

## Textbook Development Processes – Some Reflections and Learnings

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One of my colleagues of many years recently remarked in a conversation, ‘You still believe in textbook development with Governments?’ This was partly in jest and partly serious. The serious part was that, even after three decades of work in Madhya Pradesh (MP), there appears to be no institutional memory that experiments such as HSTP, Social Science and *Prashika* had taken place. They are all buried, having been formally closed in 2002. The current textbooks often reflect what it was like in the 1980s. For a while we appear to be standing in the same place again. The curricular choices and presentation reflect similar views on knowledge, pedagogy and role of teachers that we had once sought to change. However this is not true for other states and also for the efforts at the national level. We have been invited by many other state governments for being part of teams initiating curricular renewal processes at the state level. Similarly, textbooks especially in science and math prepared by NCERT in around 2005 are being used by other states. MP too, has also adopted these textbooks. Hence similar ideas have come around in a different way, probably in a more lasting manner. This could be debated. But no effort at contextualising for the state, my colleague may retort. Social science is left out, reflecting the priority usually allotted to be subject.

Is the textbook development process a way to broadcast seeds of experience which when watered would surely respond? Of course, we have no way of knowing whether it would be trampled upon, or that a small plant, even if not a full grown tree, would emerge. To be honest, apart from closure of *Eklavya’s* programmes in MP in 2002, let us also count the state efforts that have been buried in the recent past, that is, post-1995.

These would include *Lok Jumbish* in Rajasthan (1998), Assam SCERT initiative (2000), Gujarat SCERT science initiative (2002), Delhi SCERT effort (2003), Rajasthan SCERT effort led by the ICICI Foundation (2010). It would be instructive to understand these closures for the combination of reasons they represent. Institutional memory

does not survive, but do the seeds of experience lie buried in some dormant state and often revived by new opportunities? Do they contribute to long term change?

Many of the stalwarts at the state level that we worked with later were initiated into these ideas by the DPEP workshops on primary school education and the *Lok Jumbish* and other programmes. Curricular processes are negotiations and struggles between contending perspectives and can would never be a smooth, uniform path. At the same time it is painful and demotivating to see efforts that require years being buried so quickly because of changes at the political or bureaucratic level. A question that we have asked ourselves, even though we sustained these programmes for over twenty five years is: were we, at *Eklavya*, naive in expecting a linear transition from micro experimental level to macro changes in the system? To quote C N Subramaniam:

‘Ironically the spirit of innovation appeared to ebb once the new text books were published, and the other components of the ‘package’ class room processes, teacher orientation, decentralisation, etc. took a back seat. This meant that the new ideas were seldom implemented on the ground.’

However for those struggling today, what could one suggest as some strategic efforts that might lead these curriculum initiatives towards the larger goals?

### Development of a programme, not just textbooks

One of the main lessons from the *Eklavya* experience was that it was a development of a programme for social sciences. Textbooks were a part, demanding and crucial, but not the *end* objective. Changes in classroom processes were an equally important component. This could only happen with teacher dialogue and training sessions. A dialogue on perspective, values and new content. These training sessions lasted fifteen to twenty days in a year. Along with this, since materials were being tried, there was regular classroom follow-up and interaction with teachers. Transaction processes



cannot change without these elements.

In contrast, NCERT and SCERT processes are textbook development teams with a strict timeline to be adhered to. This is a major constraint. Some minimal training and changes for assessment are articulated. However, as our experience suggests, it does not work out. They do not really tackle or build in the other elements of teacher dialogue as essential goals for the development team. (*Batra*) The need is acknowledged and understood, but there is no roadmap for implementation. This is left as a wholly desirable task, like our directive principles of state policy in the constitution: meant to be taken up as subsequent process to the textbook development. The ideas are embedded in the texts without a credible plan for execution. However, in reality, this ends up being ignored. Why does this happen?

### **Institutional vacuum**

At one level, especially in relation to CBSE schools, there is an institutional vacuum. Schools affiliated to CBSE are spread across the country and fall into two categories- one, government schools such as the *Kendriya Vidyalayas*, and the *Navodayas* and, two, privately managed schools which use textbooks labelled ‘as per NCERT syllabus’, with the teacher orientation or training being left to the management of the institution. It is important to note that out of nearly 25,000 CBSE schools, nearly 23,000 are privately managed. KV schools have their *Sangathan* and many private schools have their network, such as DAV, DPS schools or individual schools, which decide on their own individual requirements for orientation. NCERT says it does not have an institutional mandate for this and the numbers are too large for an Advisory Council. The CBSE is the approving authority for the syllabus, but its main functions are affiliation and conducting public examinations. After the preparation of the books some teacher workshops were held, but these are extremely limited. For example at the RIE, Bhopal (part of the NCERT group of institutions) where workshops were held for social science after the new textbooks were introduced, from among thousands in that region, probably only fifteen to twenty schools participated. Where perspective building is required, teacher interaction through television is also not effective.

Thus, the teachers of individual schools have no opportunity for dialogue with those responsible for the perspective and content of the textbooks and

therefore freely interpret these as overloaded and consider many activities as unnecessary. Many of them leave out the questions or activities that could make the class interactive for social sciences. They go back to hunting for snippets of information that can be dictated in the class. The spirit of the text is often overturned. At the same time, since there is no one listening to their views and experience, the overall expectations could be more than what is feasible. They are not allowed flexibility by their managements and appear to be sidelined, with the new textbooks, rather than the structures that hold the processes in place, being blamed.

In such a vacuum, any public discussion tends to take extreme positions – the textbooks are either praised or rubbished. Whatever textbooks survive in a fragile atmosphere, where they have not been debated, mulched with experience and then accepted by the teaching community, many teachers take the textbook materials as tasks to be executed and not something that they believe in. In such an atmosphere teacher indifference grows. This only feeds a cynical outlook. At some teacher orientation sessions I have been given such a showdown by individual school teachers and administration as if I was the incarnation of the NCERT devil whom they could never meet in person! Srinivasan begins his EPW paper on with a quote from a student:

‘In April 2014, a newspaper reported the angry reaction of a learner to a Class 10 social science board examination question. This learner wanted to know the details of social science syllabus developers and wanted to kill them (*Rajasthan Patrika* 2014). In 2012, Indian Parliament was adjourned for the “inappropriate” use of materials such as cartoons in social science textbooks published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), New Delhi. This led to a year-long debate on the use of cartoons as a pedagogical tool in school social science textbooks (see, for instance, Singh 2012; Wankhede 2012). Later, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), New Delhi intimated schools that no questions be asked in board examinations about “visuals” from (read NCERT) social science textbooks’ (*Hindu* 2010).

Part of the reason is the indifference of teachers to an issue. Their opinions were not sought. How they used the textbooks was not considered. Visual questions being banned made no difference to them. This teacher indifference stems from no



dialogue with them. For textbooks that offer a change in perspective, dialogue is essential and not something optional to be discovered on your own. For many, the new books do not match their graduate or post graduate course organisation. If dialogue is not possible then I would take my colleague's advice and probably give up on this process.

### **Could new institutional norms be devised to make teacher dialogue mandatory?**

However as an evergreen optimist, I believe that dialogue with teachers could be institutionally organised. Both the NCERT and the CBSE have to set up a combined protocol for this. As a first principle we should reach all teachers, whether they are from government schools or private schools. The effort is to change the culture commonly practiced in the classroom. Here both government and private schools are similar. There is a need to invest in the future and this cannot be done without addressing all teachers. It therefore requires a public effort and financial investment by government. A changed classroom culture is like a public good- it benefits all but it will not happen without public effort.

The NCERT needs to take up the mandate of creating *state resource groups* for schools with the RIEs as the hub. These resource groups would be a mix of people who could be resource teachers themselves, faculty at universities or colleges or NGO personnel with experience in the required area. We have done these processes at different state levels and know that this is feasible. Time, investment and vision in forming subject groups is required. This should be the NCERT's role. At the same time the CBSE has to mandate that every affiliated school, whether government or private, has to send subject teams for these refresher courses. An enabling order is required. The order could bring them in, but to sustain the process academic effort from the NCERT is essential. The training sessions and dialogue have to be engaging so that teachers want to attend them. Although this is more difficult, we need to move to towards eventually creating strong resource groups and teacher peer groups. It is the CBSE asking every teacher to attend training sessions conducted by resource teams set up under the supervision of NCERT and RIE.

This peer group of teachers should be viewed as a collective of professionals and not allowed to be fragmented and isolated by individual school

managements. The choice of textbooks or the design for classroom processes or selection of chapters is left open for school managements and their teachers to decide. This is a process of dialogue on content and pedagogy, not a higher authority imposing a uniform format that all schools have to follow and is the true work of a council. A protocol that brings two institutions in a new arrangement is required. Today we are already battling the private market of textbooks and guides that has taken over this space and, in the long run, isolating teachers. Some state governments have tried this, but they are not able to sustain the process.

### **Assessment norms first, then textbooks**

This dialogue with teachers often tends to become acrimonious. Any discussion on pedagogical methods or content soon turns to the question, 'But this doesn't fit our examination pattern'. This is the real logjam. Unless we are prepared to change our thinking on assessment, the dialogue breaks down. Or the completion of syllabus becomes an end in itself, since a third person would set the examination based on the entire syllabus. Why should teachers not be responsible for assessment of their students? How can most assessments be an aid to learning rather than a means of creating fear and trauma?

How do you assess the interest and learning among children? If one is interested in forms of assessment that aid learning, what do we experiment with? Open book examinations for the Class 8 board exam and the older experience of HSTP for hands-on experiments have set up the goal posts for us. Social science textbooks had a number of case studies and used stories which had questions in between, after every section. This was the active part. These questions were a mix: comprehension, ability to reason with the concept embedded in the story, understanding the visuals and maps, open-ended questions asking for your opinion on a conceptual point. (*Batra & Samajik Adhyan*). Significantly, oral understanding was emphasised along with encouraging children to answer some in their own words in a written form. Teachers worked out their own strategies. (*Prakash Kant*). Many teachers designed small projects or extended these ideas in their school context (*Shobha Bajpai*).

Changes in the assessment process was inherent to the programme and part of the perspective of the textbook being developed. A format was gradually worked out for the open book examination. Over



time, the exercises in the text were examined for balancing expectations. Review by resource people suggested that skill development required more practice than we had embedded and drawing out conceptual issues from stories required more help for the children. At times we had to correct interpretations by teachers that were at total variance from the expected course of the argument. Hence this was not a textbook development project, but a programme for social science where textbooks, teacher dialogue and assessment were considered together.

In most state governments where we have worked on textbooks, the mandate runs out by the time we finish our work for the a of classes. Many times, there are changes at the bureaucratic level that halt or change this process of curricular reform. Even if there is no conscious change in direction and the textbooks are actually being used, teacher training or changes in examination take a back seat. This is not a priority area. We are often told that our 'help' with the process is over. For the rest, SCERT would manage on their own. Thus, reform is piecemeal and runs out of steam. Since this situation has often come up it is clear that systemic reform is not the agenda. It is limited to textbook development.

How could things move ahead? One way would be to reverse the process. In the next round of the curriculum revision process the first mandate

with the textbook development teams, whether NCERT\SCERT, should be to change the format for assessment at various levels on the existing textbooks. These systems are evolved with extensive teacher dialogue and, most importantly, Implemented in all schools for one academic year before new textbooks are brought into the system. Hence changes in assessment patterns would become the focus and priority and textbook would be the second step.

Teachers, students, schools and parents would be intimately involved. The negotiation would be animated and participative. This is the challenge before academic bodies and textbook development teams. They need to spend time in helping the system develop an alternative that could be used at a mass scale. It is important to understand that this is the cornerstone of the architecture that we have created. It is the examination pattern that shakes off most innovative experiments and is therefore able to sustain a status quo situation within our culture. Another colleague remarked, 'Are you not suggesting that the tail wagging the dog?'. No, this cornerstone is holding up the arch and, through this, the entire edifice.

We need to negotiate this through dialogue. Textbooks would then work towards this somewhat accepted new norm.

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