

WRITING PRIMARY EDUCATION

A REPORT OF PRIMARY TEACHERS'
WRITING WORKSHOPS IN BIRBHUM, WEST BENGAL

Pratichi (India) Trust

in association with

CRY – Child Rights and You

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2012

Writing Primary Education: A Report of Primary Teachers' Writing Workshops in
Birbhum, West Bengal (English translation of original Bangla *Sabai Mile* published by
Pratichi (India) Trust in July 2011
English Translation : February 2012

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Cover: Manoj Dey
Printed at: S.S. Print, Kolkata – 700009

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1. Preface

Primary education is going through a period of transformation in this State. On the one hand, we have seen significant improvement in infrastructure, in the delivery of the mid-day meal, in enrolment, attendance, girls' education, and overall quality and scope of education. We have also seen greater public interest and involvement in these matters. On the other hand, however, greater involvement has also brought forth the deficiencies and challenges of this sector. The Pratichi Trust has been intimately involved in the area of primary education in West Bengal, and is proud of having the chance to contribute to these developments.

Why Teachers?

Teachers play a pivotal role in social empowerment, especially of minority and fringe groups. Their role is no longer confined to the classroom, within the parameters of instructor and student. To limit teaching to the act of drilling prescribed knowledge into ostensibly empty heads excludes the individuality of each student and each teacher, of their social and cultural context, and thus robs teaching of its immense potential as a medium of social change. In the primary stages, a teacher is the person who creates a bridge between herself and the students, transforming the sum total of their personalities, individualities, social environment and the curricula into lasting knowledge.

Lately, whatever little attention the media pays to primary education has been reserved for highlighting the various failures and shortcomings of our primary teachers. But in the Trust's experience, our primary teachers have consistently contributed innovations and constructive effort to the area of primary education. These instances, however, do not reach the wider public. There is little observed effort, even within the education establishment, to highlight or promote such efforts. But, as research in early childhood education – and indeed education in general – shows, no policy can succeed in achieving its goals if it chooses to remain uninformed by the functionings of a system on the ground. Indeed, policies detached

from the realities of a sphere are implemented in a mechanical, disinterested way, because those compelled to implement them feel no connection to their prescribed actions.

Most teachers, even the more enthusiastic ones, are gradually demoralised by a top-down system that encourages routine and mechanical implementation of set, homogeneous rules, at the cost of open and lively communication between professional peers and a creatively active administration. The lack of acknowledgement of the work they do can also lead many teachers to devalue their work, and consequently be perfunctory in their duties. The perfunctory adherence to the word of the requirements, instead of the spirit of teaching, has been further cemented by the old-world loyalties of some teachers: “We’ve left behind a golden age, nothing now could possibly compare, so why make the effort?” Yet others are influenced by social prejudices. For example, some teachers quite honestly believe girls or children from ‘backward’ communities are incapable of excelling in school, and therefore expend the minimum possible effort on them. In yet other cases, we’ve seen sympathy for ‘first-generation learners’, but in combination with disenchantment with the system and an unconscious belief in their lack of intellectual abilities. Such ideas persist because most of these teachers have little connection with the evolving world outside their tiny spheres of personal experiences. Neither are they encouraged to meet peers who have seen, first hand, the achievements of students from underprivileged or minority communities.

Pratichi’s effort in Birbhum was aimed at building a capacity for this communication and free exchange of ideas amongst teachers. In a series of workshops organised at the district level, teachers were asked to document their experiences of teaching, curricula, and especially of the daily running of schools. These narratives are particularly valuable because:

- They offer the greater public a rare glimpse into the working of our public education system.
- They offer researchers and policy-planners very rich accounts of our schooling system, its social contexts, and its many achievements and persistent challenges.
- They document the progress of a consorted movement to ensure the rights of children to adequate nutrition and education, and consequently to a richer and more secure life.

Writing and Capability

Although only its mechanical aspect is manifest, writing is a complex cognitive process. The purpose of providing a space where teachers are encouraged to write about their experiences, is not merely to harvest an archive. Written communication, unlike spoken ones, produce a tangible and verifiable text that persists as-is for considerably longer than the spoken word lingers in audience memory. Hence there is greater personal motivation for providing logical and factual validations for one's ideas, when expressing them in writing.

Factual validation, however, is not immediately available. It requires some research in the field. It is the experience of all writers that the search for one kind of data leads to several other related data sets, and inspires reflection on the nature of their reciprocal relationships. In short, research breeds broader research, and leads to a more comprehensive understanding of problems which had previously served only to irritate. A better understanding of problems sometimes even leads to their solutions – an organic process that has much to recommend itself, especially when most intervention fails to fulfil their projected potential.

It has been our experience that discussions or debates yield a greater degree of problem-statements and (legitimate) complaints, whereas the written communications from the same group are more reflective, analytical, and focused on possible solutions.



2. Introduction:

The Pratichi-CRY Project in Birbhum

From Pratichi's decade-long conversations with teachers and parents and public actions in the field of primary education, we have gleaned the following:

- A) For an institution of public education to succeed, it must have the cooperation of teachers, parents, and the local community. Such cooperation is particularly necessary for ensuring the enrolment and daily attendance of local children, as well as the smooth running of the MDM programme, health and sanitation drives. This is particularly true of our schools, several of which inevitably experience phases of severe understaffing and lack of resources. The support of parents and of the village will ensure an uninterrupted and efficient functioning of the school, and the health and nutritional programmes associated with it.
- B) Such cooperation also has immense potential for developing the local community. With a well-equipped library, wall- and student-magazines, and locally-relevant TLM aides, schools can acquire the capacity of being centres of cultural and educational development for the entire community.
- C) Connection with people from the students' own socio-cultural milieu will also encourage a more organic, and therefore more effective, way of teaching. This applies particularly to areas where the local language and customs differ considerably from those represented in the prescribed textbooks. Such schools, where teachers have established a strong connection with the community, and which benefits from their active cooperation,

can – and indeed, have – become models for other schools, extending the sphere of their positive influence beyond their own few students.

- D) Schools which function as a centre of community effort can also become the place for coordinated local development, focussing the efforts of the School Council, the Sarva Shiksha Mission, area ICDS and Anganwadi workers, and so on.
- E) Providing a platform for such combined efforts benefits not only the local community, but also the administration and researchers working in the area of education and child development.

Based on these experiences, the Pratichi Trust, in collaboration with Child Rights and You (CRY) India, has undertaken a project entitled 'Public Participation in Education'. The primary stakeholders in this effort are teachers, parents, and the local community for each school. We envisage this effort being strengthened by public interest and participation in the project.

Our goals for this project are as follows:

1. Enrolling all our children in schools.
2. Keeping them in school till they complete their education, and ensure regular attendance.
3. Improving classroom delivery such that private tuitions become unnecessary. This would include making sure children finish their schoolwork in class, so that there is no added burden of 'home task'.
4. Ensuring parental participation in the running of the school, and establish cordial relations between teachers and local villagers.
5. Creating a network of communication amongst teachers across the state, so that innovations and ideas can travel freely from one school to another.

To fulfil these goals we have undertaken the following:

1. Create a two-level network of communication: between primary schoolteachers statewide, and between us and primary schoolteachers in each district.
2. Use this network to create a better informed, more coordinated teaching community at the primary level, as well as for observing the implementation of education policies on the ground, their effects, and public reaction to them.
3. Convene workshops which encourage teachers to document

their experiences and ideas, which we shall publish periodically and which will inform our policy recommendations.

4. Improve MDM and other nutrition and health related programmes at the school level.
5. Coordinate all of the above so that children in the public education system has access to a healthy all-round development.

The Workshops

The primary phase of this programme occurred in November and December 2010, in 121 primary schools located over 8 graam panchayats in 6 blocks of Birbhum district. Later, between January and March 2011, 5 ‘Teachers’ Writing Workshops’ were conducted within the combined area of 8 graam panchayats. Each workshop invited representatives from all the local public primary schools, who was usually the head-teacher. In some cases, he or she was accompanied by a colleague. Overall, we had 125 attendants from 121 schools (only 14 among them, however, were women). Amongst this 125, 112 submitted their experiences and ideas in writing.

The present document is a compilation of these ideas. It is a valuable, first-hand repertoire of teaching experience, efforts, challenges and innovations in the field of primary education. It has also proved to be an excellent tool for analysing our teachers’ ideologies, motivations, and capabilities.

In the following chapters, we will use the teachers’ own narratives to illustrate the issues they raised during this series of workshops.

3. What Teacher Said: An Overview of the Writing Workshops

In this chapter we will look at the primary concerns and issues raised by most of the teachers from the district, and document the solutions some of them practise in their own schools.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Education in West Bengal – especially primary education – has been plagued with infrastructural problems. Interventions by the Sarva Shiksha Mission and conditions set down by the Right to Education Act (RTE) 2009 has improved the condition of classrooms, toilets, drinking-water supplies, teaching aides etc. somewhat, but a considerable amount – discussed in detail later – still remains to be done.

A. CLASSROOMS

Classrooms are absolutely vital to the school infrastructure – this should be self-evident. And yet several schools in this district (and in the state) lack sufficient classroom space. Nearly every school has to accommodate more than one class in a single room, distracting both sets of students from their lessons and making an already-challenging teaching responsibility more difficult.

B. DRINKING WATER

According to field surveys in Birbhum, most schools now have provisions for drinking water. However, several teachers complained that this solution exists only on paper. One teacher writes, “There are several problems at my school, but the scarcity of drinking water is the most acute, particularly in summer. The water table goes down, making the handpumps useless. Such water as we do get from the pumps is brackish and undrinkable”. Other teachers reported that their schools did not even have access to handpumps, useful or otherwise, and requested for one within the school

compound. There is, however, no guarantee that the new pumps or taps would be able to supply drinkable water to these schools.

C. TOILETS

All schools are now expected to provide separate toilets for girls and boys. The lack of toilet alone proves a deterrent to regular attendance. Although many schools have acquired toilets recently, our field studies show that most of these remain unused. Sometimes because children are not used to toilets, but sometimes also because they are discouraged from doing so. For better public health, teachers will have to accept the responsibility of teaching their students basic measures of personal hygiene.

D. PLAYGROUNDS

Teachers who mentioned the need for regular exercise were unanimous in the opinion that schools need to have a playground. However, while this is an important issue in terms of both student health and their all-round development, not many teachers brought it up. This is probably due to the fact that most schools do not have the land or space to accommodate playgrounds.

E. BOUNDARY WALL

There were several opinions in favour of boundary walls. Some favour it because their schools are right next to highways or ponds, and they fear unattended children will wander into them. Teachers stated that parents are not willing to send their children apprehending insecurity. This is a large enough concern in the communities that Goltikuri Primary School has raised its own boundary walls with the help of local residents.

Some teachers, incidentally, have also recommend boundary walls to prevent children from being distracted by 'whatever is going on outside the classroom'.

F. AVAILABILITY OF TEACHERS

Primary schools have struggled for a long time with insufficiency of teachers. New recruits in recent time have changed the picture a little, but the view is still disappointing. The lack is particularly acute in rural areas. According to one teacher, "The pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) is lower than in suburban or rural areas. To improve primary education overall, more teachers must be assigned to rural and 'backward' areas".

According to another teacher, there should at least be one teacher per classroom in every school (sadly, this is far from the normal in contemporary public schools).

G. SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS

Physically or intellectually handicapped children do not see their special needs accommodated in any of the public primary schools. Yet another teacher said that it is not enough to supply musical instruments to schools. They must also be provided with teachers who know how to use, and instruct with, them.

ENROLMENT, ABSENCES, DROP-OUTS

A. ENROLMENT

To have all our children enrolled in school is of vital importance today. The government, Sarva Shiksha Mission (SSM), the District Primary School Councils (DPSCs) keep undertaking projects and programmes to this end: Special enrolment week, camps in villages and schools, celebrating enrolment day in schools, and student marches with banners and posters promoting enrolment.

The problem, however, is that children enrolled later through special enrolment programmes cannot keep up with their classmates or the academic schedule. However, according to RTE 2009, these children cannot be detained for an extra year, and are promoted at the end of the year. Several teachers feel this is a counterproductive *modus operandi* for ensuring 100 per cent literacy. In their writings, they have described it unscientific, and a deterrent to the learning process.

Constructive commentaries on the issue recommend a two-month enrolment period every year. Others speak of working together with local Anganwadi workers, who can provide a list of children to the schools, and help teachers speak to each family in the village about bringing their children to school.

Finally, there is the matter of enrolment-age. Teachers think 5+ is a difficult age to begin formal education. “It takes six months for the children to learn to speak properly”, they concur. The RTE 2009’s raising of the enrolment-age to 6+ received near-unanimous support. Some teachers mention explicitly that that Adivasi or other ‘backward’ children, in particular, be enrolled only after they are 6, not earlier.

On the other hand, some of the same teachers have said that they are compelled to accept children even below the age of five. Sometimes it is because they do not have anyone to look after them at home, and sometimes

because of other considerations. In such cases, teachers recommend a special children's section. It should be noted here that according to the RTE 2009, children cannot be barred from attending school for the lack of age-proof.

B. ATTENDANCE

Most teachers attributed poor attendance to either the students' socio-economic backgrounds, or their parents' lack of awareness about the importance of an education. Citing anecdotes, teachers stated that the children of migratory labourers – which form a significant part of the student body in Birbhum – are obliged to stay away from their homes several times a year, adversely affecting both their attendance and their education.

Others pointed out that several of these children have daily chores which, in the short term, appear more important to them and their families than an education does. This encourages them to miss the latter and accomplish the former. Young girls, especially, take long leaves of absence or drop out entirely to take care of younger siblings, while their parents work for long hours in brick kilns, fields, and so on. The only solution to these girls (and some boys) dropping out is to allow them to bring their younger siblings to school with them. Then, however, it becomes a matter of under-age attendance, which has been discussed above.

As a possible solution to irregular attendance, one teacher recommends awards for the most regular students at the end of the academic year. At his school, he said, teachers contribute to buy gifts for students with the best attendance, which is given to them during a cultural function that the school organises in collaboration with the parents.

C. DROP-OUTS

Drop-outs are usually the cumulative result of several long absences. Attending school in phases makes children feel disconnected from their classmates, who have moved ahead in terms of schoolwork. After a few attempts to re-integrate with the mainstream, these students usually give up the struggle. This problem is especially visible in Birbhum, which, being prone to droughts, sees lower agricultural productivity and high levels of labour migration. Economic or familial demands on the children, as discussed above, are other important causes of eventual dropping out. For children of migratory-labourer parents, some teachers recommend the introduction of boarding schools.

LANGUAGE BARRIERS

A large part of Birbhum's population does not speak standardised Bengali as a mother tongue, which is the medium of instruction in most Birbhum schools. Schools in areas where such communities live in significant numbers see acute communication problems between students and teachers. One teacher writes, "All students at my school are Adivasis. We don't understand what they say, and they don't understand what we teach. In Classes 1 and 2 especially, when they are young and don't know anything except their mother tongue, teaching becomes almost impossible. In such situations, students lose interest in school very quickly". The language barrier also prevents teachers from establishing relationships with parents, which is an area of major importance in the current public education agenda. Another teacher writes that his school is located inside a forest, and the community he teaches in is very self-contained. They don't travel beyond their own area much, and consequently even adults do not speak much of any other language.

Teachers from such schools recommend at least one teacher fluent in the local language (Santhali, in this case) per school, if not from the community itself. Till such time as this happens, teachers try to teach their classes in Bengali, and try to also pick up operative words in their students' language.

SYLLABUS AND TEXTBOOKS

Learning by rote, which has been the traditional way of 'learning' in West Bengal's schools for decades, has only recently been re-evaluated. The dual processes of 'learning by heart' and 'vomiting on paper', considered the twin pillars of school education so far, have been proved to be inadequate to imparting an education. Mathematics and English are two areas where the state's recent pedagogic experiments have manifested themselves. New textbooks have been commissioned, and teachers'-training modules for these new approaches and texts are in progress. The training will probably be the most important component of the first stages of this reform, because no matter how scientific, teachers will not fully embrace any teaching methods they do not feel comfortable with. Examples of this discomfort have been visible in some of the opinions expressed at the workshops.

"The arithmetic syllabus for Classes 3 and 4 are excessive. The syllabus should scale it down", opined several teachers. "The reduction of the academic year by a month has made new syllabi impossible to complete", said a few others.

New ways of teaching English has received relatively warmer reception, but teachers have pointed out that the old malaise of teaching English persists: “If teachers are not allowed to speak in any language but English in the English class, the students don’t follow at all, and consequently lose interest”. The old solution – speaking both English and Bengali in the class – has proved unproductive, but no other solution has offered itself. The teachers’ own fluency in the language might be a factor in their hesitation, too.

Teachers are more welcoming of the new textbooks – although some of them have pointed out small errors in some of them, and wish them to be better edited. However, the delay in the books reaching schools caused collective irritation, as each delay is capable of upsetting an entire year’s schedule.

EXTRA-ACADEMIC RESPONSIBILITIES

Nearly every attending teacher is of the opinion that to fulfil their duties as teachers, they must be relieved of the extra duties state administration assigns to them. Primary amongst them are compiling voters’ lists for various elections, census duties, and being appointed booth-level officers for the year. RTE 2009 has prohibited appointing teachers in any areas outside the scope of teaching, but it has made allowances for these responsibilities, as well as for relief- and aid-efforts during emergencies. It has also made teachers responsible for the running of the MDM in schools. Teachers are unified in their wish to be free from these responsibilities, as they believe it distracts them from their teaching responsibilities.

SCHOOL INSPECTIONS

Monitoring and evaluations are vital for functionality and excellence in schools. The schools inspect system, however, has proved entirely inept. Inspections are either absent or perfunctory. Inspectors claim their enormous workload prevents them from fulfilling their duties well, and it is certainly true that the same inspector is responsible for monitoring several schools. Teachers, on the other hand, point out that regular inspection is the only way to ensure that every member of the school’s staff perform their duties adequately, that the lapses in school infrastructure are noted and acted upon, and that the provisions of the RTE 2009 are properly observed.

THE ROLE OF OTHER STATE DEPARTMENTS

Quite a few attending teachers said that the roads and means of communication to their schools are abysmal. It is difficult to convince parents to send their children – particularly the young children of primary schools – to school if they consider the way unsafe, too long to travel on foot, or on difficult terrain. More than one teacher has said that the only roads to their schools are drowned each year during the monsoons, cutting students and staff alike for days together. Some of them have even tried to petition concerned authorities for better access to schools, but to no avail so far. To ensure higher enrolment and regular attendance, teachers concurred, the state must first ensure schools are connected to the communities they serve by at least one ‘all-weather’ road.

THE ‘ALLURE’ OF PRIVATE SCHOOL

During the workshops, teachers have been particularly vocal about the threat public primary schools face from their private counterparts. The attractions of private schools, as the teachers describe them, are manifold. Chief amongst them is the belief that English-medium private schools will equip one’s children with skills – especially fluency in English – that public schools are incapable of imparting. Their children are attracted to the uniforms private schools mandate for their students, which are often smarter than the clothes they wear to school. Parents, too, acquire a certain kind of distinction and prestige by displaying the ability to dress their children in crisp shirts, ties, socks and polished shoes.

Added to these attractions of private schools, is the negative expectations people have of public schools. Parents are convinced, most teachers attested, that children are taught poorly in public schools, that their facilities are sub-par, and that a public primary education will not prepare their children for either higher education, or for competing successfully against their private-educated peers. This image is only reinforced when several public school teachers enrol their children in private schools, even at considerable expense.

This particular phenomenon, and that of private tutoring, must be analysed discussed at length if the public delivery of primary education is to regain said public’s faith.

4. Mid-Day Meal: A Vital Step Forward

People were suspicious of the Mid-day Meal (MDM) in terms of implementation and efficacy. However, the MDM programme has, over time, proved an indispensable part of public schooling. Since the programmes are implemented mainly by teachers, their opinions are vital to a qualitative evaluation of the MDM.

A. INCREASE IN ATTENDANCE

Teachers have reported a remarkable increase in attendance with the introduction of the MDM programme. Children above the age of five, especially those from impoverished families, finally have a tangible incentive to come to school. That one cannot learn on an empty stomach is a bitter truth that this programme has indisputably established. Several teachers attest that children of the so-called 'backward' communities have particularly benefited from this nutritional-aid programme, malnutrition being frighteningly high amongst them.

B. REDUCING DROP-OUT RATES

Along with increasing daily attendance, the MDM programme has also ensured lower drop-out rates in schools. Children from poor families who earlier could not spare time for school, can now attend classes because the programme takes care of part of their hunger, nutritional needs. Children living below the poverty-line ('BPL children', in common parlance) have benefited particularly from this programme.

C. THE ROLE OF SELF-HELP GROUPS

Most teachers feel that the self-help groups (SHGs) have been instrumental in realising the MDM programme. Their role in the day-to-day running of the programme is also worthy of praise. This is

made clear by the teacher who writes, “The MDM programme is run very well in schools. Four SHGs coordinate the programme amongst themselves. Every afternoon, after cooking, they call us to serve the children. It feels really good to be a part of this endeavour”. According to another teacher, the MDM programme functions solely because of the indomitable spirit of the SHGs.

D. RUNNING THE MDM

Although most debates about the need for MDM have now been put to rest, there are still some reservations about the way the programme is run. Making teachers, especially the head-teacher responsible for accepting supplies, keeping accounts, devising menus etc. disrupts the teaching process. One teacher notes that while the MDM has been very useful in bringing children to school and keeping them there, it has also burdened teachers. It would be more efficient if the responsibility for MDM was given to SHGs or other organisations, because teachers feel looking after MDM eats into about half the time allocated for teaching. This scheduling problem is further compounded by the infrastructural lacks and shortage of teachers, which increases the pressure on teachers currently employed. Other teachers, however, have commented that the added responsibility of the MDM have made them more efficient, and better at time-management.

E. ALLOTMENT OF MDM

One of the biggest handicaps for the MDM is insufficient supply. Schools which have fewer students cannot arrange regular meals unless they have a regular supply of all ingredients. Once the community starts expecting regular MDM, stopping it because of supply constraints might also put an end to cordial relations between parents and teachers. Not providing means regularly once an expectation of it has accrued within the community causes friction between teachers and parents, and damages the cordiality necessary for the smooth running of primary schools.

Teachers have noted that attendance rises or drops, depending on whether the MDM is regular. In this case, teachers will have to tell parents right at the outset how many days a particular school is capable of providing lunch. It would be best if lunch could be provided for every working school day, including Saturdays.

“The Rs. 3.02 allotted per child per day is, teachers feel, too little in the current market. 100gms of rice per head is not enough either, because Adivasi children eat more than 100gms of rice per meal”, says a teacher who feels rationing should increase in Adivasi-majority schools.

F. SATURDAY MDM

As we have seen, there is a clear correlation between providing free and nutritious lunches at school, and regular attendance (plus lower drop-out rates). Most teachers, therefore feel the programme should also run on Saturdays. This will be especially useful since most schools hold their weekly literary meetings on Saturdays. One teacher reports that his school has benefited greatly by keeping the MDM programme alive on Saturdays.

G. VARIETY IN MEALS

Most people connected with the MDM feel there should be more variety in the lunches. It is quite natural that children will not want to eat the same meal day after day. One teacher said, “There must be more diversity in vegetables and curries, and we must also try to include fish, chicken and eggs occasionally. This will also improve attendance”.

Another teacher reports similar experiences at her school. She writes that a few parents refused to send their children to school unless the food is good. She overcame this problem by personally creating weekly menus with enough variety to attract children. So doing, she says, has taught her better nutritional planning.

It should be mentioned here that to the RTE 2009 instructs all schools to have a separate kitchen for preparing MDM.



5. A Few Conceptual Matters

‘BACKWARD CHILDREN’

Most of the children attending public primary schools in West Bengal come from low-income families, frequently from socially marginalised groups. The dominant idea in primary education appears to be that students from challenged socioeconomic classes would also be more challenged in the classroom. Post the introduction of the MDM programme, there have been overt and subtle hints that ‘such children’ merely come to school to improve their nutritional status, and not their academic. However in surveys conducted by the Pratiche Trust, we have seen that the inability to learn is not a function of the earning capacity of the students’ families. Thus this assumed correlation between affluence and intellect is both prejudiced and deeply flawed. It is unfortunate, however, that both parents and teachers share this idea to some extent.

At our workshops, few teachers opined that one reason for this perception is the lack of awareness amongst parents of such children about the importance of education. Teachers need to speak to such parents – who may not be educated themselves – about the need for regular attendance of their children in classrooms, and how their personal development suffers from its absence.

Of course, their poverty and their unschooled parents have convinced some teachers that even regular attendance cannot improve the academic performance of these students. This is because they, in the words of one such teacher, “Do not even open the books once they go home”. In his opinion, therefore, the lessons imparted at school are essentially incomplete, and must be completed with homework. This goes against the edicts of the current primary school infrastructure, however, which often reiterates its emphasis on finishing lessons in the classroom, and not assigning it to ‘home task’.

It is very unfortunate that perceptions of caste-difference persists amongst teachers to the extent that they accept social inequality as

inevitable, since it is them who can make the biggest contribution towards ending these inequalities.

PASS/FAIL AND NEW SECTIONS

RTE 2009 has prioritised the ‘no-detention’ policy in public primary schools. Some believe that this measure has increased attendance in primary school and decreased drop-out rates. On the other hand, the pass/fail parameter has traditionally been an integral part of the education system in our country. People are reluctant to let it go, especially since they feel removing it would eliminate quality-controls in education. However, when a child does not perform to reasonable expectations, the constructive solution should be to find out why, and not reject the child as unworthy. The traditional pass/fail system prefers the latter over the former. This must be discouraged.

On the other hand, however, there are some drawbacks to the no-detention policy. Some teachers have reported that parents are unhappy with the progress of their children, and want them to spend an extra year in a certain class. The teachers often agree that this would help the children learn better. Under RTE 2009 however, this is not permissible. Also, by RTE 2009’s ‘100 per cent enrolment’ goal, children must be enrolled throughout the year. This makes learning uneven for the class. Although RTE recommends remedial classes for students joining late, this has been difficult to implement because of the staff and infrastructural deficiencies discussed earlier.

A section of teachers feel that this problem can be addressed by introducing kindergarten sections in schools, while others feel Class 1 should be divided into sections A and B. One section will prepare newer students, and the other will focus on following the prescribed syllabi for Class 1.



6. Our Successes

The previous chapters are testament to the several difficulties teachers delivery of public primary education in Birbhum and West Bengal. However, the workshops also saw stories of successes, and of new innovations in primary teaching. Besides, the subject of health and nutrition came up in several write-ups, showing an encouraging trend of teachers taking an interest in the overall development of their students.

A. CREATIVITY IN CLASSROOM DELIVERY

Teaching aides are an integral part of the classroom delivery of education. In primary education, particularly, thoughtful and effective teaching aides can single-handedly change a child's experience of school: from tedious to joyful, dull to interesting. The workshop saw several discussions on teaching aides. One teacher said that the use of teaching aides depend on a teacher's own interests. However, such individual ideas, when pooled together, offered a diverse and rich teaching environment for the students.

A few other teachers said that they had been helped in making teaching aides by parents and members of the village community. This input eases some of the financial burden on teachers, as well as make the aides more organic to that specific area.

Teachers were also quick to point out that the Teaching-Learning Materials (TLM) compensation offered per teacher is not enough. Rs. 500 per teacher, one of them said, buys not much more than paper and ink in this economy. He feels that the TLM grant be increased. Others pointed out that granting TLM funds per teacher is a flawed idea in itself, since their aim is to help students. There are schools, a few teachers reported, where resource-allotment glitches have resulted in far too many teachers for a few or no students. In the majority of other schools, far few teachers – sometimes, just one – are responsible for all the enrolled children. In either case, TLM grants are a waste: In the former because there are no students to benefit from it, and the latter because they are insufficient for

the large number of students. Several of these teachers recommended that TLM funds be granted on a student-enrolment basis, instead of per teacher basis.

B. LEARNING HOW TO LEARN

Despite the many constraints, the successes of our school education depend largely on the dedication and creativity of our teachers. The infrastructural deficiencies of the school have been addressed in many cases by the innovativeness of teachers. One teacher said he saw excellent results by adopting a playful, group-centric learning process. He also involves children who can write, into teaching other children how to write. This peer-teaching system, he says, has been very successful, and above all, enjoyable for the students. Another teacher wrote that instead of introducing slates and notebooks, he lets the children play in sandpits, and draw numbers and letters in the sand. He also practises finding common threads in the structure of letters and numbers. For example, the Bengali number ‘৩’ is similar in shape to the Bengali letters ত, ঝ, ঞ and the Bengali number ‘৬’ is similar to the letters ড, ঙ. Using these similarities, one can teach the Bengali alphabet using the numbers 1-7.

C. CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Since primary schools are the gateway to education, it is important that children learn to enjoy the time they spend at primary schools. Co-curricular activities are indispensable for this purpose. One teacher remarked, “Participation in regular literary meetings makes children more articulate, gives them confidence, and improves their creative productivity”.

“If students can come to school and dance with their friends, demonstrate the songs and poems they picked up at home, then it makes them happy and more enthusiastic about coming to school”, said another teacher, who was of the opinion that co-curricular activities increase attendance in schools. Other teachers at the workshop, while agreeing with the above, have offered these other co-curricular options, some of which they labelled ‘productive’: drawing and painting, pottery, knitting and sewing etc. have found favour with them.

Some teachers have recommended short school-trips. Historic places, the beach, hills, forests etc. would be beneficial for the children. It would give them a better idea of the land and its people than mere

textbooks. A teacher organises educational trips with his students, and says he has seen significant improvement in their learning and classroom involvement.

D. HEALTH EDUCATION

A few good habits, learnt young, can benefit a child for the rest of his or her life. The responsibility of teaching them these habits rests equally with parents and teachers. However, since in primary schools, and especially amongst students who come from busy, wage-labourer parents (as most public primary students in West Bengal do), it is teachers who can make the most difference in this area.

Reminding children everyday to keep their nails, hair and clothes clean gradually reinforces personal hygiene amongst students. Several teachers reported that having a quick check-up every morning after assembly is an effective way of doing this. Including advice about cleanliness in the assemblies is also a good idea.

A teacher recommends doctors' visits to the school for free examinations. Supporting this view, a few other teachers recommend quarterly check-ups of every student per year. According to them, to build real, beneficial health awareness amongst children, schools need to involve the local community in the efforts. Mother-teacher committees (MTAs) and local health workers should collaborate on the issue for maximum effect.



7. Public Participation in Primary Education

NECESSITY AND CHALLENGES

Lately there has been a certain amount of media attention on public participation in primary education. For local communities, it has now become a civic responsibility, and not just a voluntary option. Village Education Council (VEC), MTA, School Monitoring Committees are all steps towards ensuring this participation. About such efforts, a teacher says, “Parents must be made to feel that the school is their property, and it is their children who will be studying in it. Therefore it is in their interests to make sure that the school runs smoothly. This is why”, he feels, “it is not enough to talk about it. Parents and villagers must take on responsibility. From this participation a sense of ownership will be born, and from this sense of ownership, there will be a sense of duty towards the betterment of the schools”.

However, some other teachers have felt that elections to the VEC are motivated by reasons other than the development of the school. They have emphasised the need to have more qualified and genuinely interested people in the VEC, rather than those whose motivations may not be strictly academic. Even when questions about the VECs’ intentions are not raised, teachers have commented on the lack of interest and efficiency of the committee members. Nearly every teacher attending the workshops commented on the poor attendance at these meetings.

Trying to find a reason for this, one teacher has noted that these meetings are always scheduled during working hours. This makes it difficult for working parents to attend these meetings. Neither can they afford to forgo the day’s wages. As a solution, he recommends scheduling meetings in the evenings. He admits this will take some sacrifice on the part of the teachers. However, since public participation

will ultimately benefit teachers, it is in their interest to accommodate the already taxing labour-schedules of poor SC/ST parents.

Another aspect hindering public participation in the running of schools is the lack of awareness amongst some parents about the environment required for their children's all-round development. Teachers working in Adivasi or other socially marginalised communities have said that there is need for proactive interaction between parents and teachers to raise awareness about education. If needed, teachers should go to the students' neighbourhoods and homes, and talk to their families. Pratiche Trust's earlier studies show clearly that the poor performance of the so-called backward classes is largely a result of indifference and lack of guidance – and in some cases active exclusion – rather than any inherent flaw in children from such communities.

Incidentally, it should be noted here that RTE 2009 makes formation of school monitoring committees compulsory for every school. It further says that 3/4th of such members should be parents of the school's students. Teachers should pay special attention that parents of weak or backward students be included in such committees.

8. Conclusion

The Pratichi (India) Trust and CRY have initiated a collaborative project to highlight the processes of primary education in the district of Birbhum, West Bengal. In particular, the project aims to:

- Identify and encourage effective creative measures adopted by teachers.
- Help replicate them in other schools.
- Help resolve persistent problems in the running of the schools.
- Reduce perceived dissonance between policy and implementation via dialogues with teachers and administrators.
- Improve the quality of schooling in general.

The project began with a series of workshops, called ‘Excellence in Education: A School-Based Public Initiative’, and informally referred to as the ‘Teachers’ Writing Workshops’. The workshops were held in Taantipara, Bilati, Sriniketan, Barashal and Suri, and attended by head teachers and assistant head teachers, who documented their experience of running schools. These experiences, both of success and challenge, have been reflected in this report.

The greatest problem we identified, perhaps, is the assumed homogeneity of school areas in education policy. Even within a relatively small area, the student-body of public primary schools shows considerable diversity. Some of it is linguistic, since the standardised Bengali of prescribed texts is only spoken in very small urban pockets of the state. Most of the problem, however, is socioeconomic. Schools and curricula are planned with the assumption of uninterrupted attendance, of children capable of focusing primarily on their education. A significant number of children attending primary schools, however, come from families that migrate every agriculture season to find work. Such children have long lapses in schoolwork every academic year. Quite a few stop coming back to school altogether.

These problems are further compounded by the lack of permanent, class-specific teachers in some areas (particularly in remote villages where the language and socioeconomic challenges are the most acute). This matter is now being addressed by the state, but its process must be accelerated.

The Mid-day Meal programme has begun in all primary schools of Birbhum, as in the other states. The success of the programme depends largely on the participation and dedicated efforts of the teachers, who were also the first to point out the correlation between this programme, and daily student-attendance. The programme provides lunch five days a week, Monday through Fridays. Quite a few teachers want Saturdays to be lunch days as well, since a lot of co-curricular activities take place on Saturdays, and the absence of lunch brings down students' attendances. Several teachers have also documented ways of making the lunch more nutritious, diverse, and attractive to the children. In the process, different schools have faced different hurdles. For example, lack of infrastructure, uncertainties in the delivery of raw materials and allotted money, worsening quality of supplied food-grains, etc.

A common complaint of most teachers is that parents prefer private institutions to public. They feel that to improve the image of public schools, teachers must begin interacting more with parents, to make sure parents know about the benefits of a public education. But at the same time, they must ensure these benefits are actually available to their students. As part of this effort, many teachers agreed, textbooks should be supplied at the beginning of each academic year. It is futile to strive for excellence in schools that cannot provide their students with basic learning tools. It is encouraging that many teachers are teaching successfully even in this environment of lack, but they must be given greater incentive to develop activity-based learning modules, that make acquiring an education a joyful process.

Two particular points concerning teachers have surfaced in nearly every writing. They are:

Extra-classroom responsibility of teachers: In every school, one or two teachers have to undertake certain extra-academic responsibilities (Census duty, preparing voter lists, etc). Most teachers assert that such duties come in the way of their teaching schedules. However, there are other teachers who say that accommodating teaching duties with these other duties is possible, if the teachers learn better time management. There is room for discussion on this issue, and a concrete solution must be reached on the matter.

Private tuitions: Nearly every teacher wrote about the increasing

tendency of parents to find private tutors for their parents. There is clear dissonance between the methodologies employed by private tutors, and those used by public school teachers who are trained in modern methods. This confuses children, and, far from helping them, becomes a barrier to learning. Some teachers recommend counselling to minimise the gap between the two methods of teaching.

Although the perception of indifference to education amongst 'backward classes' persist, Pratchi's work in the field has shown that no parent wants their children to remain uneducated. Teachers are the link between these parents, and the future they want for their children. Therefore it is only by creating strong bonds with parents, that our public primary schools will reach their full potential. At the beginning of a new decade in a new millennium, we need changes in public policy and methods of implementation. But for these changes to be effective, and for them to reflect the wishes of an informed populace, we need to foster a culture of strong, democratic, and engaged public participation in areas that have previously been the domains of bureaucrats and so called experts. This project is a small step in that direction, and its success strengthens and encourages us to expand its horizons.



Appendix
Teachers participated