

Comparison of Western and Eastern Primary Education Systems: A Dialogue between Teachers from UK and India

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Abstract

The present education system in India is modelled basically on the British system of education. Nevertheless, it has been influenced greatly by the societal demands, training of teachers and resources in the schools. The similarities and differences in the education systems of England and India surfaced when a team of British teachers visited India and interacted with their counterparts from a school in a metropolitan satellite town of Mumbai. The visit was arranged under the auspices of the Teachers' International Professional Development (TIPD) Programme of the League for the Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers (LECT). The article compares two educational systems, one from the west and other from the east, as highlighted during teachers' discussion. The dialogue brings out similarities as well as differences in these systems and indicates possible avenues for sharing ideas and experiences from both the sides.

Background

The League for the Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers (LECT) arranges teachers' visits from one country to another under its Teachers' International Professional Development (TIPD) Programme. One such visit lasting for 12 days was arranged to India in the month of February 2003 and was posted by the Institute for Oriental Study Thane, Mumbai. The team consisted of 20 primary teachers from Newham Educational Authority (NEA) and Tower Hamlets Education Authority in East London.

An intensive professional interaction programme was planned for the visiting team to provide a glimpse of multifaceted Indian education system. It included visits to schools, interaction with educators and discussion with members of teachers' associations. As a part of close interaction with the peers in India a discussion session was arranged with the

teachers from a school at Panvel, Mumbai. Varieties of issues like school curriculum, management of multicultural classrooms, societal involvement in school education, etc. were discussed at length. This article attempts to present a summary of the dialogue highlighting similarities and differences between primary education systems in India and England.

The Dialogue

Although a variety of issues related to primary education in England and India surfaced the discussion mainly focussed on five important aspects: School Curriculum, Classroom Management, Support from Parents/ Voluntary Organizations, Students' Assessment and Moral/Inclusive Education.

School Curriculum

In India there are different curricula recognised by Indian Council of Secondary Education (ICSE), Central Board of Secondary

Education (CBSE) and the State Board of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education. Each school has to stick to one of these curricula.

Earlier, different education authorities in England followed different curricula. However, national curriculum movement that started in early 90s (in the last century) enabled to bring uniformity in the curriculum. All the schools in east London from which the teachers came followed the national curriculum. The special feature of the British curriculum is the focus on Design and Technology. Indian teachers noted that such an emphasis does not exist in Indian curriculum. It was also noticed that the British system emphasises a more active approach to learning than Indian system. One of teachers from visiting team commented, "Indian system is more information oriented while British system is more skill oriented."

Primary schools in the state of Maharashtra teach three languages (English, Marathi and Hindi), mathematics, science and social studies. It was observed by the British teachers that a great emphasis is laid on teaching science and mathematics in Indian primary schools. In Indian scenario candidates offering these disciplines at the higher level not only receive great respect but also stand high in their chances of getting jobs. The importance of science and mathematics education at the higher level is transmitted to primary level of schooling too. Indian teachers agreed that their curriculum is a bit loaded in science and mathematics. At the same time they had confessed that teaching of science is devoid of activities because of the large classroom sizes. In many of the Indian schools teachers are unable to arrange laboratory activities as they are faced with resource crunch.

In England there are three core subjects namely English, Maths and Science. In addition, there are nine foundation subjects:

Art and Design, Music, Geography, History, Design and Technology, PHSE, Religious Education, ICT and Modern Languages. British teachers made it clear that their primary curriculum is not loaded in science or mathematics. They are, on the other hand, favour of a "broad" curriculum. The teaching of concepts is based mainly on project work and on offering practical experiences. They agreed that strong laboratory programme is possible in their schools as they have to deal with a small number of students in the classrooms and they have requisite material at their disposal. Moreover, there are teacher assistants in many schools to help the practising teachers. Mathematics is taught in small groups and the groups are formed based on the capacity of the pupils to learn. British teachers could not avoid praising Indian teachers for their sincere efforts to teach science and mathematics innovatively and for arranging science exhibitions at regular intervals under the constraints of time and resources.

Classroom Management

The number of students in most of the Indian schools is quite large ranging from 40 to 70. The visiting teachers were concerned if the large class creates any discipline problem. They were surprised to know that Indian teachers hardly face any discipline problem in their classrooms. The answer probably lies in Indian culture and values. In India there is a tradition of respecting the elders in general and teachers in particular. Guru, means teacher, and is considered as God. The teachers also strive to maintain their respect by working hard. If there is any child who has a temptation to misbehave, his/her behaviour can be rectified just by an advice. There is no need for any corporal punishment.

In England, however, teachers have to earn respect by being good classroom

managers with interesting strategies to deliver the curriculum. The theory goes if you have a curriculum that engages and interests the children, the learning follows. Maximum number of students in British classrooms is at the most 35. Home and social environment is such that teachers often face discipline problems in the classrooms. Teacher is forced to listen patiently to emotional problems of children. In case of necessity the child has to be referred to a counsellor. Corporal punishment (canning) is illegal in all schools in the UK. All schools in the England have a code of conduct for the students to follow. There are rules for penalties to be given if this code is not followed.

India is a country of diverse cultures. Due to its metropolitan nature the city of Mumbai and its suburbs are quite multicultural. Students use different languages at home for communication. The medium of instruction in the school, where the discussion was arranged, was English. Most of the students coming to the schools, however, do not speak English at home. Not only they come from homes speaking different languages but also bring with them diverse cultural experiences (Khubchandani, 1997). Indian teachers reiterated that it is a challenge for them to deal with such students. They confessed that they often resort to Hindi, a national language of India, for explaining involved concepts.

In England too where the school has students with different cultural backgrounds the problems are similar. British teachers made it clear that many of the schools in London get a large number of students with diversity in culture. Along with the variation in the financial status of their parents there is also a variation in their cultures as many of them are immigrants from different parts of the world. Since language spoken at home is different from English, using English as a medium of instruction to such diverse groups creates problems in communication. This issue was discussed seriously among teachers

to seek guidance from each other. It turned out that providing education in the mother tongue of a child is the best solution. If this is not possible then efforts must be made to make a child proficient in English. It was agreed that an active learning approach using drama and role-play in English lessons might help in this regard.

Cooperation from Parents/ Voluntary Organizations

British teachers shared their experiences in gaining co-operation from parents in the education of their wards. They made it explicit that it is difficult for them to get parental support. To enhance parental involvement they try to encourage students to take certain books to share with their parents and to ask them certain questions that demand reading and investigations. The general feeling among British teachers was that their efforts bring little dividends. To put this in context it must be kept in mind that Newham is an inner-city area with much social deprivation. Education is not regarded highly by majority of parents although some of them look at education as a way out of the inner-city area. In middle class areas, however, a different picture is observed. Anxious middle class parents often support the school and ensure that their children work hard and perform well. The schools to which the visiting teachers belonged were all state-funded schools in working class, ethnically diverse areas. They have all the problems in getting adequate support from parents in school related matters.

The experience of Indian teachers was similar to British teachers. In case of first generation learners in India the direct involvement of their parents is very low although they are concerned with the education of their wards. In middle class areas parents are sometimes over concerned with their children's education. Parental involvement in school related matters is found

to be overwhelming. Teachers even went on to complain that some of the parents are so concerned that they take personal interest in the studies of their children to ensure good scholastic achievement. On many occasions, teachers said, that they have to request the parents not to spoon-feed the children.

Both in Indian and British situations, voluntary organizations play an important role in school education. It was, however, noted that the number of such agencies are higher in India than in England. Apart from private coaching classes there are a large number of voluntary agencies in India arranging out-of-school activities for school students. Many of these voluntary efforts are by teacher associations or by headmasters associations. Not only they arrange courses for teachers but also organise guidance sessions for students who need additional help. What was striking to the British teachers was the involvement of general public in these voluntary agencies. They had noticed that there are voluntary groups formed by persons from different professions to support school education. On many occasions they arrange co-curricular activities like exhibitions, quiz competitions, sports meet, visit to industries, etc. Indian teachers agreed that these inputs facilitate students' school education significantly.

British teachers narrated how some voluntary agencies like Rotary clubs support school education. They had, however, confessed that the support is not much. There is a drive in Britain to build Education-Business Partnerships. There is a move to encourage Arts organisations often to link themselves to schools to help them with aspects of the creative curriculum. These efforts are fetching good dividends. Nonetheless, the support is negligible.

It was felt that much outside support is probably not required for British schools as they are well equipped to take care of

children's personality development apart from formal education. On the other hand, there appears a greater need in India to encourage external support because of financial imperatives. This has great benefits for the school because it encourages the institution to be the centre of the community embracing opportunities to work with others to the benefit of both parties.

Students' Assessment

In India examination is given much more importance in formal school education. Public examination is held at the end of 10 years of schooling. It carries high degree of importance, especially to seek admission to higher classes. There is also an annual examination at the end of each academic year. The performance in this examination decides if the child can go to next grade or not. If the performance is not satisfactory a student is asked to repeat the same grade for yet another year. Students are therefore under constant pressure to perform well in these examinations. To ensure success they resort to extra coaching either from a private tutor or from a coaching class. It must be noted that the number of coaching classes providing private tuitions is on the rise not only in the metropolitan cities but also in small towns in India.

British school system does not follow the rigid method of annual examinations. They put emphasis on teacher's assessment through observations and assignments over a span of the entire academic year. The tests are mainly used for diagnostic purposes to understand the strength and weakness of students or to provide the guidelines to the next teacher to understand the level of preparation of the students. Public examinations are held in UK at the age of 7, 11 and 16 years. The examination at 16 (GCSE) is important for the students as the performance in this examination determines what career path they will follow. Based on

students' performance in these examinations, a league table is prepared to determine where a school stands. However, no student is detained because of the poor performance in these examinations. It is notable that the testing related to vocational subjects (applied subjects such as Leisure and Tourism) is on the increase to prepare students for the world of work.

Moral/ Inclusive Education

The need for inculcating moral values among the students has been realised all over the world (Norton, 1994). It is notable that efforts are made to teach these values in the schools in England as well as in India. In England it is called Citizenship Education whereas in India it is known as Moral Education. Because of the strong family bonds in India many of the moral values like respecting the elders, behaving properly in the group, etc. are developed automatically. In fact, most of the Indian parents feel that schools need not worry about teaching values related to social interaction. Instead, the school should concentrate more on teaching formal school subjects and leave citizenship education to the society.

In England, however, inculcating social values among students receives importance in school education due to a different family structure. A substantial number of students in England come from broken or single parent families. British teachers described what they do to inculcate social and moral values among the students. Schools arrange celebrations of festivals observed by people from different religions. Special camps are arranged to familiarise students with values related to good citizenship. These efforts are certainly useful. Nevertheless, as some teachers agreed, there is no substitute to strong family bonds.

Indian teachers made it clear that barring some remote schools in villages, gender equity is not a problem at all. In fact the

performance of girls in most of the urban schools is better than boys. At the same time they had agreed that while dealing with students with different cognitive abilities, care has to be taken to encourage the slow learners. The provision for special education is very meagre in India. Therefore, students with problems like 'dyslexia' are to be accommodated within the normal classrooms. These constraints increased the responsibility of Indian teachers.

Indian society has been riddled with social stratification. The community that was given menial jobs in the past has remained aloof from formal education. The children coming from these communities and from nomadic families encounter a variety of difficulties in their educational endeavour (Kulkarni and Agarkar, 1985). Indian teachers narrated how they use the principle of positive discrimination to incorporate these children into the mainstream. Some schools also arrange remedial classes for these children. Govt. of India has come forward to open special residential schools to provide education to students coming from tribal communities (Agarkar et al, 2002). In spite of these efforts, teachers agreed that there is a long way to go to make primary education accessible to all in India.

The problem of inclusion is equally serious in England. Apart from children from working class families teachers have to deal with children of immigrant families. They have been striving hard to incorporate them into the mainstream. On many occasions, additional inputs are given to needy students. Some schools appoint Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCO) to tackle the problems of students with special needs. Problems related to learning disabilities are dealt with separately. As soon as some learning problems are detected in the student, the help is sought from the psychologist and the student is transferred to special schools if need arises. Some of the teacher

participants in the British team were themselves teaching in such special schools. They could share their experiences of dealing with students with special needs. It was realised that there is a lot that one can learn from each other's experiences in this area.

Conclusions and Implications

The discussion between Indian and British teachers threw light on two different educational systems: western and eastern. The general feeling was that the dialogue brought out more similarities than differences. The leader of the British team commented, "Distance between India and England is more than 5000 miles but problems of education are similar." Teachers from both the sides appreciated that concerned authorities in both the countries are trying hard to work out the solutions to these problems. They were optimistic that achieving equity in primary education would soon become a reality.

Although difference in social structure has given rise to some differences in the education systems of India and England, there are many common problems that can be tackled together. For example, the issue of inclusion, managing with the students with multicultural backgrounds, problems of slow learners and inputs for the gifted are some of the areas that raise similar challenges in both the countries. Sharing of experiences in these areas would go a long way in improving the education system both in the east and the west. It is hoped that more such interactive sessions are arranged for teachers from different countries.

The dialogue between teachers of India and UK proved to be beneficial for both the groups. British party took many ideas back to their country and were able to reflect on their own ideas and practices. They were impressed by the importance given to spiritual

education in Indian schools. For Indian teachers it was a rare opportunity to talk freely to their counterparts in England in such an informal environment. They were immensely benefited from the experiences and advice they received from British teachers who urged them to make their teaching more active. It is hoped that exchange of ideas/experiences among these teachers continue in the future too.

It was realised that the teaching community enjoy freedom in both the systems. They are free to buy the things and organise the classroom as they wish. However, the classroom strength and material resources force them to manage classrooms differently. British teachers can resort to work in small groups, adopt more interactive method of teaching, offer opportunities for experimentation and provide guidance for individual or group assignments. Indian teachers, on the other hand, are forced to follow traditional mode of chalk and talk with a few opportunities for lab activities at convenient times. Since examinations results are given much more importance these teachers are under constant pressure to prepare the students for formal assessment. Cooperation received from the students, their parent and the society in India is noteworthy. It is through this cooperation that the teaching community is able to deliver the goods in spite of many odds. These lessons would certainly prove useful to universalize primary education within a short time.

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