his TLMs do it all, being wonderful no-cost educative toys in themselves. China Kundu Pal of Darjeeling, aware of the fact that her pupils would not be able to buy notebooks, has had her blackboard painted with lines so that the children can practice writing with ease. There are scores of such examples where a sensitive teacher has tried hard to gauge the needs of the pupils and create ways to satiate them.

Many of teachers have pointed out that the “backward children” affect the quality of classroom teaching. Solutions have been suggested for that as well. Many of the teachers believe that each child should be taught in accordance to her need and capability, so that the issue of backwardness does not hold ground. Tilak Mukherjee from North 24 Parganas felt that classroom teaching should be centred round a child so that the involvement in such activities helps her learn better. Preparations of wall magazines and book reading festivals have drawn children to reading and studies. Music, dance and plays stimulate their creativity and indirectly influence their willingness to come to school and learn more. Many of the teachers confirmed that regular games at school play a vital role in drawing children to their classes. A teacher who both teaches and plays with the children can become their friend easily enough. Once a “teacher” turns into a “friend”, the job is already half done. As Banamali Mondol of Siura Shibdaspur Primary School aptly points out, children should always be shown the positive side of things in order to keep them enthused and optimistic. They should learn to imbibe this attitude from their teacher.

Amidst many such inspirational ideas some discordant notes were struck as well. The question of a teacher’s responsibility towards the students has often been questioned. Anil Kumar Pal, Head Teacher of Baliadanga Oriented Basic Primary School feel that the first steps towards making the teacher realize their commitment towards children and the society as a whole. If “teaching” becomes just a “job”, then the mechanized approach can never yield a sensitive approach towards the children’s development. Many of the teachers felt that their initiative towards imparting quality teaching was disrupted by official duties like keeping track of cooking ingredients for MDM and enormous amount of paperwork they had to do. There was a demand for a separate executive who would deal with the everyday nitty-gritty of the MDM while the teachers could concentrate on the students educational needs. Besides many schools still do not have enough number of teachers to attain the correct teacher student ratio. A handful of teachers managing multiple classes and bearing the burden of immense paper work is not an uncommon sight. Munali Dey, an assistant teacher from Dhola Primary School of Bardhaman feels that man hour that should have been spent on teaching student get wasted in chaos management and other

work. It is the weaker pupil and the children with special needs who become the worst sufferers in this process.

From the two day long discussions it was evident that the teachers hold the key to the quality education of children. As Tapan Pramanik, a primary teacher from North 24 Parganas put it in a nutshell “There can be no alternative to the sincerity of a teacher.”

Parent’s role

Like the teachers, the parents too can extend their influence on the quality of education children receive. The teachers were often found complaining about the parents apparent indifference towards their ward’s education. But the fact that the parents do take interest in children’s is obvious from the fact that quite a number of them attend private tuition classes after school. Of course not being to school themselves, they may find it difficult to help their children hands on with studies. Also a hard day’s labour does not allow them time or inclination to keep regular track of their children’s education. Apart from this in backward areas the atmosphere at home may not be conducive for academic pursuits. Despite all these bottlenecks it is essential that the parents are brought into the fold for the sake of the children’s education.

Teachers try hard to make themselves accessible to teachers through meetings but it is not unusual when none of the parents actually manage to turn up. The teachers of Swarupnagar circle in North 24 Pargans have found a solution to this problem. They organize cultural programmes, exhibitions on a regular basis and invite the parents over. They use this platform to put their message across to the parents. Sandip Karan, a primary school teacher from Jhargram has communicated directly with each family of his student and developed a personal bond. The people of the community thus consider him as one of them which makes it easier for him to draw children to the school. Tapas Bhattacharyya from Birbhum found his duties of filling up electoral forms draw him close to every family of the village.

From the discussion it becomes clear parental involvement is an absolute necessity where the quality of elementary education is concerned.

Importance of TLM and innovative teaching methods

‘Joyful learning’ is the watchword as far as elementary teaching is concerned. Activity based learning and engaging children in different educational games can be much more effective than rote learning from books. In the course of two days a whole lot of out-of-the-box ideas came into play and their demonstration created quite a stir among the spectators. A teacher from Jhargram has devised a unique method of teaching activity based arithmetic. She skillfully turned her pupils into TLMs. While demonstrating addition of subtraction she calls children and makes them act as objects like trees or animals. Subsequently more children are called up in case of

addition and some get dropped while subtraction. This simple play acting generates instant interest and involvement which prompt the children to learn quickly. The same teacher produced a Mathematics kit complete with ice cream sticks, straws, buttons and other low cost articles which would help children to count, add, subtract and do other simple arithmetic operation hands on.

The teachers of Swarup Nagar circle displayed a wide range of innovative pedagogical methods. TLMs in the shape stick figures with loosely tied joints could teach children about human body as well as hygiene. TLMs in the shape of birds with folded plumes with sentences written on each feather could effectively teach them the basics of sentences and paragraph writing. While some other teachers praised Pratchi's initiative of introducing reading festivals and introducing the children to the world of story books. Periodic publication of wall magazines can help the children shake off their initial trepidation and spur the interest in writing and art. The teachers have taken this creative project ahead by publishing the children's writing and drawing in the form of journals with their pictures with it. Besides being ecstatic to see themselves in print, the children have started taking their writings seriously.

A teacher from Barrackpore displayed some of the project books prepared by his pupils on topics chosen from their history and science text books. The children have not spared any effort to draw, decorate and find information about their chosen topics. This activity not only mobilizes the children's interest but also provides vent to their creative spirit.

The wide array of creativity displayed by the teachers clarified the fact that sensitivity about the students' needs and ability to think differently remains the key to good teaching.

Evaluation

The quality of education is inextricably linked to the evaluation process. The new Comprehensive Continuous Evaluation process as directed by RTE Act made its way into in discussion quite often. Many of the teachers agreed that they had not received adequate training on CCE and are groping to understand its ropes. The teachers insisted that trainings and workshops were required so that they could effectively implement this evaluation method. Some of the teachers who had been trained in CCE found the method of day to day method of observation extremely effective. It was a general feeling of the teachers that the children should not be merely evaluated in accordance to their academic standards but a holistic evaluation keeping in mind each child's interest and ability should take place.

But some voices of dissent were heard here. Many of the teachers felt it was incorrect on the part of the authorities to haul the "Promotion-Failure" system that ensured that "backward" students who did not perform well in exams repeated the same class. The teachers felt that the students lose their seriousness if they are confident about the fact that they would reach the next class without studying. This also demotivates the better students. But the logic against this regressive system of retaining a pupil in class making her responsible for every academic lapse seems

extremely unfair. A child's failure is that veneer behind which the failure of the teacher, parent and the entire education system remains willfully hidden. It can never be the aim of any education system to use a child as a shield for all its failures.

Some of the teachers discussed their personal views on evaluation Sandip Karan from Jhargram described how he continuously monitors the children by asking questions and repeating lessons in which the children don't seem confident enough. Then he grades them after discussing the children's educational standards with his fellow teachers. Subimal Pramanik, from North 24 Parganas has prepared day-to-day progress reports for each of his student in order to gauge their strength and weaknesses. But most of the teachers agreed that through workshops on evaluation would help them understand the new system more effectively.

Besides the pupils' evaluation, a large section of the teachers also insisted on their evaluation. They demanded that the authorities evaluate them by their functions and the role they play in the life of the children and the community at large. The teachers who were doing a job deserved some sort acclaim to keep them motivated and help them in outperforming themselves.

Inspection

Regular school inspection or rather lack of it has had quite a negative impact on the quality of education imparted in primary schools. Time and again we found that the primary school teachers complain about lack of proper inspection support which would help them in periods of crisis and overall maintenance of quality. Ila Paira, sahayika at Betkundari Shishu Shiksha Kendra suggested that retired teachers who are experienced at running schools effectively be hauled in the system as advisors. This might ensure spontaneous support in periods of need. Some of the teachers voiced that the school inspectors were solely concerned about maintenance of records and were barely thoughtful about the teaching-learning standards. This reflects indifference on the part of the authority which can adversely affect a teacher's motivation. A motivated teacher deserves the share of acclaim from the authorities failing which he might feel betrayed.

Health and Hygiene awareness

Every teacher present in the workshop agreed on one issue that awareness on health and hygiene was of supreme importance when it came to the maintenance of quality in education. There was a general feeling among teachers that though a lot is being done and taught about health and hygiene awareness in schools but the good work gets undone once the children reach home due to lack of awareness on the part of the parents. But the antidote came from the teachers themselves. Many of the teachers reported that a functioning "shishu sansad" or the "child cabinate" can help a lot in maintaining hygiene standards of the pupils. The ministers appointed by the children keep a tab on their cleanliness and discipline. Snarapul Hatkhola Free Primary School also awards a monthly award to the star pupil who excels in studies, discipline as well as cleanliness. Mothers' meetings in regular intervals also help communicate the message about

health and hygiene of the children regularly. Tota Santra, a health worker from Jhargram mentioned that regular communication between the teachers and the community can remedy the unhealthy practices to a great extent since the community members have a natural respect for the teachers. She also mentioned that unless the children are made to practice what they are taught in books, rote learning would be of no use at all. Kumar Rana, project director Pratichi Institute commented that teachers should device new ways to bridge the gap between school and home when it came to practicing hygienic ways of life.

Prof. Amartya Sen's Address

Prof. Amartya Sen, chairperson Pratichi (India) Trust delivered the valedictory address summing up articulately the problems and solutions that centres on the subject of "Quality of Education". He pointed out that it was essential to bring all children under the umbrella of education and quality of education at the primary school level form the building block of every nation. He cited the examples of China and Japan to demonstrate how their effort to strengthen primary education has eventually turned them into powerful market economies. The key components of primary education--the three r's--reading, writing and arithmetic, need the right emphasis so that the children find themselves well equipped to deal with their later lives and the forthcoming job scenario. Thus it is the quality of primary education which strengthens the economic foundation of the nation. He emphasized, only when young men and women find a decent livelihood, they can begin the quest of greater ideals. Without development of individual capabilities it would be a mistake to think about economic progress. Along with the quality of education, Prof.Sen laid special emphasis on children's evaluation and inspection. Teachers' evaluation also made its way into his speech. Since at the primary level it would not be possible for the pupil to evaluate their teacher in any way, the teachers would have to cooperate with each other to frame a suitable evaluation. It is only with the upliftment of education and health standards, a nation can find solution to the other problems in a larger national framework.

Prof. Sen unveiled a special issue of "Rang-Berang" a magazine where children from the schools of Swarupnagar circle, North 24 Parganas displayed their artwork and creative writing amidst huge applause.