

BACKGROUND

After the Chinese occupation of Tibet, His Holiness the Dalai Lama along with about 80,000 Tibetan refugees escaped to India in 1959. Realizing the importance of education for the Tibetan cause and for propelling the exile community into the future, His Holiness gave top priority to education. With the twin goal of providing high quality modern education and preserving Tibetan language and culture, the first Tibetan school was established in 1960 at Mussoorie with just 50 students and a handful of teachers.

Over the last 58 years the education landscape of the exile Tibetan community has radically changed. Not only did the number of schools increase, the infrastructural facilities and curriculum resources in schools improved significantly. Today, with CTA's Department of Education (DoE) as the apex body, the Tibetan schools are being run by five different school administrations: Sambhota Tibetan Schools Society (STSS), Tibetan Children's Village (TCV), Tibetan Homes Foundation (THF), Central Tibetan Schools Administration (CTSA) [1] and the Snow Lion Foundation (SLF) in Nepal. As of 31st March 2017, there were 67 Tibetan schools in India and Nepal under the DoE wherein 19,020 students were being educated and looked after by 1,467 teaching staff and 535 non-teaching staff.

According to the Tibetan demographic survey report published by CTA in 2010, the effective literacy rate of the exile community is 82.4% (compared to 74% of the host nation). Given the challenging circumstances under which education in exile began and sustained itself over the last six decades, this figure is a simple testimony to the hard work and success of the Tibetan refugee community. Every year about 1,200 students successfully graduate from Tibetan schools, and over the last 10 years, the average pass percentage of students in class 12th board examination is 90% which is about 10 points higher than the national average in India.

Besides basic education, DoE invests heavily on higher education of Tibetan students. Every year more than 500 new school and college graduates receive merit cum need based scholarship from the DOE to pursue and continue their degree, professional and diploma courses in various higher education institutes. With combined effort of the scholarship programs of DoE, TCV and THF, more than 55% of fresh class 12 graduates receive full scholarships to pursue higher studies annually. Additional 12% of graduates manage to self-finance their higher studies.

The government of India needs to be especially acknowledged for the enormous and enduring support provided to the education of the Tibetan children in India.

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FACING THE EXILE TIBETAN COMMUNITY

In spite of the successes, the Tibetan refugee community still has a long way to go in terms of meeting its long term educational goals. The following list of key educational challenges highlighted for deliberation during the Five-Fifty Forum was drawn based on the inputs from a team of experienced Tibetan educators and reports on educational assessments conducted by the DoE over the past eight years (2010-2018). Since the nature of the core challenges are systemic and cultural, it requires comprehensive, evidence-based and long-term educational strategies that include all the stakeholders and does not undermine the Tibetan context.

1. Addressing Quality of Education Issues

In spite of having far-sighted and holistic education policy on paper, the education in Tibetan



schools has by and large remained highly examination-centric with overemphasis on grades/marks. This encourages rote learning and limits acquisition of 21st Century Skills (creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and communication). Every year hundreds of high-scoring students graduate from Tibetan schools without having acquired sufficient academic and soft skills that are crucial to succeed in the 21st century world.

One of the key reasons for this state of affairs is the collective failure of the system which has resulted in our teachers' failure to significantly change their classroom practice in accordance with the progressive educational goals. Teaching is the most important activity in a school and it is the key lever for improving student learning. There was a time when a good teacher is one who effectively transmits knowledge to students. However, a wave of awareness about alternative approaches to teaching spread across Tibetan schools in the 90s and 2000s. "Child-centric education" which emphasizes the shift in the role of teacher from "transmitter of knowledge" to "facilitator of learning" became a buzzword in Tibetan schools.

Over the years the DOE and school administrations have made efforts to transform teachers' classroom practice primarily through training workshops. However, these efforts have had limited success. Reports on educational assessments of Tibetan schools have repeatedly pointed that teaching in schools is still heavily "teacher-centric" with teachers doing the bulk of talking in classroom, thus limiting the role of students to that of passive listeners. One such assessment conducted by the DoE in 2012 reported "a serious lack of student engagement in most of the lessons observed... There is little room for children to think, make meaning, give interpretations, and construct knowledge on the basis of their prior experiences, local knowledge and local resources."

Since classroom teaching is at the heart of school education, a comprehensive approach is required to address this issue rather than relying on one-off in-service trainings with no follow-up actions. Besides providing high quality need-based trainings for teachers, teaching as a profession has to be redefined to give our teachers more responsibility and resources to learn and improve their own practice through meaningful teacher collaboration. Studies have revealed that more schools in high-achieving countries have policies and practices that foster teacher collaboration.

To address this issue at a deeper level, it is important to raise the profile of teaching profession in the Tibetan society to encourage brighter students to pursue career in education. One way to achieve this is by raising teachers' salary and other benefits while also improving job accountability. In the long run these efforts may help create a strong community of professionally competent teachers who will be able to assume leadership roles and responsibilities in various areas including curriculum development, educational research and teacher professional development.

It is also important to prioritize the quality of classroom teaching at primary and pre-primary level to address the issues related with education quality. Early grade level in Tibetan schools has always been given lesser importance, which is a serious contradiction to what scientific studies have found. Research in education strongly claims that it is the education at pre-primary and primary level, which has far more pervasive and life-long consequences compared to that of secondary and senior secondary level. Therefore, investment in primary education is crucial for overall improvement of educational quality.

2. Strengthening School Leadership

Of everything that research in education has learned about the art and science of reforming an

education system, school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning. Kenneth Leithwood, a prominent educationist at the University of Toronto who studies education leadership claims “there is not a single documented case of a school successfully turning around its pupils’ achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership.”

One of the biggest challenges facing Tibetan schools today is the lack of effective school leaders. As much as education leadership is crucial in creating a positive school culture, majority of the principals and headmasters in Tibetan schools have relegated their roles to assume just ‘administrative leadership’ rather than ‘educational/instructional leadership.’ Many lack a thorough understanding of teaching and learning process and developments in the field of education to guide and inspire their teachers. As a result, they fail to create a school culture conducive to professional satisfaction and high morale of teachers as well as learning, fulfillment and well-being of children.

Although providing high quality job-specific professional support and trainings for the school leaders will help the existing principals and headmasters improve their job effectiveness, a systemic change in school leader recruitment process is required to address this problem at its root. At present administrative bodies do not seem to have a clear and transparent school leader recruitment policy. Principals are typically appointed internally by senior administrators from within the ranks of teaching staff and criteria of advancement are not clearly laid. This recruitment system deprives capable teachers having leadership qualities (who may have been overlooked by senior administrators) the opportunity to apply and participate in the selection process for the position of principal/headmaster. Thus, the Education Council of DoE has an opportunity to form guidelines on application criteria and introduce ‘Principal and Head Teacher Entrance Test’ through Academic Section to conduct transparent and merit based selection of senior leadership for all Tibetan schools.

3. Impact of Social and Demographic Challenges on Education

Decrease in fertility rates[2] combined with an increase in overseas migration of Tibetan communities and more parents opting to send their children to private schools has led to the decline in Tibetan student enrollment across the 67 Tibetan schools in India and Nepal. In 2009 there were 24,804 Tibetan students enrolled in Tibetan schools in India and Nepal. By 2017, the number dropped to 19,020. If this situation of low fertility rate, increased overseas migration and more students enrolling in private school is not addressed then it will significantly shrink the student pool in Tibetan schools.

Furthermore, Tibetan schools have high teacher attrition rate due to low teacher salaries when compared with other Indian schools and alternate opportunities available in India and abroad. In addition, donor fatigue has led to a drop in grant funding that affects the sustainability of programs initiated by the DoE as well as the scholarship support. These set of challenges have severe impact on the operational sustainability and quality of education in Tibetan schools.

Under these circumstances the DoE and other Tibetan school systems may need to come up with a school consolidation plan so that the available human and material resources can be pooled into a fewer number of schools. At present, as many as 26 Tibetan schools (mostly primary schools) have less than 100 students in each school. In the Dharamsala region, there are 11 Tibetan schools in which 5,700 students are enrolled while the same number of students could be comfortably accommodated in five larger schools in the area. Furthermore, same settlements have multiple schools administered by DoE and TCV.

School consolidation may enable provision of better quality education for children as available resources could be used to meet the needs of lesser number of schools. This could make it easier for the administrative bodies to raise teacher salary, improve infrastructure facilities, provide better curriculum resources and organize high quality professional development opportunities. It will also enable administrative bodies to monitor and assess its schools on a more frequent basis so that specific needs of schools could be easily identified and met.

Fewer and higher quality schools may even attract students who are currently attending private schools. Families that live overseas but with the right conditions may also consider sending their children to study in Tibetan schools in India.

4. Implementation of Basic Education Policy (BEP)

For about four decades since Tibetans first came into exile, the Tibetan schools almost entirely adopted the education system of the host nation. However, the education system for Tibetans in exile saw an overhaul in 2004 when CTA launched its own Basic Education Policy designed to meet the unique needs of the Tibetan people.

At the core of the BEP lies four holistic aims of education: 1) freedom-enabling the full awakening of students' discriminative faculty of mind, 2) altruism-embracing others as more precious than self, 3) upholding the heritage-preserving Tibetan culture and natural environment and 4) innovation-ability to introduce new principles, systems, movements and so forth in accordance with the needs of time and place.

One of the main aims of establishing separate schools for Tibetan refugee children was to enable the preservation of rich Tibetan language and culture in exile. Over the years, the DoE has put tremendous effort in achieving this goal in Tibetan schools. Besides the Tibetanization of curriculum under the BEP, philosophy teachers have been appointed in all Tibetan schools and science of valid cognition has been introduced as a school subject in all Tibetan schools. Under the DoE's Tibetan Early Grade Reading (TEGR) Project, more than 57 high quality children's books in Tibetan language were published in the last seven years including the first ever graded reading series in Tibetan language.

The BEP highlights mother tongue-based education, particularly at primary level. Under the policy, all the subjects of study including math, science and social science are taught exclusively in Tibetan until grade 5. English as a second language is introduced starting from grade 4. Efforts are being made to vernacularize the medium of instruction and curriculum all the way to grade 8. Besides the emphasis on mother tongue-based education, the policy also underscores the importance of child-centric pedagogy, teaching of traditional knowledge like science of valid cognition (tse-nyi), life skills education, and fostering of higher order thinking skills. However, in terms of translating the aforementioned policy goals into practice particularly at the classroom level, the DoE and BEP-following schools have been facing significant challenges.

Baseline survey conducted under TEGR project in 2017 found that only 26% of grade 2 students in Tibetan schools could read a grade level text with adequate competency. According to a 2012 DoE assessment report, "the standard of Tibetan language is low in most of the Tibetan schools. Children's reading and writing proficiency are particularly a cause of concern." Poor pedagogical practices of Tibetan language teachers, dull and outdated language curriculum and lack of Tibetan language resources were identified as key factors responsible for the poor mother-tongue proficiency of Tibetan children.

In order to uphold the principles of BEP there is a need for a strong bilingual and biliterate

Tibetan community. Related with the issue of mother-tongue proficiency, Tibetan children's English language competency is also a cause for serious concern. English language proficiency is critical for employment, livelihood and higher education opportunities. However, many Tibetan students graduate from Tibetan schools without having acquired higher level language skills in English required to succeed in academic, professional and business environments. Besides outdated language classroom practices (including textbook centric language instruction and teaching of grammatical rules in isolation), the lack of reading culture at home and school is one of the main reasons for poor English language proficiency.

The DOE may also explore the possibility of adopting differential dual-language immersion models at different stages of education so that children's proficiency in second language is also enhanced while meeting the BEP objectives. For instance, from grade I to V, 70:30 model (wherein 70% of curriculum is taught in Tibetan and 30% in English) and for grade VI to VIII 50:50 model could be piloted. To enable the success of such a program across schools, the DOE should incorporate focused modules on delivering dual language curriculum in the in-service and pre-service teacher training program.

While it is important to improve the quality of Tibetan language instruction and curriculum, efforts also need to be made to keep Tibetan language relevant and evolving with time. One of the ways to enable this is by making high quality reading materials on various fields including science, philosophy, economics, social science and global literature accessible in Tibetan. Translation and publication of such reading materials in Tibetan will enhance students interest in the subjects as well as the language. Furthermore, this might also create significant livelihood opportunities for people.

From a broader perspective, due to the increasing number of Tibetans immigrating to the west, the challenges to create a truly educated Tibetan community (as envisioned in BEP) may increase manifold in years to come. CTA needs a long-term strategy to address the educational needs of Tibetan diasporic community living overseas which within the near future may include half of the total Tibetan refugee population. The strategy could include strengthening existing Sunday Schools, setting up new Tibetan primary and secondary schools in countries with larger Tibetan population, creating appropriate reading materials for learning Tibetan as a second language, establishing learning centers and starting short and long-term Tibetan culture immersion program for Tibetan students living overseas. CTA could also roll out scholarship programs for Tibetans living in the west to pursue degrees in Tibetan and Buddhist studies in colleges and universities like College for Higher Tibetan Studies (CHTS) and Central University of Tibetan Studies (CUTS).

In line with His Holiness' vision to create a peaceful and compassionate world and the BEP's goal to foster altruism in children, promoting secular ethics (or a happiness curriculum) in Tibetan schools strongly grounded in Tibetan Buddhist philosophies should be an educational priority. The DoE can design a high quality secular ethics course in partnership with existing international universities working on secular ethics education. The course could be incorporated in Tibetan school curriculum and delivered in the Tibetan language across Tibetan schools. The DoE may also explore possible collaboration with monastic institutes not only to strengthen its secular ethics education but also to enable sharing of knowledge and resources in the areas of science education and Buddhist studies. Successful incorporation of a secular ethics or happiness education in Tibetan schools may enable replication/adaptation of the model in other schools (in India and overseas) which will go a long way in fulfilling BEP goals and His Holiness' vision.

5. Nurturing Professionals in the Tibetan Community

During the conclusion of his statement on the 50th anniversary of Tibetan National Uprising Day, His Holiness remarked, "... we must primarily focus on the education of our children and the nurturing of professionals in various fields." Shortage of genuine professionals, capable of serving the Tibetan community in various sectors such as education, health and livelihoods is one of the biggest challenges in education. Considering that more than 800 Tibetan students manage to pursue higher education every year, the issue of shortage of professionals is particularly alarming.

Although the issue is complex and is related to the quality of education in school, DoE could take some concrete steps to mitigate the problem. There is an urgent need to diversify the choice of subjects at the senior secondary level particularly by introducing vocational education subjects. This should not be too difficult particularly when CBSE has mandated vocational education as part of its grade 10th and 12th examination. Unlike Tibetan schools where students have no choice to but to take 5 compulsory subjects at the senior secondary level, many Indian schools have more options to choose from.

Along with diversifying the choice of subjects, it is important to tackle the stigma attached to 'vocational studies' being good only for academically weaker students and school dropouts. Tibetan youth and family often perceive vocational training and diploma courses as having lower value in comparison to degree courses. Hence, there is low social acceptance for vocational studies although they are more job-oriented than the regular degree courses. Improving and repositioning existing technical and vocational education will make Tibetan students more employable and promote economic development.

Here, school counselors play a critical role in preparing students for a well-chartered future after high school. The quality of counseling services should be improved in schools. For this, DoE may consider formulating a counseling policy and restructuring its counseling delivery model. Furthermore, students should be counseled on job opportunities, career progression and skill requirements to enable them to make well-informed career choices.

The existing scholarship system needs to be revised to discourage large number of students into pursuing generic degree without having clear goal and interest. The course selection criteria for providing scholarships could be revised on the basis of internal human resource requirements, partnerships with premium institutes and stringent criteria for college selections. Also, introduction of merit cum need-based grants may help students in undertaking competitive examinations for admission in premium professional studies institutes. At present the participation of Tibetan students in various entrance examinations is low mainly due to lack of knowledge about the exam and limited financial assistance.

With changing donor priorities, reduction in donor grants, and increasing cost of specialization courses in India and abroad, the scholarship section for its sustainable operations should formulate a higher education investment policy. It should revise its current grant-based model of scholarship program to returnable grant model with or without subsidized interest components. This will not only help to control the fund outflow, but also make the scholarship program self-sustainable.

QUESTIONS AND ISSUES TO BE CONSIDERED FOR STRENGTHENING TIBETAN EDUCATION THEME

1. Addressing Quality of Education Issues:

- What could be done at the DoE and school-level to transform our teachers' classroom practice?
- How could DoE address the issue of high teacher attrition rate? What measures could be taken to attract brighter people into the teaching profession?
- How could DoE strengthen its primary and pre-primary education?
- How could schools foster 21st century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication skills in children?

2. Need to Strengthen School Leadership:

- What kind of support could DoE and administrative bodies provide its existing school leaders to strengthen their academic leadership qualities?
- How could the school leader recruitment process be improved? How could the roles of school leaders be redefined?
- What kind of selection criteria should be set for school leader recruitment?
 - How can the DoE and other Tibetan schools provide school leadership with higher degrees of autonomy combined with training and more clearly defined roles and responsibilities associated with higher learning outcomes?
 - In-service
How can the DoE ensure that in-service trainings are offered periodically to principals and leadership teams so they can update their skills and keep up with new developments?

3. Impact of Social and Demographic Challenges on Education

- What kind of school consolidation plan would be best in terms of its feasibility and operational efficiency?
- What measures could DoE and school administrations take for its long-term operational sustainability considering that funding supports are drying up?
- Should the CTA consider setting up special schools to attract students not attending Tibetan schools and Tibetan students from overseas?
- What is the feasibility of setting up Tibetan schools in the West?

4. Challenges Regarding the Basic Education Policy (BEP) Implementation

- How can Tibetan language and culture education be improved in schools?
- How could DoE deliver a successful secular ethics education in schools?
- How could Tibetan language and culture education for Tibetan youth in the west be strengthened?
- How could teaching and learning resources in Tibetan language be enriched?
- How could DOE work towards uniform implementation of BEP across all the school systems?
- How could the four aims of giving education be integrated in daily classroom learning and school programmes?
- How could DOE, CTA support and strengthen the office and management of Education Council of Tibetans in exile?



5. Nurturing Professionals in the Tibetan Community

- How could school counseling programs of DOE, TCV and THF be strengthened?
- How could scholarship scheme of DOE, TCV and THF be revised to address the issue of lack of professionals in the Tibetan community?
- What can be done to remove the stigma attached with vocational studies? How could we encourage more students to pursue job-oriented vocational studies?
- How can scholarship scheme of DOE, TCV and THF be revised to address the needs of underprivileged students and youth with limited financial resources?

[1] All the CST Under the management of CTSA run by the Govt. of India are being transferred to STSS run by Department of Education, CTA. So far the transfer of 33 pre-primary, 9 primary, 5 middle, 5 secondary and 3 senior secondary schools have been completed.

[2] The total fertility rates of Tibetan community in exile for the period 1989-2009 reduced from 4.9 in 1989 to 1.22 in 1998 and 1.18 in 2009.