

ROLE OF ORGANISATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN SCHOOL REFORM EFFORTS

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ABSTRACT

Despite decades of political rhetoric, intermittent and well-intentioned efforts to reform the education system, and substantial investments, the Indian education system, continues to deliver less than satisfactory results. This paper argues that one of the key reasons for this is that the organisational and institutional characteristics of the Indian public schools constrain rather than aid school reform. It begins by delineating some of the key features of effective schools and schooling systems and then compares them with the existing characteristics of the Indian public schools - bringing out the contrast between the two. In doing so, it also builds a case that efforts to develop an effective schooling system must necessarily address and reform the organisational and institutional characteristics of public schools in India.

INTRODUCTION

Since its independence about 65 years ago, India has made some significant strides in improving its education system - the overall literacy rate, for instance, has risen from around 12% in 1947 to 74% in 2011; and starting with 2,09,671 primary and 13,596 upper primary schools in 1950-51, by 2004-05 the country had established a network of 7,67,520 schools at the primary level and 2,74,731 schools at the upper primary level (Nayaka and Nurullah 1974; Census of India 2011).

However, the Indian education system continues to face some stern challenges. Despite decades of political rhetoric, intermittent and well-intentioned efforts to 'reform' the system, and substantial investments, less than 60% of Indian students, for instance, reach high school, and less than 50% graduate. And the quality of education - especially in its public schools, where a vast majority of its student study - continues to be significantly poor when compared to developed and major developing nations.

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It has been suggested that one of the reasons for the indifferent state of public schools may be that their organisational and institutional characteristics constrain rather than support school reform efforts. In this paper, thus, I will discuss this claim in the context of public schools in India. Before we start with the main discussion, however, it would be relevant to delineate the essential characteristics of ‘school reform’. Therefore, I will begin the essay by drawing on existing school effectiveness research, and listing some key characteristics of effective schools and school districts. Thereafter, in section three, I will note some of the important organisational and institutional characteristics of Indian public schools; and finally, I will discuss whether these characteristics can be seen as supporting or hindering the reform-efforts, and conclude.

1. School Reforms: Important Characteristics

Whether the organisational and institutional characteristics of our public schools are conducive, to reform efforts or not, clearly and substantially *depends on the features and objectives* of the reform efforts. The issues of what comprises a school-reform effort and what exactly should be its objectives continue to be contested; however (as a discussion on this topic is beyond the scope of this brief analysis), for our present purpose it may be assumed that the objective of a school-reform effort would be, ultimately, *to improve the effectiveness of the school*, broadly defined. And since, public schools must necessarily be a part of a larger system, it will be further assumed, that a reform effort would seek to not just confine itself strictly to the school, but also look at reforming (at least) the schooling system of its district.ⁱ

In a seminal study published in 1995, titled *Key Characteristics of Effective Schools: A Review of School Effectiveness Research*, Sammons sought to provide “an analysis of key factors likely to be of relevance to practitioners and policy makers concerned with school improvement and enhancing quality in education” (Sammons 1995: 3). Some of the key (interdependent) factors or correlates identified in this review were: (i) professional leadership, (ii) shared vision and goals, (iii) supportive working environment, (iv) focus on teaching and learning, (v) purposeful teaching, (vi) high and uniform expectations; (vii) positive reinforcements, (viii) keeping track of progress, (ix) pupils rights and responsibilities, (x) home-school partnership, and (xi) learning organisation/ staff development.

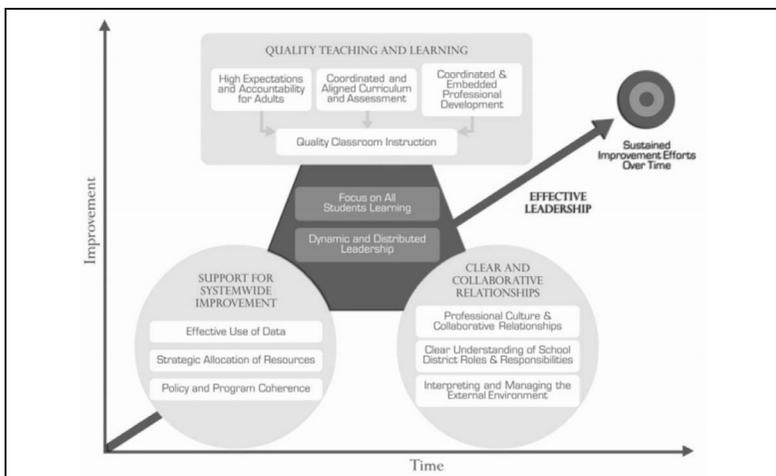
Another review in 2007, titled *Nine Characteristics of High Performing Schools*, came out with a remarkably similar list of characteristics of improved public elementary schools, whose students “achieved at higher levels than their demographic characteristics would predict” (Shannon and Bylsma 2007: 2).

These features included (i) a clear and shared focus, (ii) high standards and expectations for all students, (iii) effective school leadership, (iv) high levels of collaboration and communication, (v) curriculum, instruction and assessments aligned with state standards, (vi) frequent monitoring of learning and teaching, (vii) focused professional development, (viii) a supportive learning environment, and (ix) high levels of family and community involvement.

These central characteristics of an effective or high-performing public school, one may reasonably assume, also give us an indication of what a ‘reformed’ public school might look like. As mentioned earlier, however, from a systemic point of view it is important that an effort to reform individual schools also takes into account the features of the larger system, of which the schools are a part.ⁱⁱ Let us now, therefore, turn our attention to some of the primary features of improved school districts.

In the study *Characteristics of Improved School Districts: Themes from Research* (2004), Shannon and Bylsma identified 13 themes or characteristics of improved school districts, on the basis of a review of over 80 research articles. They grouped the 13 themes into four categories: (i) quality teaching and learning, (ii) effective leadership, (iii) support for system-wide improvement, and (iv) clear and collaborative relationships; and presented a conceptual framework to express the relationships of these themes and categories to each other (Shannon and Bylsma 2004). This is represented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 - Themes and Characteristics of an Improved School District: A Conceptual Framework



Source: Shannon and Bylsma (2004).

The rectangle on the previous page represents the overall focus of improved districts: quality teaching and learning - which, in turn, comprises of four interrelated themes: (i) high expectations and accountability for adults, (ii) coordinated and aligned curriculum and assessment, (iii) coordinated and embedded professional development, and (iv) quality classroom instruction. At the heart of quality teaching and learning lies the expectation and understanding that “everyone in the educational system will support student learning” (which becomes the ‘focal point’ of the effort) and moreover, this understanding is supported by on-going professional development focused on the learning needs of students (Shannon and Bylsma 2004: 3). The top rectangle is based on a trapezoid that “symbolises the central role leadership plays in district improvement efforts” and “the two circles, like wheels that keep the improvement efforts on track and moving in a positive direction, encompass support for system wide improvement and clear and collaborative relationships” (ibid 4).

To sum up our discussion till now - we thus see that there are some common features which are repeatedly highlighted in studies as characterising effective / improved schools and schooling sub-systems such as a schooling district; which may be summarised as follows: (i) high levels of collaboration and communication among staff within school, which both supports and is supported by a shared vision and focus, (ii) clear focus on learning of ‘all’ students, (iii) professional and distributed leadership, (iv) supportive learning environment and focused professional development, (v) system-wide coordination and alignment of efforts, and (vi) high levels of family and community involvement.

Table 1 - Sorting the 3 Sets of Characteristics of Effective Schools into 6 Groups

High levels of collaboration and communication within school, supporting and supported by shared vision and focus	Supportive learning environment and focused professional development	System-wide coordination and alignment of efforts
Shared vision and goals A clear and shared focus	Supportive working environment Focused professional development	Effective use of data Keeping track of progress

Clear and collaborative relationships	A supportive learning environment	Strategic allocation of resources
Professional culture and collaborative relationships	Coordinated and embedded professional development	Policy and program coherence
High levels of collaboration and communication	Learning organisation/ staff development	Curriculum, instruction and assessments aligned with state standards
	Positive reinforcements	Sustained improvement efforts over time
		Interpreting and managing the external environment
		Clear understanding of school and district roles and responsibilities
		Coordinated and aligned curriculum and assessment

Clear focus on learning of all students	Professional and Distributed Leadership	High levels of family and community involvement
Focus on all students learning	Professional leadership	High levels of family and community involvement
Focus on teaching and learning	Effective school leadership	Home-school partnership
Purposeful teaching	Dynamic and distributed leadership	
High and uniform expectations from students		
High standards and expectations for all students		
Quality classroom instruction		

In the next section, we will look at some of the institutional and organisational features of the Indian public schools; and thereafter we will discuss if and to what extent these features may support or constraint school- reform efforts, based on the outlines of an effective school which we have drawn in this section.

2. Institutional and Organisational Features of Indian Public Schools

2.1 Public School: For the ‘Masses’

Some of the central characteristics of the Indian public schooling system can be best understood by tracing their historic origin. Following Macaulay’s (in) famous minutes in 1835, Bentick decided to encourage *English education among urban, upper and middle class Indians*, primarily to gain their assistance in the Company’s revenue and judicial work. The elites received the elementary education in better run private schools and could then move on to state supported institutions for secondary and higher education, which were based on the western pattern and knowledge. The elementary system, for the ‘masses’, on the other hand, was poorly funded and managed, and rested almost entirely on the reform of existing indigenous schools. This was when the foundation of a “city-centered system of English education for the dominant caste elites, as well as the prioritisation of higher education and neglect of primary education,” which exists to date, was laid (Sharma 2000).

2.2 Stress on Inspection

In 1841, less than a decade after the first 46 vernacular zilla schools were established, an ‘inspector’ of schools and colleges in Bengal, Bihar and Assam was appointed. The state’s attempt to improve the elementary schooling system was limited to superficial measures, such as scholarships and grants-in-aid to existing indigenous schools, which was in turn heavily dependent on inspection of such schools. In what was called the Coimbtore method, for instance, inspecting school masters would provide assistance and sell books to those teachers in indigenous schools “who were willing to be inspected regularly” (Sharma 2000). The school masters could also make grants to the schools he found performing satisfactorily (ibid).

Thus, on the one hand, the colonial government substantially supported western style education in English for few urban elites by setting up and funding secondary schools and institutes of higher learning, and on the other hand, it neglected the elementary education for the masses - merely attempting to

improve the already existing indigenous schools by inspection, examination, grant-in- aids, and some example setting and training. This inspection system of public schools, then set, was to become, and continues to be, one of the central features of school administration in India.

2.3 Education Administration and Planning

After independence, while on the one hand a large number of state sponsored elementary schools were established, on the other hand the “framework of an inspection system that had developed in quite another context, i.e. of private, indigenous schools in which the government sought to maintain standards” was retained (ibid). Moreover, the education and inspection system continued to be staffed by ‘generalists’ with little professional training in the field.

Though attempts were made to develop institutional expertise in educational planning and administration at the national level, leading to the setting up of National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA) - now National University of Educational Planning and Administration (NUEPA), neither this institute nor other universities developed/offered a pre-service course in educational administration or management. The state level equivalent of NIEPA were not set up either - which meant that capacity in educational administration was very limited at the state level, even though, managing the public schools was largely in the hands of the state governments.

Similarly, the addition of Block Education Officer (BEO) at the block level, which had the potential of reinvigorating the public schooling system, did little more than add another layer in the existing inspection system. And the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) led to the creation of parallel structures (State Project Office, District Project Office, Block Resource Centre (BRC), and Curriculum Resource Centre (CRC)). And their non-alignment with the existing structures of the education department often led to: “(i) lack of role clarity on primary responsibilities (e.g. the BRC-CRC structure has been appropriated for administrative work rather than academic mentoring); and (ii) multiple reporting structure (e.g. BRC is required to report to DDPI, DIET Principal, Deputy Project Coordinator and BEO; which compromises his academic responsibilities in favour of administrative responsibilities” (Mukhopadhyay et al 2009: 5).

Thus, to summarise this sub-section: (i) structures that had evolved for very different purposes and in different contexts are being used in independent India for the administration of public schools, and (ii) lack of proper

education administration and planning often leads to non-aligned efforts and inefficiencies in the system.

2.4 Teachers' Training and Professional Development

State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) institutions, which are considered to be the most important organisations for pedagogic inputs at the state level, were originally set up in 1964 and were involved in large-scale in-service teacher training, revision of curricula and textbooks. However, they did not offer pre-service courses, or encourage rich contacts with student-teachers, and support their research in substantive ways (Sharma 2002). After independence there was also a substantial growth both in the number of DIETs which were set up “to be autonomous, accountable institutions of excellence, with the intention to improve the quality of training and support provided to enhance the quality, competence and character of teachers” (PRIA, 2002: 3).

However, in many states the SCERTs and DIETS have ended up becoming a part of the state education departments, and in most states there is “mobility between the administrative and academic positions and as a result there is a continuous tendency to move into administrative positions from academic positions . . . and devalue any efforts to build institutional capabilities” (Mukhopadhyay et al 2009: 7). This, in turn, has meant that despite their supposedly autonomous status, the SCERTs have been “*overburdened with administrative functions that conflict with [their] academic focus*” (ibid). And as regards the DIETs, studies have pointed out concerns such as “lack of inter-linkages with other subordinate academic structures (i.e. the BRCs and CRCs); inadequate technical and specialist capacity of personnel recruited/deployed to the posts; non-alignment of internal structure and functions with expected roles; and lack of adequate resources” (ibid 10).

As a result of these institutional and organisational shortcomings, the teachers of the Indian public schools are often inadequately trained (poor pre-service training at DIETs or teacher training colleges), and are often lacking in basic professional competencies, which are difficult to overcome because of low quality in-service training.

2.5 Central Authority, Control and Decentralisation

The decentralisation which we see in education in independent India continues to be characterised by the split between responsibility (which was transferred to the lower level) and authority (retained at the higher level), introduced in

the British era (circa 1870). For example, though some states have handed over the responsibility of the functioning of schools and appointment of teachers to elected bodies at the district, block and panchayat levels, these bodies have not been vested with the authority to take important policy decisions or raise financial resources as per their needs (Sharma 2000).

The *Primary Education and Panchayat Raj Institutions* study in 2002 reported that “most panchayats were not clear about functions they are expected to perform, were often unaware of their powers, a majority did not get official communication, and that most gram panchayats were functioning as implementing agencies for infrastructure schemes from the education department. With respect to teachers, they had only nominal roles, with control largely vested with the education department. Thus they could supervise teachers, but no action could be taken. They could complain about teachers, but if these complaints went unheard, they would usually get disillusioned and stop complaining” (PRIA, 2002).

2.6 Bureaucracy and Hierarchy

The Indian public schooling system is also a massive, bureaucratic structure. In the state of Karnataka, for instance, nearly *half* of all government employees are in the Department of Education. And as with many bureaucratic structures, the education departments are also heavily hierarchical. As Mukhopadhyay et al (2009) remark, “This relates to both the programmatic relation between the states and the center, and to the internal hierarchy of any state department. Such a structure...prevents *the adoption of implementation approaches that are local and/or emerge from the needs elicited from lower level institutions and their functionaries. Both innovations and critical voices...are ignored in blue-print driven top-down implementation*” (ibid). This, they argue, results in the state objectives of participatory planning, bottom-up approaches, flexibility accorded to institutions and programmes to adapt to local specificities to remain confined to plan documents, vision statements, and evaluation reports.

3. Discussion

To recall our discussion in section two, some common features which characterise effective and improved schools and schooling sub-systems are : (i) high levels of collaboration and communication among staff within school, which both supports and is supported by a shared vision and focus, (ii) clear focus on learning of ‘all’ students, (iii) professional and distributed leadership, (iv) supportive learning environment and focused professional development, (v) system-wide coordination and alignment of efforts, and (v) high levels of

family and community involvement.

Now, if we were to contrast these features of effective schools and schooling systems with some of the key characteristics of the Indian public schooling system, we would notice that many of the characteristics of the latter may not be conducive to school-reform efforts. For example, 'high levels of collaboration and communication' among staff is encouraged by an organisational structure which is less hierarchical. The Indian education system, however, took on a hierarchical structure and 'inspectional' character since its origin in the 19th century and it continues to remain so even today. Even within a school, the relationships between staff is usually multi-tiered (head teacher, senior teachers, junior teachers, and administrative staff) and the difference in position is (often expected to be) clearly acknowledged. Similarly, the various administrative and even academic layers (such as the DEO, SCERT) tend to see their role as 'assessors' or 'inspectors' rather than coaches and facilitators.

One of the fallouts of the hierarchy in schools is that collaboration and communication (or 'innovations and critical voices that can meaningfully feed into existing approaches, programmes and plans') becomes difficult communication and collaboration development of a common vision, and its realisation, is difficult to achieve.

Another related characteristic is that of 'supportive learning environment and focused professional development'. As earlier noted, the institutional characteristics and capacity (especially of those institutions tasked with pre-service and in-service training and professional development) of the Indian education system leave much to be desired on this front. Moreover, the hierarchical nature, stress on inspections, and lack of effective collaboration and free communication also *precludes the formation and sustenance of meaningful communities of practice* (or professional learning communities).

Similarly, 'system wide coordination and alignment of efforts' as well as 'clear focus on student learning' is significantly dependent not only on collaboration and communication, but also on extensive capacity building with regards to educational administration, planning, and pedagogy. A dearth of good institutions (state-level equivalents of NUEPA or university run courses) in the Indian education system, which are capable of taking on this task, would negatively impact educational reform efforts. Furthermore, the development of professional and distributed leadership, is contingent on (i) effective professional training of the educational leaders (such as head teacher) as 'administrators', and (ii) capacity building among the staff (as 'distributed'

leadership cannot work in the absence of properly trained and supported staff) - which, as already noted, is often of indifferent or poor quality.

Finally, the split between government schools (for the ‘masses’) and private schools (for the ‘classes’) makes it difficult to create and sustain the pressure on the public schooling system to provide good education for ‘all’. And though there has been a lot of stress on decentralisation and many responsibilities have indeed been handed over to local communities, high levels of family and community involvement can come only when, with a shift in responsibility, there is a concomitant shift in authority. Most communities have very limited powers with regards to issues such as recruitment, training or even accountability of teachers who teach their children. Over time this can, as mentioned earlier, lead to a sense of powerlessness and disinterest in the affairs of the school.

It must be mentioned here that we do have some notable examples of reforms in Indian public schools and schooling systems. Programs such as DPEP, SSA, and the effective use of CRCs and BRCs in certain districts, are some examples of changes at relatively large scale. Some other examples are Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme in Madhya Pradesh, in which middle school teachers met at the block level to discuss academic issues, leading to the development of specialised training, activity based textbooks etc. Lok Jumbish in Rajasthan is another such example credited with evolving unique styles of planning and management which provided autonomy to block level committees comprised of educators, voluntary workers, locally elected representatives, teachers, administrators and parents. As Sharma suggests, while the success of such efforts - in engaging with a part of the public schooling system and even modifying them to an extent, “may not be easily applicable to large state owned school systems as they are, they do offer very important insights into what is possible” (Sharma 2000).

However, having compared the characteristics of effective schools and schooling systems with the institutional and organisational features of the Indian public schools and schooling system, I have attempted to show how, at a large scale, many of the features of the latter constrain rather than encourage school improvement efforts. Taking these facts into consideration may thus be critical to the success of present and future reform efforts.

Notes

- ⁱ While the schooling-system is decidedly multi-layered and every layer may influence the other layers to lesser or larger extent; it may be argued that the layer which perhaps has one of the most significant impacts on the performance of a school, is the one directly above it - i.e. the district subsystem (which would include the 'block' sub-system in the Indian context) Centre for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (2006).
- ⁱⁱ Section two is based on studies conducted in Western countries; and the author acknowledges that their outcomes may not be fully relevant in Indian contexts. However, a lack of similar large-scale studies on the subject in India, make the cited studies some of the best sources that we presently have.

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