RESEARCH IN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLING AND TEACHER EDUCATION: ISSUES AND PRIORITIES

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Abstract

The alternative schools are those that generally serve a special population, such as students with unique learning interests or disabilities or potential dropouts. Alternative schooling is an absolute requirement because every student should have the opportunity to learn and to achieve a quality of life. Alternative schooling also offers school and community leaders the opportunity to fulfill their legal responsibility to provide equal access to education for all students. There is a growing consensus throughout the world that all children have the right to be educated together. In the last six years a number of major international statements have appeared, affirming the principle of inclusive education and the importance of 'working towards schools for all- institutions which include everybody, celebrate differences, support learning and respond to individual needs' (Salamanca Statement 1994). Teachers are key to helping alternative school students. The challenge confronting the alternative school is that of developing a child –centered pedagogy capable of successfully educating all children. So with the emergence of the concept of alternative schooling, the role of teacher education institutions need to be widened. The present paper highlights the priorities areas in alternative schooling which need immediate review and action.

Introduction

Knowledge is an inevitable part of life. But some of us are not so lucky to get good education. The vicious circle of poverty, adverse circumstances etc. are the major hindrance on the path of formal education. Moreover, now, the education itself is an expensive task. Here is the importance of non-formal education/alternative education. These alternatives include non-formal education, adult education, distance education etc (Sinha, T. K., 2008). When the educational establishment and curriculum follows nontraditional method, it is an alternative school. Alternative schooling is an absolute requirement because every student should have the opportunity to learn and to achieve a quality of life. Alternative schooling

also offers school and community leaders the opportunity to fulfill their legal responsibility to provide equal access to education for all students. There is a growing consensus throughout the world that all children have the right to be educated together. In the last six years a number of major international statements have appeared, affirming the principle of inclusive education and the importance of 'working towards *schools for all-* institutions which include everybody, celebrate differences, support learning and respond to individual needs' (Salamanca Statement 1994). These schools have a special curriculum offereing a more flexible programme of study than a traditional school. Alternative schooling is another extensional activity of the National Resource Centre for NFE. DPEP interventions have enhanced the role of Non-formal education for providing alternative educational strategies through NFE programmes. In this context, the National Resource Centre organized, in collaboration with MHRD, a national workshop on the issues pertaining to Alternatives Schooling strategies at the primary level. The deliberations of the national workshop facilitated in identifying some of the alternative strategies for providing educational facilities to various learner groups (Sinha, T. K., 2008). In alternative education, students find spare time for fulfilling their educational objectives. Numerous models of alternative schools have been developed to serve local needs and are operating with varied degrees of success. Hefner-Packer (1991) has studied these models and has described five models of alternative schools:

1. The Alternative Classroom, designed as a self-contained classroom within a traditional school, simply offering varied programs in a different environment;

2. The School-Within-a-School, housed within a traditional school, but having semiautonomous or specialized educational programs;

3. The Separate Alternative School, separated from the regular school and having different academic and social adjustment programs;

4. The Continuation School, developed for students no longer attending traditional schools, such as street academies for job-related training or parenting centers; and

5. The Magnet School, a self-contained program offering an intensified curriculum in one or more subject areas such as math or science.

Mary Anne Raywid (1994), writing a synthesis of *Research for Educational Leadership*, provides another descriptive listing of popular alternative schools. The three types she describes are:

1. Schools of Choice, offering different specialized learning opportunities for students usually in a magnet school;

2. Last-Chance Schools, designed to provide continued education program options for disruptive students; and

3. Remedial Schools, having a focus on the student's need for academic remediation or social rehabilitation.

While a good deal work has been undertaken to spread and improve education through various alternatives, a major problem has been lack of trained functionaries especially teachers. Developing skills, competencies and commitments in the personnel involved in alternative strategies demand preparation and use of teaching and learning materials to be specifically designed for the programmes. The quality of an alternative school consists of two main components:

- the program (i.e., the school climate, curriculum, including the school location, the activities, etc.), and b)

- the staff (i.e., the teachers, the administrative staff etc). The training of the functionaries at different levels including instructors, supervisors, material writers, project officers and managers is significant. The objectives of the training of the functionaries may be the following :-

(i) to familiarise the functionaries with the latest developments in knowledge and technology specific to their job performance.

(ii) to develop among them critical awareness about India's social reality.

(iii) to acquaint them with special requirements of the groups they have to deal with.

(iv) to provide them knowledge and skills as may help in the socio- cultural development of the clientele.

(v) to enable them to draw support from a wide variety of sources.

(vi) to develop among them positive attitudes towards the under-privileged sections of society.

(vii) to promote among them the desire to actively participate in the developmental activities (National curriculum framework for Teacher education, NCTE).

Among various functionaries, Teachers are key to helping alternative school students. Sometimes there are good curricula, but poor implementation; other times there are great teachers in poor working environments. There are some alternative schools with excellent staff and a well-designed curriculum; and in the alternative systems of most concern are poor teachers, with poor curriculum. The challenge confronting the alternative school is that of developing a child –centered pedagogy capable of successfully educating all children. The heart of alternative education isthe teacher (Morley, 1985-86; Pariser, 1990; Gregory and

Smith, 1987). The teacher creates a place in which students can learn. Students involved in alternative education schools and programs indicate that the most important characteristic of teachers is that they care for students. The most powerful influence on students to stay in school is friendly attention. As well, a primary characteristic of successful alternative programs is a supportive atmosphere-- caring and being concerned about the individual (Pariser, 1990). The note on behalf of 'Alternative and Innovative Schools' with regard to certain provisions of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 has mentioned that The RTE Act requires schools to ensure that their teachers have the necessary qualifications for teaching at the primary and upper primary level. In operational terms this would most likely mean the possession of a D.Ed or a B.Ed (or equivalent) certificate from a recognized teacher-training institute. Several alternative schools have a significant proportion of teachers who do not possess these certificates. Some reasons for this are:

•Dedicated persons without formal education degrees have often initiated these schools. Given the historical context of poor quality B.Ed programmes in most teacher training institutes in India, these schools have also sought to attract and engage bright and otherwise well- qualified persons who show a commitment to the type of education the school intends to sustain.

• In many cases, these schools have evolved their own teacher development programmes and mentoring processes that enable new teachers to develop both educational perspectives as well as 'on-the-job' teaching skills to a degree that is often not achieved by the typical B.Ed graduates.

• Some alternative schools working with marginalized communities induct motivated, educated youth from these communities, who undergo a rigorous 'apprentice training'. They often prove to be more successful teachers than regular teachers with paper qualifications, for they relate well with their students and are able to contextualize the curriculum to meet their real learning needs. The provision of the RTE Act requiring all teachers to gain a teaching certification of the B.Ed type within 5 years, would place considerable stress on many A & I schools that are currently providing a meaningful education to different sections of society. It would mean that practicing teachers would either have to be given time off as well as financial support to complete full-time B.Ed degrees, or else double up their teaching duties with enrolment in distance-learning teacher certification programmes. Since most such schools are small in size and have limited financial resources, this would place an almost unmanageable burden on them.

We have two provisional suggestions (one long term and the other a short term measure):

a)   Alternative routes to pre-service 'teacher certification' for those joining the teaching profession anew:

•   It is suggested that at least some 'innovative models' of teacher education, with more effective school-based components, are set up in the coming years. These could aim to draw upon alternative schools and their educators for enriching the learning of student-teachers. Any such courses that are developed and recognized are more likely to attract better candidates into teaching. Some possible models that could provide such routes may include:

• Full-time 2 year B.Eds with a strong internship component, for graduate students

• A one-year residential, apprenticeship-based programme, which involves study visits to a few alternative sites

• A one or two year distance-cum-contact programme, for those who may gain a certification while working on the job as teachers, with their current work experience serving as an internship component

b)   Flexible assessment of the competence of existing teachers: It is suggested that an appropriate regulatory body, designated by the National Council for Teacher Education (perhaps this may be a National Council for Alternative Schools proposed above), be asked to devise, as part of its accreditation process, the following:

• A scheme for developing teacher profiles of A & I schools, which covers teacher competencies using more nuanced parameters than a bare declaration of 'qualifications' and 'years of experience'

• A well-designed written test for evaluating competence of existing teachers who have had some minimum teaching experience (This test could be used to evaluate basic 'subject-related' as well as 'pedagogic' competence of individual teachers at the primary/upper primary levels in self-declared alternative schools)

• All existing teachers (without a teaching certificate) and with some minimum level
of relevant experience would be required to take this test

• Teachers without the minimum experience as well as those who fail to meet the stipulated standard in the test would be required to seek a fuller teaching qualification through a teacher training/mentoring programme within 5 years.

• Those who meet the standards (and have the required experience) would thus not have to compulsorily go through a teacher-training programme in order to continue teaching.

A school's continued accreditation as an A & I school could, among other things, rest on

a demonstration of an adequately qualified and experienced teacher body, based on the

declared teacher profiles. These teacher profiles may be reviewed periodically by the

accrediting authority. The researches on alternative schooling should focus on following priorities areas:

- Research on alternative schools is not Comprehensive but does indicate positive   Results for some students that probably

- Conventional schooling. Some positive results indicate:

- Increased attendance

- Decreased dropouts

- Decreased truancy

- Fewer student behavior problems

- Completion of high school program/increase in earned credits

- Maintenance of academic achievement to increased achievement

- High satisfaction of social needs, self-esteem, security and self-

- Actualization

- Positive attitudes toward school

- Productivity in the community after graduation

- Increased parent involvement

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