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School Teachers in NEP 2020

Contradictory messages and silence on critical issues

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The New Education Policy pays obeisance to school teachers but while the policy makes some interesting recommendations, there is no radical change in the offing that will improve the quality of teaching or the working conditions of the all-important teacher.

What does the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 hold for teachers in India working in both government and private schools? Like all the previous policies, NEP 2020 too pays lip service to the importance of teachers and why their status, motivation and service conditions need to be given attention. The new policy acknowledges that no reform will work unless the teacher is brought centre-stage (4-5).

However, after paying obeisance to teachers, the policy document does not follow up with recommendations that will transform the way teachers are positioned and treated in the education system. NEP 2020 fails to convince us that a radical overhaul is in the offing.

This article focuses on four issues/concerns: (a) the status of the teacher in the system and in society, (b) teachers' professional capacity and subject knowledge, (c) teacher deployment and transfers, and (d) teacher autonomy, appraisal and accountability.

While discussing foundational literacy and numeracy as being a core objective of the new policy, NEP 2020 states:

Teacher vacancies will be filled at the earliest, in a time-bound manner - especially in disadvantaged areas and areas with large pupil-to-teacher ratios or high rates of illiteracy. Special attention will be given to employing local teachers or those with familiarity with local languages [...] Teachers will be trained, encouraged and supported with continuous professional development - to impart foundational literacy and numeracy (8-9).

The policy is not clear about the working conditions and salaries of these 'local' teachers, nor is there any clarity about who will hire them. The idea of 'contract teachers' or 'para teachers' slipped into educational practice in the 1990s without any policy-level approval. It entered the system in the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and continued under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan, and now in the Samagra Shiksha.

The number of contract teachers in India's education system has steadily grown from 3,16,091 at the elementary level in 2010-11 to 6,32,316 by 2017-18 at the elementary and secondary levels (UDISE, various years). While the draft NEP of 2019 made an unequivocal statement about discontinuing the practice of contract teachers, NEP 2020 does not do so. It is well known that this system is unequal because two sets of teachers are expected to do the same work under two entirely different service conditions. This practice has been challenged in several high courts and in 2014 the Rajasthan High Court ordered the state government to discontinue the system of contractual appointments.

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In-service teacher training has been a part of the Government of India's centrally-sponsored schemes since 1994, when the DPEP was launched. Over the years, from DPEP (1994) to the SSA (2014), the fixed 20-day annual training module became institutionalised. The feedback from different states has been mixed and the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) had in 2006 noted, that "10.45 lakh teachers (53%) in 18 states/UTs were not imparted any training" (paragraph 7.4.13.1). The CAG report stated that the objective of upgrading the professional knowledge and skills of teachers was not being achieved. NEP 2020 pays some attention to this and the idea of the school complex is put forth as a hub for continuing teacher professional development. It now depends on how central and state governments interpret the policy and make the school complex not only the hub for teacher recruitment, but also for teacher training and school management.

A positive dimension of NEP 2020 is that it recommends that all teachers be appointed to the school complex and that the existing system of transfers and posting be discontinued. The policy hopes that this will insulate teachers from political pulls and pressures and give them greater autonomy in the system. However, there is no mention of whether private (aided and unaided) schoolteachers can also use the resources of the school complex.

Another issue that has been part of all earlier policies is about streamlining recruitment processes and making them transparent. After the enactment and notification of the Right to Education Act of 2009 (RTE,) the government announced the introduction of Teacher Eligibility Tests (TETs) as a necessary process that would precede teacher recruitment. Equally significant, every policy, including NEP 2020, recommends a proper procedure for recruitment and deployment of teachers, paying special attention to ensure that all schools have the required subject-teachers.

Yet the new policy states:

First, teacher vacancies will be filled at the earliest, in a time-bound manner - especially in disadvantaged areas with large pupil-teacher ratios or high rates of illiteracy. Special attention will be given to employing local teachers or those with familiarity with local language... (pp 7-8).

Just like the ambiguity in NEP 2020 on teacher working conditions, there is also ambiguity about the teacher recruitment system. Apart from Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, most states do not have a formal teacher recruitment policy, one that is based on assessing a school-wise need for specific subject teachers. The implementation of this aspect of the policy is now left then to the interpretation of state governments, though they are expected to ensure that all candidates have cleared the TET.

Teacher vacancies have been a huge problem in India. The year 2018-19 saw 11.7% vacancies against the sanctioned posts of teachers. Of the 17,64,956 posts of teachers under the Samagra Shiksha, 19.1% were vacant and 8.8% of teacher posts under state and union territory governments were vacant. States like Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh had more than 30% of the posts sanctioned in the Samagra Shiksha vacant. Though the reasons vary from state to state, the fiscal situation of the state government is often cited as the deciding factor for their ability or inability to fill sanctioned posts (Ramachandran, Das et al. forthcoming 2020).

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The states argue that in the event that the central government decides to close down the Samagra Shiksha, they would then have to bear the salary burden of teachers recruited to the programme.. It is perhaps to prevent such an eventuality that the states hire contract teachers through Samagra Shiksha funds. In a study on the teacher workforce (Ramachandran et al. 2018) a number of other state-specific reasons like recruitment processes being held up in court, a lack of proactive effort to fast track recruitment processes, and apathy were identified as reasons for state governments hiring contract teachers. Just creating a system of locally hired teachers, as outlined in NEP 2020, is not likely to solve the problem.

Another challenge staring at us has to do with availability of teachers for all subjects. In many states there is a huge shortage of teachers in mathematics, science, commerce, and English. As a result, many schools located in rural, remote, or tribal areas, or girls-only schools, do not offer science and mathematics at the higher secondary level. In several states more than one-fifth of their upper primary schools do not have all three subject teachers (UDISE 2017-18). The worst situation is in Uttar Pradesh where 90% of upper primary schools do not have subject teachers. The situation is also poor in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and Jammu and Kashmir . At the same time, there are 78,372 surplus teachers at the elementary level! (Ramachandran, Das et al. forthcoming 2020).

In the 1968 National Education Policy there was the idea of a time-bound programme to enhance the pool of educated professionals – teachers, lab technicians, and doctors – in tribal and economically disadvantaged areas and among specific social groups. However, no government has taken upon itself the responsibility of initiating programmes to systematically enhance the pool of professionally educated people in areas and communities that need them the most.

It is important to acknowledge that there are many interesting ideas strewn around in NEP 2020. It states among other things that the government will set in motion a merit-based structure to motivate teachers with avenues for career development. The policy cites the need to give options to teachers to move into teacher education or into educational administration. It also states that academic structures

like the State Councils for Educational Research and Training (SCERTs), District Institutes for Educational and Training (DIETs), resource centres at the block and district level, and advanced study centres in education would be rejuvenated. All this would be done by strengthening school complexes to become the effective administrative units for management of schools. The policy also provides for the creation of parallel bodies for academic matters (curriculum development, textbooks and teacher training), establishment of certification boards, conduct of national assessment surveys to measure learning as an indicator of the health of the education system, and creation of regulatory bodies that would use the same benchmark and criteria for government and private schools.

None of the ideas discussed in NEP 2020 can be operationalised without a clear road map to transform the way teachers are positioned in the educational system.

Many of these ideas are not new and have been said in earlier policies. The real question is whether there is a serious implementation plan that will take on board all stakeholders.

None of the ideas discussed in NEP 2020 can be operationalised without a clear road map to transform the way teachers are positioned in the educational system. To start with, there is an urgent need to address the administrative and social status of teachers. They should not be viewed as the last link of the administration in the villages and urban wards. Notwithstanding the improved salary structure of regular teachers, their autonomy in the school and classroom has been eroded over the years. They are expected to teach to a pre-decided schedule, regardless of whether their students are learning or not. They are expected to furnish a wide range of input-related data without having the freedom to structure their classroom in such a way as to enable every child to learn.

For many decades now we have been hearing about teaching at the right level. This cannot happen without autonomy and freedom. Yes, teachers need to be part of a rigorous appraisal system, one that is a combination of self-appraisal, peer-review and student-review. And, most importantly, teachers need to be insulated from the decades-old patronage network for transfers, posting, promotions and other benefits.

There are some ideas in NEP 2020 that seem to be at odds with the spirit of the policy. Having talked of school complexes as the main hub, the policy slips in national assessment tests. We have had a number of national assessments conducted by the National Council for Educational Research and Training. So far, these assessments have not found their way into the teacher community. National sample-based assessment makes little sense when there is no feedback loop to the teacher. The new policy should have spent more effort at outlining systems that would encourage teachers to continuously assess their students – may be with help from the school complex – and be made accountable to ensure every child is learning. Imposing systems and calendars from above has in the past not helped. Equally, predetermined training modules have not worked. What we need to do is strengthen need-based and teacher network-based systems for professional support and continuing education.

There is also no vision in the policy on the private sector. This is serious because there is so much evidence to show that the private sector is expanding exponentially – till recently. The Covid-19 lockdown and the resultant migration, economic distress and increasing poverty have left many private schools wondering if they can actually reopen.

The problem with our policy-programme-project-implementation system is that we do not take a holistic view and get down to seriously transforming a system that is creaking and breaking up. The numbers of schools, students and teachers has gone up exponentially since the 1990s, but the administrative structure that manages the system has remained unchanged.

Conclusions

We all believe that social norms have changed and schooling is now part of our ethos. We have also celebrated the gradual closing of gender gap right up to the secondary level. All these gains may be lost with Covid-19, and our system (meaning our teachers) needs to do a lot more to ensure children enrol again, come to school and are able to learn.

We are living through difficult times, and the medium and long-term impact of the lockdown and economic distress will be seen in our education system.

In the post-Covid-19 era, our teachers may have to do a lot more than just show up in the class room. Children are traumatised and afraid, parents are in distress and the society at large is in pain. Teachers may have to rediscover themselves as counsellors, friends of children and healers. They are our most precious resource. It is time we gave them the respect and created working conditions that

facilitate their work.

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