

Ensuring Dialogue and Institutional Alignment in the Education System

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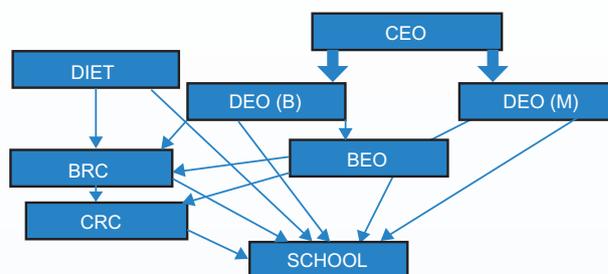
Education is important, interesting but a complex process. It is complex because it is social in nature. Geographical, cultural and other diversities in a society are a major source of complexity. A second source of complexity results from the wide field of content areas and pedagogies which keep changing. Yet another area that adds to this complex process is the variety of stakeholders, for example the diversity we come across with respect to students and teachers with the kind of changes happening there in multiple dimensions.

The context of public education in a large and culturally diverse country like India takes the issue and scope of complexity to an entirely different level. We can get a glimpse of it by just looking at the number of children who are being provided Mid Day Meals (MDM) in schools. This number is more than entire populations of many countries. The diversity of food habits even in one Indian state is such that preparing MDM menu itself is quite a challenging task.

Due to the changing characteristic of education, from time to time, new institutions are set up which result in the addition of new set of stakeholders with different kinds of expectations from them. Universalization of education is a major change that we have seen in the education domain which cannot just be seen as expansion of education. It has come with new sets of issues and concerns and demands a different kind of value system and social awareness. The mission mode approach to universalization has ensured that new institutions and structures have come into existence. Decentralization of education in this context has demanded community and larger civil society participation and we do find it happening in various forms and levels of the system.

The biggest challenge facing universalization agenda is the lack of dialogue and mutual alignment among different actors and institutions. Either there is absolutely no dialogue or it is limited within individual institutions only. There is no mechanism to ensure that the left hand is well informed about what the right hand is doing. The following line diagram shows the various institutions and their

inter-relationships. Several of these institutions have taken up ‘monitoring’ role rather than performing ‘academic enablers’ role.



CEO – Chief Education Officer; DEO (B) – District Education Officer, Elementary Education; DEO (M) – District Education Officer, Secondary; BEO – Block Education Officer; BRC – Block Resource Centre; CRC – Cluster Resource Centre

It is absolutely essential to bear in mind that in education only those efforts succeed and sustain which are done out of self-motivation, self-initiative and with a spirit of voluntarism. Following commands can only lead to mechanical compliance which neither has life nor sustainability.

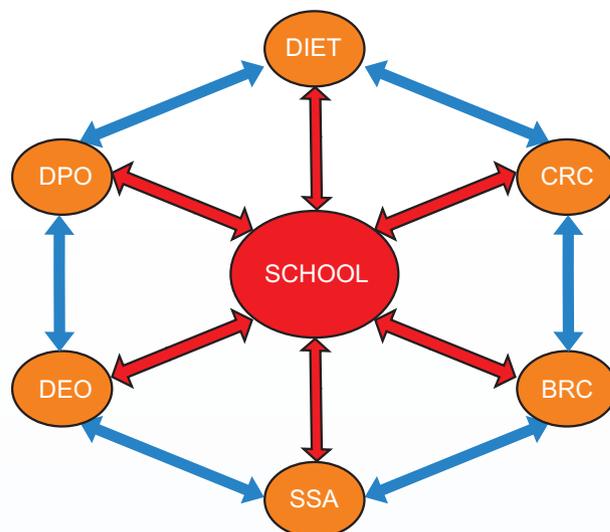
We have observed that there is a lack of communication, cooperation and alignment among the educational institutions. We do come across sensitive individuals who could grasp the essence of the prevailing circumstances and who are able to direct themselves towards the need of the children. Whatever good these individuals are able to do is because of their individual goodness rather than an institutional effort and outcome. Institutions, who were originally envisaged and established to play a complementary role and whose success depended on it are seen functioning in isolation, as parallel institutions or sometimes in conflict with each other.

In the above context, we conceptualized an institutional mechanism called Academic Resource Group (ARG), formal in its constitution but informal in its processes. A mechanism for ensuring communication and alignment in an atmosphere of mutual respect so that it adds value to the system

rather than becoming a burden. The government also felt the need and not only gave us permission to constitute ARGs in the Uttarkashi and Udham Singh Nagar districts but also made financial provision for its functioning. Thus ARGs came into existence with the following identity and objectives:

- It is an inclusive forum that has representation from teachers to senior education officials, basically covering all stakeholders including NGOs, PRIs also
- It is a forum that provides opportunity to all stakeholders/institutions to not only get to hear expectations from each-other but also understand their problems and challenges
- It provides a common space to all institutions in the role of academic enablers for better coordination and alignment
- It provides an opportunity for sharing 'special' efforts being done in the field of quality improvement with the 'rest of the stakeholders'
- It identifies the problems and challenges being faced by teachers and academic support functionaries and suggests possible solutions
- It tries to shift the decision making culture from 'individual' to 'a collective'
- It does not only aim to 'break' the lack of communication but also aims at 'enhancing' it
- As a forum, it adheres to democratic values through its practices, such as all, whether teacher or an official, share their thoughts as members only; anyone can be the facilitator; same quality of boarding and lodging arrangement for all etc.
- It also aims at supporting DIET, DPO/DEO for formulating and reviewing their annual academic plans

If the idea of ARG gets internalized completely, the following form of institutional alignment emerges and we have moved a few steps in that direction.



Some milestones achieved in this journey so far:

In district Uttarkashi, some decisions and initiatives taken up after the constitution of ARG have also given direction to the state. For example:

- The academic discussions in ARG gave rise to an innovative idea called Bal Shodh Mela (student researchers seminar) which later got adopted by the entire state
- Teachers' Grievance Redressal Camps at block level was another idea that tried to solve administrative nature of problems faced by teachers. Such camps gained popularity among teachers and also provided a moral right to academic support functionaries to be a little emphatic while demanding performance from teachers during their visits.
- Encouraged the culture of having a research based approach to articulating problems/issues in the meetings
- Many block and cluster level meetings have not only become academic in nature but are gaining maturity in that direction
- Many teachers and academic support functionaries got recognition for their successful and meaningful initiatives and their work inspired many others for similar steps
- It's not that just the ARG meetings and discussions led to such efforts; the following capacity building workshops and exposure tours were also organized for the ARG group members:
 - 10-day Capacity Building Workshop on Education Perspectives by and at Digantar, Jaipur, Rajasthan

- 10-day Capacity Building Workshop on Education Perspectives by and at Vidhya Bhawan, Udaipur, Rajasthan
- 10-day Capacity Building Workshop on Education Perspectives by and at Eklavya, Hosangabad, M.P.
- 5-day Capacity Building Workshop on Education Perspectives by a collaborative effort of Azim Premji Foundation, DPO (SSA) in Uttarkashi

Some Observations:

During the course of this journey we realized the importance of this initiative for bringing about institutional alignment. Seeds of good behavior and culture were sown among people and institutions. We found that a dialogue with respect and as equals was always constructive and led to effective decisions with long term impact. The onus of generating conducive environment for facilitating dialogue with respect and as equals falls on those who are in leadership positions. The perspective of leaders, to a large extent, determines the success of this initiative.

ARG is in operation for the last 5-6 years only in Uttarkashi and Udham Singh Nagar districts and we haven't had regular meetings of this forum because of frequent transfers of district education leadership. Still in this short span, the achievements have substantiated our belief that – In this vast education system, with its whole range of education functionaries, teachers, in particular, find themselves 'isolated'. Collective and coordinated efforts and a continuous 'dialogue' are much needed for all those working in the education domain. This dialogue and mutual alignment would break the professional isolation of education functionaries and thus help individuals and institutions to support each-other and play complementary roles. ARG experiment in Uttarakhand provides a healthy beginning though the journey is very long and we find ourselves only at its first leg. We see that 'communication and alignment is not a destination but a direction and ARG is heading towards it.

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