Consultation on the National Education Policy 2015
School of Education Studies, Ambedkar University Delhi
in collaboration with
The Forum for Deliberations on Education
Date: 26 September 2015, 10:00 am to 05:00 pm
Venue: Faculty Lounge, Ambedkar University Delhi, Kashmere Gate, Delhi

Concept Note

The Government of India recently announced the formulation of the National Education Policy 2015-16 (NPE) through a ‘consultative’ process. The government has sought responses from various stakeholders in education on a set of themes and questions for school and higher education levels. In this light, the School of Education Studies (SES), Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD), in collaboration with The Forum for Deliberations on Education (The Forum), is organising a one-day consultation on the implications of the NPE for school education with a view to frame an informed response that may feed into the Policy. The specific agenda of the consultation are: a) Examining the themes formulated by the Government for consultations on school education; b) Formulating informed responses on selected themes in the policy consultation document for school education; and c) Identifying concerns that need further attention, deliberation and research. This concept note aims to contextualize the agenda by presenting an overview of the development of the NPE 2015-16, the existing education policy environment/ethos in school education, and the potential issues emerging from the implementation and analysis of the consultation framework. In this backdrop, this note frames the idea and the format for the proposed consultation being organised at AUD.

1. Introduction
The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) is currently developing the NPE 2015-16. The announcement of the new NPE comes after a long hiatus in the sector that has undergone unprecedented changes since the last policy (1986 – 92), especially since the introduction of the economic reforms of the 1990’s. In this duration, there has been an enormous rise in the social and economic aspirations that has led to multifold increase in the demand for education across the unequal social fabric of India. There has thus been a massive expansion and diversification of education at all the levels — also seen as having been shaped by the pressing demands of the global ‘knowledge economy’. This expansion has been accompanied with concerns about ‘quality’ of and ‘equity’ in education across levels — at the school level in particular. Balancing the demands of quantitative expansion with the needs of maintaining quality and equity have become the challenges facing education today.

The MHRD has outlined the new NPE thrusts as:
…to meet the changing dynamics of the population’s requirement with regards to quality education, innovation and research, aiming to make India a knowledge superpower by equipping its students with the necessary skills and knowledge and to eliminate the shortage of manpower in science, technology, academics and industry. (MHRD, 2015a, para 1)

The MHRD has also outlined a “time-bound grassroots consultative process, which will enable the Ministry of HRD to reach out to individuals across the country through over 2.75 lakh direct consultations while also taking input from citizens online” (MHRD, 2015a, para 2). The policy thrusts and the approach of policy framing charted by the Ministry need to be located and examined in the context of the existing policy ethos/environment.
2. Current Policy Concerns
India has had two national education policies preceding the one in the making — the National Policy on Education 1968 and the National Policy on Education 1986\(^1\). The focal concerns of the NPE 1968, that were based on the Kothari Commission Report (1964-66), revolved around ensuring compulsory elementary education and equalising educational opportunities. The NPE 1986 continued many of the key foci of the 1968 policy and also and brought-in quality concerns (critiqued for the limited way in which they were conceptualised and implemented) — through its recommendations of making elementary school education “child-centered”, creating provision for recruitment of teachers, and for enhancement of infrastructure.\(^2\)

While these are the national policies of education in India, there are several significant developments that have impacted policy and have shaped or are shaping the school education sector. Among these, three recent significant ones are: the Children’s Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 (RtE), the National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCF), and the Justice Verma Commission on Teacher Education 2012 (JVC). These documents underline the conception of education as children’s right and outline a framework to reform ‘quality’ of school education. While the RtE Act is meant to operationalise the Article 21A of the Indian constitution (that makes elementary education a justiciable right of the children of ages 6 to 14), NCF 2005 may be seen as defining what educational/curricular experience should be like. The JVC charts the revamping of teacher education in the country to reform teaching–learning in schools. These three policy related frameworks are at various stages of implementation and need to be taken into account while contemplating a new policy in education.

Furthermore, there are other developments that concern the provisioning of quality school education and are matter of intense debates. One of these concerns the spread of low cost unrecognised private schools and changes in the ‘school preference’ patterns among the economically weaker sections (EWS). While there is advocacy for low cost private schools for meeting the aspirations of the poor from some sectors (Tooley, 2009), there is a strong critique of these schools from the standpoint of equity and quality (Nambissan 2012). The second relates to the poor state of public education and the solutions on offer. While there is a fair agreement on the abysmal state of affairs implicating the quality of education in government schools, there are some who argue for systemic changes to strengthen the public system of education and there are others who suggest public-private partnerships as the future of school education. The third is the debate around the conception of “quality”. There are arguments that define quality in the terms of specific “learning outcomes” and there are those who critique these views and frame quality education as a larger and holistic concept that integrates equity in substantive ways (Nambissan, 2015).

All these debates are interconnected. Central in these are differences on the idea that elementary education is essentially a public good and thereby must primarily be the responsibility of the state. The debates closely relate to the positions around the conceptions of the goals of education — is the goal of education to deepen democracy and lead to critical citizenship, or is it primarily to create skilled workers? While these debates are not new, in the recent past they have made in-roads in the official and public discourses on education in new and diverse ways and hence form the context that needs to be taken into account in any policy formulation.

\(^1\) The national policy on education is a framework for charting the common national agenda for education encompassing all the levels of education – from early childhood to higher education, and from formal to non-formal education. It is expected to act as a guide for the state governments, administration, and educational institutions, to set their action plan and align their agenda.

\(^2\) NPE1986 was amended in 1992 to take into account what were cited in the modified document as “the developments” during 1986-92 and “the experience in the implementation of the Policy” (Government of India, 1992, p. 1).
In this context, it is useful to ask, how is the new NPE and its consultation framework positioned in relation to the education policy context and debates in India (some of which have been discussed above)? How does (if at all) it proposes to take these developments further? What departures does it propose to/is set-out to make? What kind of reforms or changes in education policy may be envisioned given the objectives and scope of the policy? Positioning of the new NPE in relation to this existing policy context will to a considerable extent shape the continuities in the education sector. A complete departure from the current policy context may create discontinuities and ruptures in a cohesive vision urgently needed for education in India. A vision for education that builds on the pertinent past policy thrusts and addresses current challenges is expected from the National Policy. In this relation, it will be relevant to examine the objectives of the proposed NPE 2015 and the consultation framework laid down for school education.

3. School Education in the NPE 2015 Framework: Perspective and Approach
The consultation framework/documents developed by the MHRD for school education do not present an overall policy perspective. A “grassroots consultative approach” is proposed for the formulation of the policy recommendations for which the MHRD has designed a framework covering 13 Themes and Questions for Policy Consultations on School Education (MHRD, 2015b) (see Appendix A) (and a similar framework with 20 themes for higher education)³. Through the prescribed consultations on these themes and questions, the Ministry has sought responses from ‘stakeholders’ by September-October 2015. The 13 themes are as follows:

1. Ensuring learning outcomes in Elementary Education.
2. Extending outreach of Secondary and Senior Secondary Education.
3. Strengthening of Vocational Education.
7. Promotion of Information and Communication Technology Systems in School and Adult Education.
8. New knowledge, pedagogies and approaches for teaching of Science, Maths and Technology in School Education to improve learning outcomes of students.
10. Enabling Inclusive Education – education of SCs, STs, Girls, Minorities and children with special needs.
11. Promotion of Languages.
13. Focus on Child Health.
(MHRD, 2015b, p. 2)

How these specific themes been arrived at has not been described in the consultation document. For each of these themes a set of questions has been listed. Another NPE template for school education consultations (MHRD, 2015c) further elaborates and breaks-down these questions depending upon the level of the consultation (see Appendix B).

The ‘grassroots’ consultations are accordingly being held at various levels with a view to consolidate the responses at the Central level for framing draft recommendations. This consultative approach is highlighted as a ‘unique’ feature of the Policy by the government. The HRD minister has been quoted

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saying that while in the previous official regimes a few “experts” (academics, bureaucrats and politicians) decided what the nation should study, this government's policy would be shaped by the views of India's Village Education Councils (VECs) (Kumar, 2015, para 2). The MHRD thereby decided to invite suggestions from across the country amounting to roughly 2,50,000 meetings at the village level, 6,600 at the block level, 3,700 for urban local bodies and 676 at the district level. Around 100 meetings at the state level, 6-8 meetings at the regional level and 12 consultations at the national level are meant to follow. A National Task Force will then put the recommendations emerging from these consultations together. At each of the ‘higher levels’ the views collected will be screened, consolidated and made public.  

It is believed that this approach will provide opportunities to the stakeholders to have their voices heard and will lead to recommendations that are accepted as policy recommendations (and are thus implementable). While the idea of democratising policy-making is indeed a laudable goal, whether a ‘grassroots’ consultative approach is the way to do so needs serious discussion. An overview of some of these issues discussed and those that have been peripheral in the discussions in the public domain is presented below.

4. Issues in the Policy Planning
4.1. Logistics and Logic
The consultative exercise for the formulation of the national policy is reported to have turned into a “logistical nightmare” for the state governments (Kumar, 2015, para 1). Many states are finding it difficult to make-sense of the complicated multilayered process — and are already set to miss the deadlines (April to September 2015) decided by the MHRD. The rationale of the entire exercise has also been questioned (Behar, 2015; Kurrien 2015; Mody, 2015a & b). Several questions in this regard are being posed: What are the deemed benefits, and pitfalls, of such a consultative process and the manner in which it is framed? In this context, Kurrien (2015) notes, “It is unclear why this inductive approach was deemed appropriate for the framing of an educational policy for the nation as a whole.”(para 9). Others have noted that the consultations are taking place in a pre-designed framework within which what questions are to be asked at what levels is pre-determined (Mody, 2015a; Mishra, 2015). Some have pointed out that consultations with stakeholders may be useful to understand the context in which the policy will be practiced and the challenges that some of the major new reforms envisioned may encounter in the field.

Yet it is relevant to ask — will the economic policy be decided through a similar consultative process? While that is clearly unlikely to be the case, it may be asked — why is such a process being followed for framing the education policy? What can be the possible benefits of this approach? How will the outcomes of the consultative exercise be used in framing policy recommendations? How will the quality of policy recommendations get implicated through this process? How will this approach mediate in (re)defining the status of the national institutions meant to design these policies? How is education as a field of study being (re)shaped in this process? How should policy-making process in a democracy be conceived, which is not populist but democratic in its substantive goals and procedures?

4.2. Themes and Questions for School Education
On the one hand, the problems of the approach appear to be limiting the quality of possible outcomes. On the other hand, the quality of the themes and questions (MHRD, 2015b & c) for the consultations made public by the MHRD need serious attention. Some of these issues are discussed below as examples.

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4 http://mhrd.gov.in/consultation-framework. The MHRD also launched a portal for citizen-government dialogue, where views were sought from the public on the Policy to begin with (see: https://mygov.in/new-education-policy-group.html).

5 Kurrien (2015) asks, “…is the opinion of thousands of lay people who have never seriously studied or reflected about issues of education to be given equal weight to the views of hundreds of educationists and professionals…?” (para 9).
Learning outcomes, efficiency, employability and accountability can be seen as overarching concerns across the 13 themes listed for consultations on school education. While learning outcomes and skills for an employable workforce are presented front on in the themes 1, 3, 7, 8 and 9, the vocabulary of efficiency and effectiveness, measurement of performance, institutional assessment and accreditation, and ‘improvement and reform’ presents the paradigm that is meant to inform the policy consultations. While these concerns may be pertinent for the government, these represent a very limited perspective on education that has been sharply critiqued (Sarangapani, 2010).

Furthermore, the themes and questions document has several general statements hinting at the possible solutions to the problem of quality. The general assumption seems to be that the concern for quality can be “solved” through technological and accountability measures. However, ‘quality’, one of the major policy concerns, has not been spelled-out anywhere in the document. And, a clear concerted frame for addressing quality concerns does not come across from the themes and questions.

There are other kinds of issues as well — particularly relating to how well the consultation points have been framed. The formulations indicate that most of the policy concerns and questions are presented as givens and a space for critical reflection on these has not been imagined and provided. For instance, there are questions such as: “What needs to be done to improve student participation in Science and Mathematics subjects?” (p. 6); “What needs to be done to make VE popular amongst students?” “School services-sector courses, be introduced in schools rather than manufacturing based courses?” (sic.) (p. 8).

There are many more issues that come across from a general review of the document — which are sufficient to underscore the need to further deliberate on and refine the consultation framework. It also points to the need for critically engaging with the policy themes and providing a considered and informed response as an input for policy planning.

4.3. Missing Foci Needing Attention

The themes and questions document (MHRD, 2015b) misses many critical matters that are at the centre of concerns in education at present. Some of the contemporary policy related concerns (RtE 2009, NCF 2005 & JVC 2012) that have been highlighted in the section 2 of this note do not find space (at least apparently) in the themes and questions. Education as a matter of rights of children does not find a space in the grammar of the document. “Child-centered” education, which has been a major curricular policy thrusts from 1986 onwards, is not in the focus of any of the themes. Similarly, the matter of quality teacher education has been defined only in terms of its bearing on the quality of the outcomes of school education. It is not imagined as a sector in higher education. Also, the Early Childhood Level as a whole has been restricted to the theme “Focus on Child Health.”

Thus, it appears that the policy consultation framework does not take into account some of the major policy developments of the recent past and is seemingly set-out to depart from the existing policy concerns. It is relevant to reflect on: Do these above foci need further attention? Are there other aspects that have not been captured in the policy consultation framework? Given the developments in the consultative process, are these missing but critical concerns likely to get any attention and be built into the recommendations? How to formulate a response within the consultation rubrics to reflect/address these missing links (if this is needed)?

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6 Roy (2015) identifies similar conceptions embedded in the consultation themes and questions for higher education developed by the MHRD.

7 For instance, ICT has been presented in the document (MHRD, 2015b) as some kind of a fix to the problem. It is claimed, “ICT can potentially make significant difference in improving the quality of Education” (p. 15). How would this happen is not delved-upon but can be gauged from questions such as, “How do we use technology to ensure real time availability of teachers?” (p. 4)
5. Agenda and Format for the Consultation at AUD
While the above stated concerns largely cover what has been discussed in the public domain about the Policy and other issues, these do not capture the entire spectrum of the constraints and opportunities of the consultative framework and design. Also, the above concerns primarily revolve around the problematics of the policy planning and only peripherally deal with envisioning ‘alternatives’. Thus, on the one hand, there is an urgent need to critically examine the process of policy making as laid down. On the other hand, it is equally pertinent to realise the critical-political space for creatively contributing to the framing of a better policy. Through the proposed consultation SES and The Forum propose to bring these two strands together.

In this regard, the proposed consultation aims to bring together scholars and practitioners who have actively engaged with the Policy, and/or have been closely involved with some concerns charted out for school education by the MHRD. The idea is to listen to the understanding, experiences and vision of the invitees, and to think through some selected themes to be able to formulate a well-informed report that can be submitted to the government. We also wish to identify concerns that need further deliberation and research. The questions that we propose to explore through the consultation include: What are the constraints, problems and opportunities of the current approach for policy planning (specifically keeping the school education level in mind)? Are there critical issues and areas that have been missed out in the consultation framework on school education? How can (if at all) these constraints and gaps be worked around? Which themes in the school education consultation framework demand more urgent attention and submission of an informed response to the government? What could be these possible responses? What should be the overall focus of a response that may be thus submitted?

The proposed consultation will follow a roundtable format and the discussion agenda may be framed during the event. However, to ensure coherence in discussions a tentative set of themes have been identified. These broadly focus on ‘quality in school education’ and are broad enough to allow the bringing-in of several related themes and questions. These include:

1. Key Developments and Issues relating to the NPE 2015-16 (Reviewing the key developments, process and themes)
2. Conception of Learning: Quality and Equity (Examining issues emanating from the MHRD’s consultation framework and envisioning recommendations)
3. Quality Concerns at Pre-School Level Needing Policy Attention
4. Quality of Teacher Education (Examining issues emanating from the MHRD’s consultation framework and envisioning recommendations)

While all the invited members would contribute to each of the themes, it is proposed that some panelists initiate the discussions in a session with very brief observations. This will be followed by the roundtable deliberations and conclude with discussant’s remarks (details given in the Schedule & Agenda). The format can be altered if the members feel the need during the event. After discussions on the proposed themes, the group will discuss the broad contours/formulation of the response that would be submitted to the MHRD and the way forward. Based on these discussions a report will be developed by a team and shared with the consultation group within a time-frame discussed in the meeting.

References
Consultation on the NPE 2015-16, 26 September 2015


