

ANTRIEP Seminar on Improving School Efficiency

From (December 15-17, 1998)

Colombo, Sri Lanka

The Third Annual Meeting of the Asian Network of Training and Research Institutions in Educational Planning (ANTRIEP) held on 18 December 1998 in Colombo, Sri Lanka, was preceded from 15 to 17 December, by a seminar on *Improving School Efficiency*. The seminar brought together 45 participants from 12 countries (Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Maldives, Nepal, the Philippines and Sri Lanka). They included representatives from 14 member institutions, nine Ministries of Education and of four donor agencies (JICA, SIDA, UNICEF and the European Commission) and other experts.

The seminar, inaugurated by the Deputy Minister of Education and Higher Education of Sri Lanka, covered four themes, namely, School Autonomy, Supervision, Evaluation and Assessment, and Teacher Management.

Why the Focus on School Efficiency ?

It is now widely recognised that reform measures in the past did not contribute sufficiently to effect changes at the institutional level and hence they could not lead to improved school outcomes. This was due to various factors.

Firstly, educational reforms in the past focused more on changes and interventions at the system level than on improvements at the institutional level. It was assumed that public policy and provisions would lead to an improved performance at the institutional level and hence reform measures placed very little emphasis on issues related to the functioning of the school. However, this expectation was belied as the schools failed to deliver the goods.

Secondly, they focused too strongly on inputs in the system (e.g. facilities, textbooks) and not sufficiently on the processes of teaching and learning and on decision-making, in particular at the school level. It is increasingly realised now that those process variables (variables relating to school organisation and

practices) are crucial in explaining variations in quality.

Thirdly, any reform in the past tried to focus on isolated components at the school level. For example, the teacher was seen in an isolated fashion and competency development programmes were envisaged for teachers, independent of the teaching-learning conditions in schools. Now it is recognized that improving efficiency of individual components may not automatically and directly lead to improving the efficiency of an organization. Processes are contextual and their improvement depends upon the capacity of each school to become an effective organization.

Fourthly, interventions were not sufficiently adapted to the - sometimes very varied - needs of the individual schools, characterised as they were by a general, system-wide strategy. The traditional hypothesis, underlying many plans of action, that all schools function in more or less the same way is not realistic. There is often not much in common between schools in a developed urban and a remote rural setting. Similarly, the standardized supervision services which exist in most countries rarely adapt their strategies to the needs of specific schools.

These different arguments have led a growing number of governments to concentrate their efforts on improving the efficiency of schools, by taking into account the holistic characteristics of school as an organisation. In many instances, this policy has taken the form of giving more autonomy to schools and is generally known as the trend towards school-based management. The implementation of such a strategy in countries which have been characterized by fairly centralized and standardized education systems, manifestly implies a reorganization of the management structure as a

whole and a redistribution of roles between different levels and actors.

The discussions in the Seminar started with evolving an operational definition of school efficiency. This was followed by discussions on the themes of supervision, evaluation and assessment, and teacher management.

Defining School Efficiency

The concept of school efficiency is defined with reference to three commonly found factors. Firstly, efficient schools are those which obtain good outcomes, in terms of examination results. This operational definition makes it easy to quantify efficiency because examination results are a measurable entity. However, it may have negative implications as far as the school process is concerned. It implies that schools, to be efficient, need to be examination oriented which is, especially at the primary level, hardly a welcome feature. Secondly, efficient schools are those which are well managed. This definition focuses on the internal management of the schools. It starts from the belief that any school is efficient where the interaction between different stakeholders is cordial and mutually reinforcing so that the teachers are happy to come to school and teach, parents are willing to send their children to school, and children enjoy the learning process. Thirdly, efficient schools are those which give good results at a reasonable cost, affordable to the society as a whole and to the different individuals in society. In this definition, it is the cost and equity considerations which are dominant. A closer look at these definitions indicates four dimensions of efficiency, namely, focus on outcomes, favourable internal management, cost-effectiveness and equity. Needless to add, all these four dimensions should be integral aspects of an efficient school.

(i) School Efficiency and School Autonomy

School autonomy implies the relative independence of an institution in its operation, to carry-out commonly agreed goals with a view to making its functioning more efficient and effective. Three points need to be stressed here. The policy to offer schools more independence is essentially seen by its advocates as a mechanism to improve school efficiency, although both literature reviews and country experiences have shown that such a link is elusive, at the least. Secondly, public central authorities will continue to provide a framework and play a regula-

tory role in establishing norms for provision and quality assurance. Interventions to improve efficiency will need to be introduced at the school level. Thirdly, independence of schools is relative and contextual. The level of development of a country and the type and size of a school are among the more obvious factors to consider. The conclusion should be that there is no optimal locus for decision-making on education, which applies to all countries or all schools. Nowhere, school autonomy implies total independence. It generally implies operational freedom to organize and galvanize school and community resources to make its functioning more efficient and cost effective. But the translation of this principle into reality leads to many different scenarios. The varied terminology created in the wake of the school autonomy movement – school-based management, school-site management, local level management, self-management of schools – shows the wide spectrum of experiences.

While many governments now toy with the idea of autonomy for schools, very limited effort has been made to operationalize the idea, and in particular to offer a comprehensive answer to the key question: which level will be responsible for which issues? At present, the existing circulars are more constraining than enabling. It seems that, if schools are to be made more autonomous and responsive to local requirements, decisions in three crucial areas become important : (i) curriculum; (ii) examination and performance evaluation; and (iii) finances.

Local level curriculum development would allow for a more relevant, more adapted school and would enable teachers to become still more active partners. The case of the State of Victoria in Australia shows that curriculum development at the local level is feasible. However, many other countries face at least two fundamental problems. Given their multi-cultural and multi-racial composition and the resulting diversities, the curriculum content is a sensitive issue, not least politically. Public education precisely is expected to play the role of uniting the nation and therefore a strict curriculum framework is imposed. Moreover, many countries do not have adequate local capacity to facilitate curriculum development at the local level.

Autonomy in curriculum development is evidently linked to the issue of examinations and, in wider terms, performance evaluation. The backwash effect which national examination systems can have on classroom teaching is too well known to receive, much comment here. Keeping the examination system centrally designed and directed

immediately restricts the freedom of schools. On the other hand, such a restriction might well be necessary when schools receive more autonomy, so as to effectively control their quality. The issue of school evaluation will be returned to later in this report (Theme iii).

School autonomy does not mean withdrawal of funding support by the state. In fact many of the educationally backward regions are also economically deprived regions and hence these regions will not be in a position to mobilize sufficient resources to provide quality education to all its population. Therefore, the continued funding support by the state is a necessary condition for making these schools more efficient and functional. Only the state can look into concerns for equity from a broader

perspective. In other words, the state has to continue with the funding support precisely when one is arguing for school autonomy.

The extent of autonomy that can be enjoyed by a school depends upon the head-teacher of the school. The efficiency and authority of the head-teacher depends upon the process of selection of the head-teacher. In some of the countries, head-teachers are selected based on their seniority in the system with little regard towards their efficiency and competency. However, a trend noticeable in most of the countries in the recent past is that, in the selection process, teaching experience remains an essential requirement but seniority need not be an overriding criterion. Such a change has been introduced, for instance, in Malaysia, as part of the programme “*Making schools effective*”, where, in addition the head-teachers after recruitment are given orientation training in issues related to institutional planning and management. In the context of school autonomy, it is very important that the head-teachers are in a position to provide academic leadership to their staff on school development plans and that they are trained in budgetary processes so that the school activities can be prioritised, initiated and closely monitored. This is all the more important in a situation where autonomy also implies freedom to operate the funds allocated to schools.

Of crucial importance will be the head-teacher’s capacity to bring the whole school staff together around one objective: to improve the school in all its aspects. The existence of such a positive school climate should not be taken for granted, neither should the resistance within schools themselves against more autonomy be underestimated. In some cases, head-teachers are apprehensive in front of the additional authority they receive and

especially the accompanying accountability. In other cases, teachers do not look forward to seeing an increase in the power of the school principal, especially in the field of teacher supervision and discipline. While training undoubtedly is needed, arguably more important will be a change in mindset among all the partners, in and around the school.

Community participation is another crucial element influencing the efficiency in the functioning of schools. There are some, where community involvement is more easy, evident and prevalent, for instance, financial and/or resource contribution and the supervision of teacher attendance. But even these are not without problems. The possibly negative impact on equity of the first strategy is well known. With respect to the second strategy, one can wonder what purpose it serves to allow communities to supervise teacher assiduity, if they cannot take any disciplinary action. When asking communities to play a role in curriculum development or teacher recruitment, problems become still more evident. On the other hand, the separation between the school and the community is in some ways an artificial one: parents are also educators and as such should be involved in schools. The question was asked if it would be possible and desirable to define a line of demarcation, beyond which communities should not go.

When referring to levels of involvement, we can distinguish between: information, consultation, negotiation and decision-making. There is little controversy about the need to keep the community informed (although for instance the publication of supervision reports is so far acceptable in few countries) or to consult with it regarding some decisions, such as the location of a new school. The fundamental question, which is raised but is far from being resolved, concerns the decision-making power which communities might be given.

Participants agreed that in any context, communities can play a positive role and that so far their potential has not been fully exploited. To ensure stronger school-community relationships, with a positive impact on school effectiveness, national authorities should take action in these fields.

(ii) School Efficiency and School Supervision

At present, the control and visit-oriented supervision have almost no impact on the schools most in need of this support. Demanding a change in approach and in attitudes is nothing new. Supervisors have been

blamed for their authoritarian attitude since ages. It is better understood now that such a change will not happen automatically through raining, but requires also a reform in the type of activities which supervisors are expected to undertake. Presently, the main activity on their job description – and the one by which their performance is judged – is school visits.

Even if external supervisors adopt a more developmental behaviour, their impact on schools will remain limited, because of their inherent external character. They remain outsiders. Supervision and support should, therefore, start within the school. Head-teachers evidently play a crucial role, but the peer support which teachers can give each other is just as important. Research has indeed shown that teachers learn easier from each other than from outsiders. This might demand a change in the internal management structures of schools. Secondary schools in many cases already adopt such an approach, by setting up departments with their own heads, for groups of subjects. More problematic is the introduction of such a strategy in smaller primary schools, where at times there is not even an official head-teacher. Many countries have, therefore, set up the well known school clusters.

Many of the problems with which supervisors struggle at present, will not be resolved if the strategic and structural changes are not accompanied by a commitment to give these services the minimum of funding they need to be functional. The most evident need of supervisors is transport. In the absence of vehicles or of the necessary allowances, supervisors are condemned to remain in their offices. This is sadly regularly the case and not surprisingly, supervisors in such a situation lose commitment and motivation. To this deplorable picture, a positive message can nevertheless be attached: the additional funding needed is marginal compared to the overall education budget, while the benefits that it would bring could be important.

(iii) School Efficiency and School Evaluation

There is a need to make a distinction between self-evaluation and external evaluation. School based evaluation for school improvement and for actions to be taken at the school level needs self-evaluation. The overall evaluation efforts made at higher levels may be useful to effect system level changes.

This may need evaluation of several schools and may be initiated by people other than those at the individual school levels. Such external evaluation will rely on a standard, externally designed evaluation format. Indicators on performance of schools can be used to compare different schools at any given points of time or to monitor school activities over a period of time, if data on major activities are collected at regular intervals. When schools undertake self-evaluation, this can be done on the basis of a self-selected set of indicators, limiting the possibilities of comparison, or with reference to an externally determined set, may be compelling the school to focus on matters which it does not consider the most important.

This leads to the issue of indicators. As the most common mode of evaluation is student performance in the examination, exam results are the most popular indicator to judge the efficiency of a school, by parents and by the system, if not necessarily by the teachers. Teachers' resistance is not an expression of a corporatist attitude, but the reflection of a realization that examination results are a poor indicator of a teacher's quality. While they are an important aspect of evaluation of school activity, school evaluation obviously should not be confined only to student performance in the examinations. One has to develop other reliable indicators for assessing school efficiency and monitoring progress.

Ideally, one should look for indicators which can assess at the same time system level efficiency and school level efficiency. Such indicators should evaluate both quantitative and qualitative aspects. The quantitative indicators provide a comparative picture and relative position of the school in a given administrative unit. Indicators like enrollment ratio, learner achievement levels, qualification and training levels of teachers, attendance rates, etc. are among the quantitative indicators, which are available in most countries. However, process indicators, which reflect more accurately what goes on in the classrooms and are qualitative in nature, are more difficult to find. One of the challenges lies in identifying qualitative indicators which can be quantified. Therefore, methods of evaluation will have to focus not only on quantitative data collection but also on qualitative information collected through discussions, observation, interviews, etc. At the school

level these discussions and interactions may become more important than quantitative data to arrive at decisions regarding functioning and efficiency of schools.

(iv) School Efficiency and School Management

Even in a decentralized context, where decisions on teacher recruitment and promotion are taken at a district or local level, there will remain a need for a general framework for a set of checks and balances at a national level. Even in the most decentralized situations, such as in Victoria, the public authorities continue to employ teachers and to pay them along national salary scales.

Political interference in teacher management, in particular in recruitment and posting, is a problem encountered in many countries. The mechanisms and strategies to reduce such interference, are context-specific. This implies that decentralization, allowing local involvement in teacher management, will not automatically turn around this reality. In several

countries, it might actually make the situation worse.

The recruitment at local level of teachers belonging to the community, might lead to an increased sense of belonging and a greater commitment among these teachers. This seems to some extent conditioned by two factors. These teachers, if they feel abandoned, once appointed, might lose quickly such commitment. It is important that they are given an opportunity to improve themselves and to grow professionally, e.g. through in-service training. Secondly, the usefulness of such a strategy also depends on the economic context. Where few job opportunities are available for secondary school or university graduates, it might be easier to attract some to the teaching profession than when there is a scarcity of teachers. (Further details on the paper presented in the Seminar and on the participants are available from the IIEP, Paris).

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