

**DEVELOPMENTS IN DEVELOPMENT:
Evolving new teaching methods
in the District Primary Education Program (DPEP)**

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It seems development has made some development lately. As idealistic youths have turned into old-hands, and everyone from government agencies to multinationals and the World Bank have stepped in, development has acquired a new flavour.

If this trend could be described in one word, perhaps the word to use would be 'commercial' - commercial in the North American sense, with all its negative connotations. Just like a slick commercial that is seen on television in the USA. The main motivation for development is no longer associated with idealism or revolutionary thinking - if it ever was. The goal is clear (although it is also so obvious that no one says it outright): the rich want to get richer, and they need to develop a workforce that can make them richer. If it means education - maybe there even should be a little education.

Thus, along comes a plan like the District Primary Education Program, brought to us by the World Bank et al. This project has taken off in a number of states, and its stated goals are not trivial: to get 100% enrolment in primary schools, to reduce gender differences in enrolment, dropout, and achievement levels to less than 5%, and to raise average achievement levels by 25%. This is to be done by a large scale overhaul of the entire educational system, including everything from teacher training, to text book rewriting, school construction and improvement, supply of teaching materials, and the introduction of child-centred learning. But perhaps the most radical change that is proposed is to do all this by 'decentralised grassroot micro level planning'.

Whenever someone makes a really serious evaluation of any development programme, whether it is non-governmental or governmental, they have been forced to acknowledge that the programmes face problems in basic organisation. The organisation has always been essentially hierarchal. There is usually one head, a number of English speaking elite, a few non-English speaking helpers, the workers, and at the very bottom the servants and drivers. All power is delved out accordingly. This structure is of course not limited to development programmes - it can be found throughout Indian society - from government to industry to education to the basic community and family structure.

What's the problem with this hierarchy? Well, the people at the top naturally feel that they are the only ones that are competent enough to make decisions or provide creative inputs. They don't have faith in, or recognise the talents of people lower down the ladder. Consequently, other people's talents and creative abilities are being wasted. The people at the bottom may feel resentment, frustration, anger, etc., but there is not usually much they can do about it because their jobs are at stake.

The entire process suffers more when those at the top have less time or less ability to make all the decisions and creative inputs. Even the delegation of mundane tasks is often not done in a logical or efficient manner.

However, lately those at the top have begun to realise that they should believe in democracy. So they start engaging in all kinds of charades in order to convince themselves and others that their organisation is democratic. The techniques for this endeavour are now highly polished. Even the jargon is sophisticated. But the results are sometimes worse than if the leaders had not even tried to make any new pretences about democratic functioning.

Take the case in point - DPEP. Let's take a look at how they have been tackling just one of their aims: textbook rewriting. From the beginning, the people in charge had a clear idea of what kind of textbooks they wanted. Indeed, they had already written textbooks for other programmes.

They had a certain amount of previous experience in education - and they had previously developed specific programmes for 'child-centred, activity-based education'. The idea is that children learn best not by listening, copying, and memorising, but by doing and thinking. Education can and should be fun for children. Students should want to go to school. Students can learn important, complex concepts by playing games, by sharing and communicating with each other, and by being creative.

The organisers also had a clear idea of what kind of teachers they would like teachers to be. They had a clear idea of the classroom activities they would like to see.

Their ideas were good. If these changes could be implemented, there would certainly be substantial improvements in education.

It might seem that the most logical, and quickest way to rewrite the textbooks, then, would be for the people in charge to do the writing, with the help of a few other like minded experts. But this would not have sounded very democratic. Besides, the teachers may have resented being subjected to strange books imposed by people coming from outside. Although textbooks would be needed for DPEP programmes throughout the country, there was a desire to have regional specificity, and local relevance. So a decision was made that local teachers would write the textbooks. First there would be a series of workshops, not to train the teachers, but to gently guide them along the path of self-discovery.

The idea was that the teachers would themselves develop guidelines, analyse problems with present textbooks, develop curriculum framework, write implications, base papers, and finally write the textbooks. The whole process would be 'participative and experiential'. The teachers should arrive at an understanding on their own.

So it seems that DPEP's goals were good, and their proposed methods were good. Now let's look at what actually happened.

The first obstacle was the severe time restraint. For some reason, which never was clear to those not at the top of the hierarchy, this entire process was supposed to be completed within a very short time - in some cases all the text books for one class were to be prepared within a series of 4 or 5 workshops spread out over only 2 or 3 months.

For example, how did the process go in Haryana? In the first workshop, teachers were asked to talk about games children play, and activities they engage in outside of school - for example, goat herding. They discussed what kinds of things children can and do learn while doing these activities. For example, they learn counting by playing the game 'pithoo'. By analysing the differences between learning counting by playing a game and learning counting by 'studying', the teachers could see that learning through games and activities is more fun and also allows children to more quickly and easily learn a greater variety of things at the same time. The group then considered whether activities and games could be used in the classroom. The objective was for the group to evolve their own definition of activity based teaching.

Next, the teachers discussed the role of text books in an ideal classroom - one which was activity based. The present text books were analysed and found to be lacking in many respects.

By this time, the teachers were beginning to figure out what was going on. The organisers had a certain agenda that the teachers were supposed to internalise. The teachers were learning that teaching could be activity based.

But there were a few obvious problems that were emerging. The teachers were wondering whether their own ideas and problems would be heard. They had been told that they would be writing their own textbooks, but they still didn't believe that this would happen - they didn't think the organisers could possibly have that much faith in them.

The organisers realised that the teachers would be antagonistic. After all, the teachers never appreciated being forced to use new methods which would required them to do a lot of extra work, on top of their present load of not only teaching, but election duty, census taking, etc.

But the interests of the teachers were not to be ignored. A substantial portion of one workshop was spent on discussions of the difficulties faced by teachers. The problems were categorised and recategorised, and displayed on charts hung around the room.

Then there was another workshop, with teachers discussing beliefs and assumptions about the learning process, the teacher, and value of education in society. The group developed sets of 'approach papers' for teaching language, maths, and 'environmental sciences'. Then came the development of a curricular framework. Finally, lesson frames were designed.

But, things had been gradually changing. The teachers were getting less and less chance to input their own ideas. By the time it came to lesson frames, there was the lone man in charge, laboriously writing a detailed plan of the text book on the board, and everyone else silently listening. It looked suspiciously like his own personal plan, that he could have written on the board on day one of the first workshop.

This brought the group to the last day of the last workshop, but everyone was assured by the man at the top that the entire textbook for Class I could be written in one day. The teachers were divided into groups of three or four, and each group prepared one chapter of the book, according to the detailed plan on the board.

But that was not all. There was another meeting of just a few selected teachers and a couple of organisers who went through the chapters, adding, deleting, and editing. Illustrations were added on , according to

the detailed specifications from the top, (ignoring the ideas that the group had formulated) and finally, the books were published. All within a remarkably short period of time.

What about the organisation? What did the 'decentralised grassroots micro level planning' amount to? There had been an effort to find regional resource people to conduct the workshops. They were told to plan the workshops, based on the blueprints they were given. But as time went on, it became apparent that the organisers were not really open to new ideas entering their plan. In fact there was actually one person who had already worked out the entire plan in detail. The only problem was that he was very busy because he had to run around the entire country to plan, instruct, and conduct every workshop in every DPEP location. So he had no chance to meet the regional resource people before the workshops began. He might not even be able to show up until the middle of a workshop. But whenever he came, whatever had been happening would come to an abrupt halt and he would take over with his own agenda. For example, at the beginning of the last workshop the regional resource people asked the teachers to start writing some lessons for the book. But when the main organiser came, they were told that none of this material would be used - they had to go back to preparing approach papers and frameworks.

What about those charts of problems the teachers had laboured over? They were completely forgotten as soon as they were written. Was the purpose of that whole exercise just to let the teachers have one outlet to hear themselves complain, so that then they could forget about such things as inadequate salaries, leaking buildings, and classes of 85 students?

Looking over the published textbook, *Hanste Gaate*, where was the contribution from the teachers who were supposed to have written it? The teachers had said that the book should be in full colour. It was in black and white.

The teachers had agreed that the book should take special care not to show any bias against girls, either in writing or in illustrations. They had pointed out that many old textbooks showed lots of pictures of boys in active roles, with just a few pictures of girls, passively looking on. The new text book shows a boy leading a parade of mostly male characters on the cover, and inside there are approximately 390 pictures of male characters and only 97 pictures of females (25%).

The teachers had agreed that the style and content of the illustrations should be mainly indigenous (specific to Haryana), including such things as folk art and children's art. But we see the final book contains only a uniform western style of illustration showing such things as train tracks going through tunnels in hilly green landscapes, with swans swimming on a pond. You'd be searching for quite awhile to find a scene anything like that in Haryana.

After all the editing, how many of the teachers own words and ideas are found in the final result? Embarrassingly few. And almost all of the most creative ideas teachers came up with during the workshops - such as some ingenious phonetic word games - are missing.

You could argue that the purpose of all those workshops was not really supposed to be to let the teachers be creative and input their own ideas. The purpose was to make them internalise the ideas and the philosophy of the new books - to make them feel that these ideas are theirs - to make them understand

and like the books. In other words to brainwash them? Unfortunately, even with such highly polished techniques and advanced jargon, the teachers may be smarter than we think. What if they actually are capable of forming their own rational opinions? What if they actually do have worthwhile ideas that we don't have? What if they are capable of creative thinking? Who is the fool in the end?

After all the effort, after all the new text books and teacher training, we are still left wondering if DPEP could have made a greater impact by simply building good school buildings and paying enough teachers sufficient salaries. Even some of the resource people were wondering whether the amount of money that was being spent feeding them fancy lunches and transporting them to and from workshops would have been better spent on improving the teacher/student ratio. Couldn't even an untrained teacher without any decent text books be more successful in teaching a class of 20 students than a fully trained teacher with excellent, innovative text books and a class of 45, or 65, or 85 students?

I did finally manage a trip to one of the schools in Haryana where DPEP was being introduced. They saw us coming from a distance, and as soon as they heard we had something to do with DPEP they eagerly started in on a tirade of complaints, problems and pleads. Their main complaint was, "Why doesn't anyone ever listen to us?" They needed additional teachers. They needed additional classrooms. They needed electricity, fans, lights, and blackboards. DPEP had given them a number of toilets. But it so happened that this was one of the few schools that already had enough toilets. And now they have some new textbooks. No doubt, the textbooks are a world of improvement over the old ones. But still, is this the best we can do?