



Advisory Note 5

Reflection on the role and significance of in-house capacity to improve literacy



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Much efforts to improve reading, and literacy, in schools, have been driven through projects initiated mostly through the delivery-support non-governmental and funding organisations and universities. An NECT paper tracing pedagogic approaches however credits government for designing some major policy and programmes to improve learning and reading over the past 20 - 25 years. These include Foundations for Learning, Curriculum and Assessment Policy, Annual National Assessments, a massive classroom resourcing programme - QIDS UP which injected over R400 million of resources between 2008 and 2010, accountability- centred National Education Evaluation and Development (NEEDU) Programme, research-oriented programme - Early Grade Reading Programme, Primary School Reading Improvement Programme (PSRIP) and lately, the literacy indigenisation programme -Mother- Tongue-Based Reading Programme. The paper points to the poor levels of continuity of strategies and tactics employed by the various initiatives that dominated a few 'reading improvement epochs since early 2000s'.

Two other reflective papers prepared by the NECT point to underutilisation of the system capacity to improve reading especially that which lie in the 75 education districts and to poor policy mediation which causes serious policy incongruence between the conceptions of the policy designers at national level and the implementers in the classrooms and districts. While literacy improvement is the responsibility of the teachers and officials at the various tiers of the system, the officials, who control resource allocation (time, funding and teacher provisioning) and set accountabilities at district and provincial levels are treated as secondary players in the agenda to improve literacy. In many cases, the officials themselves have grown to believe that NGOs, universities and education funders have to spearhead the literacy improvement campaign, thus removing the locus of control from the state machinery and missing the opportunity to optimally fuse project initiatives with system programmes.

This note draws pertinent insights for reading improvement from the NECT reflection papers.

1. Why district and provincial sub-systems should be central cogs in literacy improvement

Administrative efficiency and bureaucratic compliance, couched in levels above the school, are critical for the success of the educational reform and improvement projects. Arguably, this imperative is ignored because of its complexity and due to widespread incorrect design approaches. These delink 'policy and practice' and lack appreciation of the connected and complementary roles of 'delivery units' (schools), 'policy and standards' machine (national); administrative machinery (provincial level) and the 'drivers of education delivery' (districts). Just as is the case from the broad education improvement 'project', successful reading improvement requires 'consciousness to the need to correctly allocate, couple and align the roles of the various levels of the education system- in order to make classrooms perform.

The school-by-school reading improvement project misses the opportunity to capitalise on the formal administrative authority, the ability to achieve equity among the schools, the opportunity to mainstream interventions and ensure a supportive ecosystem. At the NECT, the importance of engaging district level authority was further demonstrated by the survey results of 236 schools that received reading materials from the NECT. The survey recorded that, on average 39% of teachers and SMTs reported that learners are not encouraged to borrow books for reading at home and only 55% of the teachers reported integrating the NRC storybooks in their classroom activities. The field visit team expressed the view that the receipt of books by the schools does not imply their effective utilisation and that, furthermore the level of underutilisation of the story books could have been ameliorated through greater involvement of district officials (and the circuit managers) in the programming of the use of the books.

A great opportunity to drive organisation cultural change and operational efficiencies lies in districts. The district is the only tier of the department's system level not linked to (and directly affected) by elections; and provides a broad basis for (re)building the capacity of the state, by inter alia, producing a - bottom-up - talent pool for the provincial and national tiers.

Districts as the midway funnel for programming policy and programmes face several challenges inadvertently creating friction for the school-level improvement project. Their capacity, as it relates to the ability manage the complex non-linear change programming roles, is undermined by inadequate staffing and the inability to undertake some of their primary roles; especially, building their own professional capabilities as district offices to enable them to discharge their obligations to schools; actively driving policy coherence including sequencing and buffering competing policy expectations and playing a 'reverse agency' role that continually builds evidence and insights in order to shape national and provincial policies and programmes. On the positive side districts tend to be somewhat paying attention to their 'agency role' for the provincial and national levels; driving school level capacity building programme and community mediation; although with less levels of critical engagement, quality and structure.

In its assessments, the NECT has observed that the efficacy of districts to actively drive improvement is restricted by three categories of factors: 1). Basic/lower Order factors relating to scheduling, marshalling energies to priorities such as reading, numeracy and foundational skills, effective annual programming and scheduling of activities such as continuing professional development, running of effective meetings that ensure alignment to and follow through of priorities. 2). Mid- level technical capabilities, covering elements of sound strategic and operational planning characterised by clear and common priorities, change theories and clear alignment of activities, targets, resourcing and goals. 3). Higher Order Systemic/organisational culture elements, having to do with clearly spelt out frameworks for high performance organisations encompassing shared professional identities and a repertoire of approaches, tools and instruments; capabilities to innovate, stress- testing policies and building evaluation and feedback practices.

The NECT hold the view that without addressing these three sets of elements, there will be no sustainable improvement of education - including reading and numeracy outcomes. While all three sets have to be tackled simultaneously, Basic Order elements can be addressed in the short term (months-years), mid-level technical elements, in the medium term (3-5 years), and higher order elements in 5-10 years. The assumption is that there are no quick fixes, and that inputs and contributions must appreciate the systemic complexities that take the education ecology as a starting point. The principle sponsored here is that whilst initiatives cannot address every factor, they should accommodate the ecological understandings in their design; and perhaps, they should dedicate a proportion of their 'intervention package' (say 20%) to the systems level.

As introduced in the earlier sections, the provincial tier also plays an important role in the reading improvement critical path. From the advisory support provided to two rural provinces (one large and one small); the NECT observed a concerning low educational theorisation in the provincial plans. There was generally insufficient focus on reading and numeracy, dearth of engagement with educational evidence-base, lag in the consideration of new mandates (literacy strategy, MTBBEE, ECD), weak linkage between teacher provisioning and budgeting on the one hand and weak educational priorities on the other, and generally weak internal coherence of the strategic and operational plans. Such plans are expected to drive resource allocation, levels of effort and performance targets for schooling system.

To restate the simple truth, the national tier is not outside the critical path for educational improvement at school level. In another of its papers reflecting on the the 'Mediation of Policy and Programmes across the design and implementation tiers of government', the NECT grapples with the challenge of dilution of national policies and programmes by the time that they reach the intended points of effect: schools and classrooms. Following a review of literature and empirical data, the NECT sounded out the need to ensure that the multi-tier education system is thoroughly readied to mediate new policies. Literature suggests that levels of fidelity, popularity and adaptiveness of the policies determine the success of the mediation (effectiveness and longevity). Officials tend to battle with 'adaptability' presumably because of their limited policy programming capabilities and capacities (and tight implementation resources). Other challenges to mediation relate to typical 'Christmas tree approach' to policy and implementation plans and the inability of policy mediation strategies to strike a balance between prescription and discretion in the allotment of the responsibilities to implement policy. Using the understanding from literature, the NECT observed from two case studies (DBE/ NECT programmes) that policy and programme mediation could be improved by thorough consideration of the implementation environment by the policy designers, detailed upfront planning by policy and programme directive and operational levels (with serious consideration of implementation environments and organisational dynamics and resourcing) , consciousness about the extent to which the mediation will use various levers (control versus liberal approaches, reduction of clearance points, use of human and political factors- (relationships and influence), organisational dynamics and resourcing levels, managerial approaches, allowing sufficient time for the penetration of preparatory work, securing public approval and status of the programmes and increased policy awareness. The policy mediation paper emphasises the importance of

intentionality in the design of the mediation strategies and the need to align the constitutive governance (at national level) on the one end to the directive and operational governance levels (in provinces, districts and schools); and the need to iteratively manage mediation across the abstract policy aspects and the practical implementation aspects.

In as much as it is impractical to address these challenges over night, not addressing them will lead to missing the opportunity to build lasting effects in the system.

2. Some practical high-level proposals for taking the Literacy Improvement forward

There would be no silver bullets for literacy improvement. However, there are insights and principles that can tighten the interventions in this regard. Below are some proposals.

1. Couching literacy improvement initiatives in the districts.

Noting the misconceptions of the district's role in education improvement; the opportunities linked to capitalising on administrative and bureaucratic authority, the potential of driving equity and resource complementarity; literacy improvement initiatives should draft the district to the centre of literacy improvement programming including insuring that the district operational plans prioritise reading, capture sound reading change theorisation, making sure that reading initiatives are monitored and reported (sufficiently) as part of the district operations. Taking this approach, will go a long way in unifying the literacy improvement initiatives across the country. The NECT has reviewed the district operational plans as well as assisted districts to define and include into the plans both specific and standard activities such as teacher development, resourcing and monitoring and evaluation. Many of these essential improvement practices do not form part of the district operational plans and are not being easily institutionalised by the districts. A widespread of district officials lack a firm grounding on the design and implementation of sound and structured programmes literacy improvement initiatives.

2. Strengthening the district and provincial capabilities and alignment of plans

The gaps at district level, referred to above; apply to the provincial level. It is important that literacy improvement initiatives partly focus on strengthening the planning and resourcing of literacy at provincial level. In this regard, provinces should be supported to ensure that – a) strategic plans and Annual Performance Plans provide for literacy improvement based on sound education theorisation and budgeting plans; b) curriculum and district branch plans accommodate activities and accountabilities for literacy improvement; and c) there is alignment between provincial level operational plans and district level operational plans.

3. Constructive Policy Activism

As pointed out in earlier sections, there is evidence of policy (and practice) discontinuities in the literacy space. Poorly managed transitions between 'epochs' lead to policy and practice vacuums which are detrimental to the classroom practices across the country.

For example, the lack of clarity around the use of phonological and/or morphological approaches leaves the over 500 literacy subject and curriculum advisors and their (estimated 200 000) teachers and HODs confused and directionless. Similarly, the prioritisation of literacy in government policy and programmes, and among the education improvement funders and delivery agencies (NGOs and universities) wanes from time to time. These developments require a multi-year plan to reflect on and to advocate for relevant and responsive actions.

3. Conclusion

The note briefly discussed some NECT insights that are relevant for the reading improvement work coordinated by the Reading Panel. The paper advocates for an adjustment of the free-standing project intervention designs to systemic designs that include elements of system capacity development and promote the integration of the non-state intervention with the implementation programming in government. Both government and non-government intervention projects should take advantage of the capacity in government (and its authority) and start to rebuild meaning locus of control for literacy improvement in government.

4. References

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