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Are the Refugee Students well integrated into Mainstream Indian Classrooms?

Introduction

Refugee Education means access to educational opportunities for all the refugees in the host country. In India, among the other refugees it is the Tibetan refugees who have been considerably supported. They consider India as their second home. But unfortunately, in India the support provided to Tibetan refugee is by focusing on their immediate needs, such as providing them with safe refugee camps and daily meals, but their long-term needs like education are not given serious thinking. Therefore, problems persist in the refugee educational institutions that range from poor performance poor attitude of students towards all the subjects, low parental involvement in school, lack of teacher competencies, and ineffective curriculum transaction in classrooms. The students from refugee community often do not have the necessary foundations to be placed into mainstream classes successfully. Sense of alienation and loss of cultural identity and assimilation into the dominant culture prevent students from integrating into mainstream Indian classrooms and closing the achievement gap with their peers. Not only this, there is also a challenge of low teacher competency levels to deal with refugees students. To meet

the needs of refugee students effectively schools must adopt a whole school approach by focusing on different aspects of school management such as the schools; policies and practices, curriculum and programs, ethos and environment and community relations. The most important of all the other aspects of school management is the teacher competency levels.

The cognitive, emotional, socio cultural and communicative competencies among teachers can help build positive relationships to address the diverse and profound needs in classrooms of refugee students. Therefore it is imperative for Refugee schools to select knowledge for each subject area with careful examination in terms of socio-economic and cultural conditions and goals. Merely providing adequate infrastructure and conducive classroom atmosphere for learning are not sufficient concerns of quality in Refugee schools. Along with this, components of the curriculum viz. syllabus and pedagogy are also important factors which need to be addressed. The heart of education lies with the teachers, therefore the refugee schools must take care of nurturing teachers who understand the unique needs of such students and are willing to make the relationships necessary to help them grow. Therefore the refugee schools must provide teachers with a range of teaching strategies and curriculum ideas to support refugee students. There might be typical emotional blocks to learning for those students who are orphan or have experienced trauma, the learning and achievement of such students in a classroom depend on the competencies of teachers who are instructional leaders and are responsible to transact the planned curriculum successfully in classrooms.

Education of Tibetan Refugees in India

Tibetan refugees are the largest refugee community in India who have enjoyed tremendous social, cultural and economic support from Indian government. According to 2009 demographic survey conducted by the Central Tibetan Administration based in India, there is a total of 19,203 Tibetans living in India. Tibetan refugees are the only refugees in India who have been permitted to establish culturally specific Tibetan schools where Tibetan culture, Buddhism and Tibetan language are taught (UNCHR Document 1998). India is a nation of large and complex school education system, having more than 1.4 million schools under various education boards and more than 230 million enrolments. Still Tibetan Refugees have experienced social mobility

through education in India. A huge number of Tibetan schools in India are in Tibetan refugee settlement locations of Dharamshala and Bylakupe.

The mission of Tibetan schools in India is to preserve and promote ancient Tibetan culture language and heritage along with providing quality education to children. The schools therefore strive to achieve this mission with the help of explicit and implicit curriculum (Nowak 1978). The explicit curriculum i.e. the textbooks and subjects and the implicit curriculum i.e. pedagogical approaches and co-curricular activities combine to create school ethos that has strong emphasis on Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan Nationalism. Tibetans feel that the major educational challenge they face today is making their schools vibrant community based institutions that can transmit the core values and raise living standards. For transmitting values the importance of teachers cannot be neglected as teachers are a central dimension of the policies and practices aimed at providing quality education for refugees. Tibetan School Education is beset with a range of issues like poor school and student outcomes, lack of qualified and trained teachers (especially for use of technology), increasing student population, higher demand for personal attention and additional time allocation for effective teaching etc. Apart from these the readiness and the use of ICT in these schools is still not adequate despite highly emphasised by different Education committees and commissions.

The Current Scenario

Despite the guidelines from the National policies on Education (1967 and 1986) and Programme of Action (1992) as well as the reports submitted by state level education commissions and committees to bring improvement in the education quality there are hardly many suitable strategies developed and implemented by school Boards to improve quality at all the levels/stages of school education in India. It is not only the World Bank (1995) that stresses on student's outcomes as an indicator of quality but education specialists around the world also assert to an education that is student-centred and driven by the needs of the local community. It will not be wrong to maintain that, the quality of education and the teacher competency levels in the Tibetan schools that follow the education system of the host country i.e. India is no different than the other school Boards in the country. There is a noted increase in the number of Tibetan

schools since 1950, in India but this increase in the quantity is not associated with improvement in quality of education.

Given the concerns over the deteriorating quality of education in some CTSA institutions, the current scenario endorses some concrete mechanisms from the government to train teachers and bring an improvement in their competency. While achieving education excellence is imperative for Tibetan schools and school Board, it is equally vital for the refugee community to generate quality professionals. To provide education opportunities for Tibetan refugee children, there must be enough of resources available, but unfortunately there is always a great crunch in the community's financial resources to meet the increasing educational needs of the Tibetan education. Another area of concern is the ongoing efforts to gradually convert the medium of instruction in all Tibetan institutions of learning from the pre-primary level up to the highest research study level, into Tibetan language. The quality and role of teachers, teachers competencies, formation of school curriculum, and methodology of teaching is also framed mainly in accordance with the traditional Tibetan principles and sciences, rather than the modern system. This too raises question of quality in Tibetan schools as English language lack the needed importance that in turn hamper the demand of modern education.

Quality Initiatives in Tibetan Schools

Tibet Education Project launched by the exile Tibetan administration in November 2012, aimed at improving the quality of education opportunities for Tibetan refugee students in India and Nepal. Through the funds of this project was expected to increase professional training for teacher development, enable Tibetan students to access opportunities for scholarship program in higher education, textbooks for all the subjects in Tibetan and a special Primary Teacher Training Certificate courses to train primary teachers to teach effectively in the mother tongue. The Department of Education, established Teacher Education Centres in 2012 for developing Tibetan teachers, it conducts music and dance teachers training programmes on the basis of need assessment in the schools. Intensive trainings are provided in collaboration with the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA), Dharamshala. Apart from this the Indian Government offers fifteen degree level and five diploma level scholarships to Tibetan children who come from

different backgrounds to pursue higher education. The concerns for quality education are lack of parental interest in the education of their children and teacher-student communications, especially in the CTSA Schools, where the majority of teachers do not speak Tibetan. Furthermore, teacher shortage is hampered due to brain drain of educated refugee immigrating to western nations.

Some Strategies for Mainstreaming

In schools mainstreaming of education for the refugee students can only occur if the resources are in place to support strategies that will allow teachers to reflect on their teaching and modify as needed to meet the needs of refugee students. This is possible with efforts and commitment of school leadership. Following strategies can be helpful to schools in mainstreaming education;

- To pay attention to the needs and capabilities of the refugee students.
- To enable refugee students to perform complex skills.
- To encourage refugee students to express their thoughts and feelings by helping them develop writing skills.
- To teach students about cultural diversity and cross-cultural harmony about the host country and its culture.
- To provide opportunities to refugee students for variety of co-curricular activities like storytelling, drama and role play within the school curriculum.
- To provide students with an age-appropriate political understanding of the causes of displacement and refugee experiences to remove misconceptions.
- To develop links with community and take their help to organise peer support programs, teach students about health and wellbeing.

Conclusion

The range and complexity of competences required for teaching in the 21st century is so great that any one teacher is not likely to have them all, nor can they develop them all to the same high degree. Attention of policy makers and the school authorities must therefore be focused

developing competences or attributes in teachers that help them to deal with the needs of the refugee students. It is unfortunate that the concept of teachers' competencies is mostly discussed in very narrow dimensions such as teachers' planning, implementation, assessment of the curriculum, standards for the curriculum or the school. Therefore, professional development becomes a critical component for teachers working with refugee student. Good professional development in a refugee school must include understanding the role of first language and culture in learning. Attention must be paid on the demands that mainstream education places on culturally diverse learners, needs and characteristics of students as well as on belief in students. In short attention must be on training teachers to be sensitive and aware of refugee students' needs. The main conclusion to be made is that improved teacher competencies can help teachers to form strategies that will prove effective for refugee students. These practices will help teachers further develop their potential and work on John Dewey's philosophy of education where he argues that education and learning are social and interactive processes and school a place to learn how to live as well instrumental in creating social change and reform.



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