SCHOOL CHOICE NATIONAL CONFERENCE:

FREEDOM IN EDUCATION

2014 CONFERENCE REPORT

6TH ANNUAL SCHOOL CHOICE NATIONAL CONFERENCE

FREEDOM IN EDUCATION

19 DECEMBER 2014

ABOUT SCHOOL CHOICE NATIONAL CONFERENCE

School Choice National Conference (SCNC) is an annual event that provides a much needed platform to identify critical issues in the education sector, review existing programs, explore strategies to face the challenges ahead and ideate on ingenious solutions to provide quality education to all children in India. Through SCNC, we aim to:

- Bring together educationists, educational planners, policy experts, activists and government officials to discuss and debate dimensions of Freedom in Education

- Showcase innovative models—both national and international—that create an ecosystem that enables greater Freedom in Education

THEME FOR SCNC 2014: FREEDOM IN EDUCATION

Various educational organisations worldwide have been advocating for greater freedom in education. The concept of Freedom in Education is vast and has multiple aspects to it, including curricular freedom, freedom to establish and operate schools, school level autonomy, and greater choice for students and parents. In this year's conference we will discuss Freedom in Education from the point of view of increased choice for students and parents.

Through an exploration of dimensions to freedom in education, we sought to understand how different stakeholders across the world perceive freedom and the policies that enable more freedom in different education systems. We also explored some of the existing models that empower parents and students to exercise freedom in education. Appreciating the centrality of government and policy in choice as well as freedom in education, we also looked at what policy framework can help enhance this freedom.

Key sessions at the conference focused on discussing the different dimensions and models of Freedom in Education, and gaining insights into the future of the concept of Freedom in Education.

SCHOOL CHOICE CAMPAIGN

School Choice Campaign (SCC) is a policy initiative to ensure that all children receive quality education of their choice. Rooted in the philosophy that each child is unique, SCC believes that an education system can be called truly successful when it is flexible enough to cater to each student as an individual and yet ensure that the quality of education imparted in each institution is of the highest standard. Therefore, our work aims to reform education policy to make it more responsive to the needs of each student and give parents the choice to decide what is best for their child, whether it be a government, NGO, high-fee or budget private school.

KEYNOTE SPEECH

PARTHSARATHY SEN SHARMA, SECRETARY TO THE CHIEF MINISTER, UTTAR PRADESH

MR PARTHSARATHY SEN SHARMA kick-started the conference with an insightful speech on the conference's overarching theme of 'Freedom in Education'. He discussed various regulatory issues as well as models for introducing greater freedom and choice into the education sector. He began his speech by introducing two major dimensions to freedom: Freedom of parents and children to choose their schools, and freedom of edupreneurs to run their schools. According to him, it is high time that government statutes were changed to accommodate these freedoms, and stay in touch with reality, but cautioned us on the tension between freedom in education and the need to maintain basic standards. He highlighted some of these tensions, such as the mismatch between the concept of compulsory education, with that of giving parents complete freedom to choose, and the fact that parents cannot be the sole guarantors of education. He also discussed the challenges posed by inadequate governmental resources to provide good quality education for all.

Mr Sen Sharma then turned his attention to the School Choice Campaign tag line—*Fund Students, Not Schools*, and discussed the voucher model for funding education. According to him, the voucher system enables students with higher mobility to move from government schools to private (better performing) schools. However, students who do not have same level of mobility are forced to stay on at the government school. As a result, with fewer students in the government system, funding to the government school reduces, thereby adversely affecting quality, and in-turn impacting students that remain in the government system. Further, with greater competition between government and private schools, the school fees are likely to rise. Against this backdrop, he recommended that a voucher model be introduced on a pilot basis, but with care such that private school fee structures are surveyed, a strong database provided, and a system of reimbursements established. The model must also take into account that the government has limited resources.

He closed his speech by expressing his desire to get policy prescriptions, based on evidence and research, which currently is of very poor quality. He believes that the need of the hour is greater synergy between people who do research and those who are in the policy recommendation space, and continued dialogue in order to inform effective policies.

DIMENSIONS OF FREEDOM IN EDUCATION

PARTH J SHAH, PRESIDENT, CENTRE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

SWAMINATHAN AIYAR, CONSULTING EDITOR, ECONOMICS TIMES & RESEARCH SCHOLAR, CATO INSTITUTE

DIMENSIONS OF FREEDOM IN EDUCATION was the first panel session and focused on developing a shared understanding of the concept of 'Freedom in Education'. Through the session various global and Indian perspectives were brought to the fore, and speakers highlighted experiences and experiments to infuse greater choice and freedom into the education systems across the world.

The key points that emerged through the discussion were –

• The Indian regulatory structure creates bottlenecks and barriers to entry that result in adverse selection, financial challenges, lack of teacher and school autonomy and poor learning outcomes

• Standardisation of education leads to a system where there are equal inputs for each child, thereby ignoring the fact that each child has different learning needs

• The concept of education being a 'right' does not align with the fact that it must be 'free and compulsory', and these two do not align with the idea of greater freedom and choice in education

• There are a number of tools and techniques that can be used to incorporate greater freedom in education, and these have been adopted in different countries at different times. However, the results are mixed, and need to be studied further

• Freedom in markets, and in education, is not a concept of mobility, but rather of morality

• In our effort to ensure universal education, we must ensure that we continue to push for excellence in markets, and good learning outcomes. The education system, and syllabus should encourage students to think for themselves

• Privatisation of education is not the answer to the problem, but rather working with different stakeholders to increase flexibility, ensuring nuanced curriculum and creative pedagogy, and developing a policy that opens up the market for greater competition.

DR PARTH SHAH provided an overview of the concept of Freedom in Education, and discussed the Indian scenario. He began by identifying the different stakeholders/beneficiaries in the education system. These include parents and students, teachers, the school management, and the regulatory bodies. He then went on to describe the Indian education system, and the challenges for introducing greater freedom.

Shifting his attention to the Indian regulatory system, Dr Shah highlighted the fact that the License Raj / Bureaucratic processes create obstacles for people that are interested in entering the education sector (for example, the school licensing process creates barriers to entry for aspiring edupreneurs). While qualified and committed individuals are unable to enter the system, those with access to the political process are running schools across India. Therefore, the License Raj lends itself to adverse selection.

Similarly, the not-for-profit nature of the education sector leads to major issues and challenges. Currently, there is no platform available to edupreneurs to access the resources and investment necessary to start a school. As a result, schools face many financial difficulties, are often unable to scale up and expand.

Another issue facing the Indian education system is the lack of freedom available to teachers (in terms of how they teach). According to Dr Shah, teachers have a number of restrictions and must teach the same lessons in the same standardised method across all government schools, without much scope for tailoring the lessons to the local needs. Adhering to the standard is often seen as a sign of achievement.

In response to this requirement to adhere to the standard, Dr Shah discussed the need for greater freedom. Standardisation implies that there is equal input for each child. However, each child is unique and has different learning needs. Therefore equal input often leads to unequal results. The education system must be individualised and customised in order to get a more equal outcomes and parents should be able to choose what is right for them. When we consider the fact that quality of education is a term that does not have one single definition and means different things for different individuals, the inadequacies of one single education system becomes more apparent.

There are a number of things that undermine a system's ability to incorporate greater freedom and choice. The notion of education as a 'right', as well as being 'free and compulsory' are not in alignment. Similarly, according to the United Nations Human Rights Declaration, Article 26, while education must be free and compulsory, parents have an *a prior* right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children. The idea of free and compulsory undermine the third component of parental choice. Under these conditions, the only way to ensure both is to standardise the system.

Additionally, the prevalent mind-set is that parents are not capable of making the right choices for their children regarding education, as they do not have the required knowledge. However, there is currently no research to support this hypothesis, while there is some research to corroborate the contrary opinion. Seemingly odd decisions made by parents may therefore be a result of improper articulation of the rationale rather than the lack of wisdom on their part. In the education sector, the policies and role of the state should be to fund students and not schools, and to ensure adequate assessment of learning outcomes that are publically available.

MR SWAMINATHAN AIYAR provided a global perspective on greater choice in education, discussed different models and their advantages and disadvantages. He began by highlighting the different tools used to incorporate freedom in education. These include:

- Tax benefits

- Special programs for children with disabilities

  - In the USA, if a public school does not have the resources to cater to students with disabilities, the state will pay for private school education

- Vouchers for low income individuals

  - The voucher system has mixed results. While it is tempting to claim that vouchers yield better output in terms of learning outcomes, only those who are most motivated to shift schools would use the voucher. Therefore, when they exhibit better learning outcomes, it is difficult to attribute this to the motivation of the family or the quality of school. Learning outcomes depend on a host of features such as the teaching atmosphere, government environment, etc.

  - Sweden is the poster child for the use of Vouchers for education. Its program was launched in 1991 by a centre-right government, but was also accepted by subsequent socialist governments, and has been immensely successful. Today, 94% of the parents support charter schools and the voucher system

  - In the USA, political parties, influenced by very powerful teachers unions, are against the concept of charter schools

  - In Chile the voucher system was introduced in order to remove labour unions

  - A word of caution, while the voucher system should be supported to ensure the right to choice for parents, these can be misused and transacted for cash

He then discussed the education systems in the USA and China. The education system in the USA allows the states to experiment, and does not prescribe a centrally mandated system. Similarly, China also has county level school processes including hiring of teachers. This has the advantage of introducing greater flexibility in teaching (curriculum and pedagogy) and the ability to experiment. However, it has its limitations because the resources available for the education system are determined by the area and therefore, low income area schools are often plagued with the issue of fewer resources at their disposal.

The main case for greater freedom in markets is not mobility, but rather morality. It is morally correct to give parents the right to send their children to whichever school they choose, and whether they wish to educate them at all. It should be their right, even if it does not ensure efficiency.

The broader issue is that we need to push for excellence in markets. The ASER surveys show that larger and larger proportions of students are now going to private schools, but at the same time, learning outcomes are not improving. This could be due to a mismatch between the demand / aspirations and capabilities. For example, demand of many villagers is that students should be taught English and wear ties, as these are a perception of success. However, premature teaching of English can destroy learning capabilities of the student.

Perhaps children should be taught new languages earlier, at a much younger age rather than later because spoken language comprehension at a younger age is much different. Reading and writing

should be done one language at a time, ideally starting with the mother tongue, so that the child has technical skills and is in a better place to go forward. It is very important to not over burden children, especially the lower income students who have less exposure, in primary classes.

Mr Aiyar raised an important point that freedom in education is as important as the freedom to think. Education should provide the raw materials to enable a child to think independently. Curriculum framers need to be vigilant that the education syllabus and materials does not get nuanced by certain political / religious / other motives.

Teachers, principals and teacher unions are very important players in the sector, and have a major impact on increasing or reducing the level of freedom and flexibility in education. For example, increased freedom to teachers allows for greater creativity, and outcomes. Therefore, rather than standardising the curriculum and pedagogy, the need is for systemising the sector.

Similarly teacher unions need to be addressed if the system is to become more flexible. Sweden is a good example to learn from. It has the highest indicators of integrity in public life, and is notably forward looking. Learning from Sweden, teacher union activities can be considered competitive behaviour on the part of teachers, and could be brought up to the Competition Committee.

The language used to frame the recent High Court judgment on nursery school admissions is important, and its interpretation and implementation is critical.

The government is unsure about privatisation, but at the same time, the regular consumer is also not completely convinced about privatisation. The demand is high but supply is limited, and there is a perception that there is something awry. A system that is both open and of good quality needs to be developed.

Further, it is important to work with different groups of teachers within the unions, and to fully understand the teacher union perspectives. Many teacher unions are not as villainous as they are thought to be and their motivations need to be understood. For example, the 'No Child Left Behind' policy in USA focuses on assessing student outcomes. However, its implementation has resulted in reduced funding to lower income schools that were not performing well. Student outcomes are affected by many factors beyond teacher performance, and these need to be carefully considered. Different teachers unions are doing different things, and while in some USA states they are working very well, in others they are not.

Finally, the idea of freedom is not limited only to the schooling standpoint, since schooling and education are significantly different. Organisations such as Khan Academy are not reliant only on teachers or the school systems, but rather solely on itself. Policy needs to reflect the difference between schooling and education and to open up the market competition must be created.

MODELS OF FREEDOM IN EDUCATION

ERICA TARAPOREVALA, STORY TELLER

PREMA RANGACHARY, DIRECTOR, VIDYA VANAM

NAMITA DALMIA, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, CENTRAL SQUARE FOUNDATION

MODELS OF FREEDOM IN EDUCATION focused on the practical aspects of introducing greater choice and freedom in education. It highlighted different models of implementation, which include some established models such as open schooling, as well as new innovative techniques that use information technology to provide greater flexibility and choice in education.

The key points that emerged through the discussion were –

- Home schooling is an excellent option that is available to parents who want their children to learn and grow in a flexible learning environment, rather than the traditional school model. Through an unstructured curriculum that is adaptive to the learning needs of the child, and through the use of customised pedagogy, students are able to explore and learn at their own pace, and according to their interest areas

- Alternative models of education, such as open schooling, draw on a child's own instincts, and this forms the basis of their education. These models teach in a manner that is appropriate to the local environment, and therefore the students are far more receptive, engaged and motivated to learn

- Alternative forms of education enable innovative curriculums and promote an interdisciplinary approach to education

- Under the prevailing regulatory and policy framework (namely, RTE Act, 2009) there is little space for these alternative forms of education

- Technology is an excellent enabler and can help students learn in a more personalised manner

- Technology has grown by leaps and bounds, and there are many different online tools and resources that cater to the educational needs of people, support innovations in teaching methodologies, and enable collaborations and peer learning

- Technology is an extremely powerful tool that can cater to all types of schools, learning environments and needs

MS ERICA TARAPOREVALA is a champion of home schooling and believes that it is an excellent option for parents who decide willingly to keep their children out of school and let them live and learn in their home space. It is usually a schooling option that is exercised by highly educated and upper middle class families, as it requires that one parent can afford to stay at home and teach their children. It adds a very important element of freedom in education, which is the freedom to explore beyond what the traditional classes and teaching methodology allow.

Different children have different needs, which cannot be addressed in large classrooms or within the current education system. Home schooling enables the child to receive individual attention for his / her individual needs. It is a system that encourages emotional growth and values such as compassion and sensitivity.

Rather than a structured curriculum and pedagogic approach, home schooling allows for different types of exposure. Children learn through doing, through multimedia and the Internet and their curiosity is piqued. The focus often is on developing children as critical thinkers, so that they can develop their own ways to understand the world around them.

Children that have been educated at home can effectively join the join the mainstream once they are older. However, this integration process can be made smoother if appropriate policies and regulation are introduced / amended. Currently, the RTE equates education with being in school, and focuses primarily on school recognition and funding. However, if it can make space for home schooling and not focus only on inputs, the education system will shift towards becoming more inclusive and enriched, with greater freedom and choice.

MS NAMITA DALMIA has been researching the role of technology in education, and discussed its potential to catalyse open schooling in India. In 2012, smartphones accounted for 8% of the market share, but are projected to grow to 46% in the next three years. In India, we have a 19% Internet usage penetration rate, of which 15% is through mobile phones. Technology will continue to develop, and in the future, everything will be connected virtually, and hopefully, technology will become more affordable.

The implication of this growth for education is that technology can help students learn in their own personalised way. It can cater to their individual needs, and can help mend the broken teacher-led education system. Technology allows for 'anytime-anywhere' learning, which is especially useful for students from far off places and students with difficult learning environments and unique learning needs.

Ms Dalmia then turned her attention to the more practical and implementation related issues of technology-enabled education. Today, there are many online tools and resources that use 'gamification' and other innovations in the areas of content development, pedagogy, assessments, etc. Meritnation is one such tool. Study material is given to students in a pen drive, and it replaces the existing tuition model. There are also many dual-language learning tools through which a student can learn in any language that they are comfortable with. There is a lot of movement in developing resources, and the Government is opening a national repository of open resources.

Technology has enabled many innovations in teaching methodology. Digital learning tools have become more adaptable and personalised. Resources are now available in vernacular languages, students can rotate between online and offline instruction and also break out into larger or smaller group to learn at their own pace. Teachers can use data to construct personalised learning paths for their students. In some low resource environments students are given instructions on which videos to watch, and assessments are conducted through peer-evaluation and self-evaluation. In the absence of a particular subject teacher, the school can use a digital tool. Technology enables the implementation of a virtual Teacher School model where expert teachers can instruct multiple classrooms at the same time and local teachers facilitate the discussions.

Social learning can also be promoted through technology. Tools such as Edmodo allow teacher to connect and collaborate with student outside the classroom. Skype has started developing a tool, which will translate as a person talks. This will make social interaction easier and remove barriers of language.

Teacher training, peer and community learning can be enabled through blended MOOC and other platforms, and video based resources. Social media platforms can connect teachers to each other, and they can share resources and feedback. Technology can bolster school administration and management information systems as well as communications.

Technology can be an extremely powerful and cater to all types of schools / learning requirements, not only high-end schools. We cannot undermine its role and impact.

MS PREMA RANGACHARY has been running a school for underprivileged tribal children on the foothills of the Nilgiris, in the outskirts of Coimbatore for the past 10 years. The school, Vidya Vanam, is based on an open education model.

Ms Rangachary began by highlighting that the sense of amazement and wonder is what makes the young special – it is a sense of 'Wow!' and not 'Why?' However, within a few years of entering the schooling system, the 'wow' is eroded. Something is amiss in the school environment that makes children passive. The purpose of education seems to be to make a human product, but we have come to believe that standardisation and conformism is important. It is this standardisation that leads to dropouts, burnout, and dissatisfaction. Education is an organic and human system and should provide opportunities to learn differently.

The philosophy of open education can be traced back to John Dewey and Jean Piaget. The child's own instincts are the basis for learning. Most alternative schools like Shanti Niketan or Aurobindo schools have their basis in open education principles.

Ms Rangachary was convinced of the open education model after witnessing the traditional methodologies that were used by the tribal people that she worked with. The communities learnt through song and dance, which captured the local context extremely well. For example, a folk song that discusses the different varieties of spinach that grow in the area, the different environments (soil, water, nutrients, etc.) that they grow in, etc. is an excellent tool to educate children about their local flora. It is vital that these thematic models of education be capitalised on, as it is (probably) the most appropriate form / model of education for them. When teachers and students come from the same area, they share similar experiences and therefore can relate better to each other.

Open schooling, and innovative curriculums also promote an interdisciplinary approach to education. Social science flows into science, science flows in mathematics, and so on. Rather than compartmentalising knowledge into subjects, it is imparted through a common base and different concepts are taught in unison. Knowledge is viewed as a whole.

Open education gives the freedom to each child to learn at his / her own pace, choose those areas of knowledge that interest them, and learn through a multi-disciplinary approach.

While open schooling is an innovative and beneficial education model, there are some challenges. With respect to the regulatory environment, the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) has given the open schooling system some legitimacy. However, there is considerable apprehension and a student from an open schooling model is not viewed same as one from a structured institution. The curriculum taught in open schools is very similar to the CBSE syllabus, but the final decision is up to the open school on how the students are taught. Finally, the RTE is not fully compatible with the concept of open schooling, and this needs to be addressed.

FUTURE OF FREEDOM IN EDUCATION

J P NARAYAN, PRESIDENT, LOK SATTA PARTY

K SATYANARAYAN, FOUNDER & DIRECTOR, NEW HORIZON MEDIA

MANISHA PRIYAM, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, NUEPA

FUTURE OF FREEDOM IN EDUCATION focused on understanding the evolution of the movement for greater freedom in education as well as the policy and system level changes that are required to enable its growth.

The key points that emerged through the discussion were –

- In order to accelerate growth and eradicate poverty in the country, we need to provide good quality education, something our current education system is failing to provide

- For better quality in our schools, the system needs to be overhauled with greater emphasis on choice, competition, performance, and dissemination of information

- Policy changes are of utmost importance in order to create a regulatory structure that is transparent, efficient and in line with the current needs of the sector

- A good policy should ensure an independent and empowered regulator, a transparent and accountable regulatory system, readily available information for decision-making, and regular analysis of performance and flow of funds

- The government is accountable to its people, and therefore, people need to raise questions about the quality of education and management of schools

- The government needs to shift its focus towards ensuring greater freedom in education, and allow the system to flourish

MR J P NARAYAN began by giving his personal experience with the Indian education system. He went to a government school in a village, studied in Telugu, and while there were no toilets, the students received good quality education. Today, our education system does not measure up, and there are two issues at the root of the problem – lack of assessment and measurement of learning achievement, and the lure of education in the English language. Further, the emphasis on infrastructure, and large amounts of in-flow of funds into the system do not necessarily translate in quality, and this is something that many people do not yet understand. Today, if we need to accelerate growth in our country and eradicate poverty, we need to provide quality education.

In the USA, the property rates between two neighbouring, and very similar villages / towns / districts can vary greatly as a result of differences in the performance of the respective public school systems. There is a very strong community participation and sense of ownership in the education system in the USA. The RTE was envisioned to promote this community participation, but it failed to accomplish it. We have compelling evidence after 5 years of the RTE that there has been no significant improvement in outcomes. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) ranked Indian 73 out of 74 countries, and the Indian government's response to this result was to withdraw from participation in any future PISA studies. Even the ASER survey conducted by Pratham points out the grim realities of our system. For example, the ASER 2013 Survey reports that 43% of government and private school students (rural) in Grade 5 were unable to read Grade 2 text.

While the statistics are grim, there is some good news—the demand side of the equation in India is excellent. Since the demand side is strong, there is limited political resistance, and many different civil society organisations, NGOs, volunteer groups, etc. have diverted their attention to education. Any sensible policy maker should capitalise on these trends.

In order to move towards better quality, school choice should be promoted and some basic criteria should be established for schools with regards to performance. Schools should be rated on performance, and the information should be widely shared to enable informed decision-making. Further, the distance criteria should be removed, as the people value quality over distance. Policy makers can provide transport subsidies wherever required, but schools should be consolidated to ensure economies of scale, and better quality. The license raj must be abolished, and the excessive influence exerted by the DEO should be removed. There is no need for recognition norms. Instead, there should be a large number of inspectors to conduct annual inspection of schools. Students must be funded directly, and schools should compete for students. Student learning achievements need to be regularly assessed in a meaningful but stress-free manner. Finally, a district school board must be established to bring together parents, alumni, non-profit sector, etc.

MR K SATYANARAYANAN discussed the education regulatory framework, and challenges that are unique to India. India is experiencing a set of problems that no other developed country has experienced, such as our very large population, low income levels, etc., and at the same time there is immense unfulfilled potential. The framers of the legislative and regulatory framework need to be cognizant of the issues in the education system, focus on increasing transparency and take prompt action. They also need to understand that India's current legislation was created under a very different scenario than the one we face today, and therefore simply holding on to our legacy is not the most appropriate option.

In order to move away from the legacy system, and create a regulatory framework that is responsive to the current needs. First, establish an independent regulatory body that comprises of advocates and educationists. The centre must then provide autonomy to the regulatory body so that it is capable and empowered to make and execute decisions. The framework must ensure transparency and accountability at all levels. Finally, it is vital that data and information on the performance of educational institutions be available in order to take prompt action when needed. Regular analysis of the level of funds required by government schools, the amount of funds already in the system, and the subsequent performance of schools should be undertaken to make more informed decisions.

Dr Manisha Priyam focused on the role of the government, and the citizen's responsibilities in ensuring a good quality education system. She began by highlighting the Gandaman food poisoning incident (2013) in which 23 students died after consuming their midday meal. The meal supplies were stored at the head-mistresses home and the cooking oil was found to contain high levels of pesticide. This incident shed light on the lack of moderation in public schools, and the many structural deficits in the current system. However, it also showed the insensitivity of the rest of the country, especially well-off urban Indians. Most people were horrified, but did not do much to highlight the issue, visit the school, stage protests, and write about the injustice.

Despite this tragedy (and other similar ones), in India a vast majority of the people still trust the government and send their children to government schools. People do not ask important questions that relate to quality and management of government schools, and the education system as a whole. For example, in Sangam Vihar government schools were of a very poor quality and were labelled as a 'school for the poor', but no one raised any questions. The role of the government shouldn't be to create more scholarships and give more funds, but rather to grant freedom in education to private schools, and allow them to flourish.