Potential of Participatory Communicative Approach
School Education Scenario in Sikkim

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Introduction

There is a growing need to harness communication strategies and processes to stimulate students for their harmonious development. This needs the collaboration of schools with stakeholders. In this context, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 suggests community participation as a means of enhancing quality and accountability in the teaching and learning process. It emphasises the planning of activities to ensure the 'freedom and autonomy' of schools and teachers. The Right to Education Act (RTE) 2009 has also emphasised and argued for a participatory approach in the planning, implementing, and monitoring school education. Participatory communication is an essential approach-based dialogue that allows the sharing of information, perceptions, and opinions among teachers and students to facilitate students' growth. Therefore, a study was conducted to explore the situations of participatory communication existing in school scenarios.

Objectives

The proposed study aimed to address the following research objectives:

- To explore the space and scope for need-based school-centric development from the specific methodological vantage of participatory communication.
- To understand the stakeholders' involvement in the decision-making process, which may lead to effective communication planning, and action to improve and support education.

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- To document how a plane communication strategy in a participatory manner can enhance dynamic, engaging and sustainable change process.
- To study the use of participatory communication approaches as an instrument for democratic experimentation within any developmental plan of Education.
- To explore the complexities and challenges of the practice of participatory communication.

Method

The study relied heavily on the field data. Both semi-structured and open-ended interviews were conducted. Purposive sampling was used keeping in mind the selection of schools from both rural and urban schools located in far-flung areas, and under different blocks of each district. Focus group discussion was another qualitative method for data collection from the target group, i.e., parents, teachers, students, members of a School Management Committee (SMC), and Gram Panchayat (GP) members in their natural surroundings. The researcher collected data from the field visit, during meetings as a non-participant observer, visits to the school interviews with officials and staff of the Human Resource Development Department, Government of Sikkim, and also faculty of SCERT and DIETs. The researcher paid attention to the following factors while contacting the students:

- Use of English language
- Use of simple local language—Nepali whenever the need arose
- Subtle posing of controversial questions
- Questions designed to be easily understandable
- Reasonable number of questions

Relevant government reports and handbooks, government orders, books, articles, websites, notifications, and gadgets were secondary data sources.

Result

The state of Sikkim has immensely contributed towards the social and academic enrichment of the school community. During the time of field visits, observation was made of the presence of a suggestion box in a few schools. It was an important platform for communication between students and the school. The suggestion

box could allow them to have a voice in the continuous improvement of the school. There was a felt need for reorientation of various factors like leadership, community relations, and appropriate technologies to reshape various learning processes and planning methods. Analysis of data showed that the most commonly used channels of communication by teachers were WhatsApp groups and face-to-face. However, e-mail was hardly used. It was used to share teaching aids that they prepare, circulars and notifications from the department, videos related to education, and images of the co-curricular activities of the school. Field visits to the schools revealed that teachers were participating in interpersonal communication with professional learning committees, participation in pedagogical issues, and the use of ICT in the teaching and learning process. Moreover, the study reveals that school-related information does not always bear the clarity mark. As a result, the schools either failed to implement or were deprived of the benefit. Some of the situations are included below:

- School communication with GP—a close dialogue between the school and GP was not a regular mode of communication.
- School communication with SMC.
- School in communication with SCERT and DIET—for instance, any important information, sharing of good practices, school activities and the like were communicated.
- Communication linkage with HRDD—the social network was the platform to communicate all notifications, circulars, instructions, program details, etc., to the lower administrative officers
- School communicating with stakeholders—the ways of communication used by schools with parents through mobile phones, parent-teacher meetings, visits to different schools and interaction with teachers, parent's participation in their children's learning, philanthropy activities of individuals, participation of organisations like NGOs, SHGs, pharmaceutical companies, hydel power project, banks, border force, construction companies.
- Participatory communication, schools with SCERT, and schools with DIET—'On-site support' connecting with schools.
- Communicating through 'Reflections'—a quarterly newsletter.

- Various forms of participatory communication—knowledge center, e-learning centers (a new experience in mass media).
- School and administration—with the responsibility of HRDD to bring forth quality.
- In-service training—In exploring communicatory power.

The study understood the following thoughts and views of the schools:

- Communication between students, parents and teachers should be strengthened.
- More outreach programmes for parents and SMC.
- Sufficient teaching and non-teaching staff particularly in schools in far-flung areas.
- Supervision and periodic visits by the officials to the schools.
- Strengthening of communication with schools particularly primary schools and junior high schools in remote areas.
- Sanitation facility to be improved.
- In-service training of heads and teachers—deputation of the same teachers and heads for training to be avoided.
- Infrastructural needs of the schools to be provided.
- The seating arrangement and school furniture of a primary school need to be changed.
- Investment in technology for education.
- Need to improve the participation of parents in PTMs.

The efficiency and effectiveness of participatory communication will therefore, highly depend on the attention given to the developmental needs of the schools. However, there is a scope for a prudent venture to address the issues by resorting to a 'bottom-up' approach.

Conclusion

The result of the study gives an insight that communication does not only disseminate information but also facilitates the heads, the teachers, the students and the community to participate in the process of holistic development of the school. Participatory communication is viewed as a collaboration in the developmental process by which the schools gain skills, strategies, opportunities and perspectives towards progress. Thus, it seems to be a credible channel of communication between schools and stakeholders.