P.A.G.E WORKING PAPER NO. 28

Does Government's Monitoring of Schools Work?

A Study of the Frontline Education Bureaucracy in India

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WORKING PAPER

CENTRE FOR POLICY RESEARCH

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Priyanka Varma for her valuable inputs at different stages of the study as well her field support. We would also like to thank the field team members, Paras Ram Banjara, Sriranjini Vadiraj and Stephanie Samuel for field assistance. In addition, we received guidance and field expertise from several people in the different states: we are grateful to Jagori and its field staff Omprakash and Ajay in Kangra, Himachal Pradesh; Motiji and his organisation Sankalp in Baran, Rajasthan; Siba Sankar Sahu and Sharanya Puri of Adivasi Ekta Sangathan as well as Kisan Patnaik, Ashok Rout and Pabitra Sahu in Koraput, Odisha. We are indebted to the frontline officials themselves, who not only bore with us in the middle of their very hectic schedules but also provided us with rich, honest and often humorous insights.

ABSTRACT

This study attempts to understand the effectiveness of education governance, specifically the monitoring function, through the perspectives of frontline officials in India. It locates institutions within social and political structures marked by deep inequalities and analyses the manner in which these institutional arrangements influence the behaviour of frontline officials. It finds that poor state capacities in terms of inadequate resources and systemic infirmities contribute significantly to ineffective monitoring. In addition, the social distance of frontline bureaucrats from their clients reinforces their low levels of motivation, preventing them from using discretion to achieve official objectives.

I. INTRODUCTION

The decline in the quality of public education has received a lot of attention recently, with failure of the public delivery system being showcased annually in various reports and surveys. In this context, governance has emerged as an important explanatory variable, quite distinct from the education variables more commonly cited, such as teaching and learning practices or curriculum and textbook quality. In most countries, including India, the government plays the most significant role in providing school education. However in recent years, in response to calls for greater efficiency, the distribution of responsibilities has been changing and has taken on different, often contradictory, forms. For instance, while monitoring is increasingly being made 'independent' from the implementing function, with non-state agencies brought in to provide a 'neutral' perspective, integration of these inputs into the state system is yet to be worked out. Further, the involvement of private actors has raised questions about their accountability but that of state actors, especially at higher levels, continues to remain beyond the purview of scrutiny (Kramer, 1994; Milward & Provan, 1993; Smith & Lipsky, 1993; Salamon & Anheier, 1994). Similarly, while the imperatives of democratic governance have pushed for greater decentralisation of decision-making, the need to curb corruption and arbitrary actions has given rise to more rigid rules and processes, reducing flexibility at the frontline. Systems are thus accompanied by a plethora of formal procedures involving filling of complex forms, collated and analysed at higher levels of the bureaucracy with little, if any feedback.

Governance is thus becoming increasingly complex, with serious questions arising about the legitimacy of public provisioning of basic services. But there is very little systematic research on the institutional aspects of education governance, particularly the location of institutions within social and political structures marked by deep inequalities. Similarly, very little research exists on the behavior of frontline officials, and how their socialisation or the institutional arrangements they operate in influence the functioning of schools.[1]

In the education context, governance is a particularly complex and multi-layered process, involving a large number of actors. In this study, however, we focus solely on the monitoring aspect, with the view to look at how it unravels at the district and sub-district level. This is done through in-depth interviews of frontline officials assigned the task of monitoring to understand from them the functioning of the system as well as obtain their perspective on what works and what does not.

Why Monitoring

Monitoring is widely recognised as a key element of education governance as it is the mechanism by which the functioning of schools is tracked, shortfalls identified and changes initiated for course correction. Monitoring has also gained greater importance in the last few decades as the scope of public education has expanded following a huge surge in demand, most of which has come from children of deprived family backgrounds who have been

[1]Sharma, Rashmi and Ramachandran V. (eds.) (2009), is an exception to this general observation.

hitherto excluded from education and hence require special attention to stay in the system and progressively move up through it. However, the structures and mechanisms of delivery have not altered sufficiently to meet the rise in demand, and concerns about quality and equity in provision have grown. Moreover, the entry of children from the lower end of the socio-economic strata into the public education system has resulted in 'elite flight' (Majumdar & Mooij, 2011), complicating the social context in which local bureaucracies find themselves functioning. The exit of voice has created the conditions for a downward spiral of quality in government schools (Sharma, 2009; Vasavi, 2015). How has education governance adapted to the changing times whilst keeping the interests of its main [or remaining] clients in mind, is a question that needs probing. This is especially so at the frontline, where the institutions and personnel responsible for delivery are enmeshed in a complex network of social and political forces as well as increasing pressure from families seeking education for their children. In this context, does the nature and behavior of the frontline bureaucracy allow us to draw insights for improving governance? And, does the monitoring system feed into the larger planning and policy-making process? Unfortunately, even as the criticality of monitoring is recognised, answers to these questions do not exist.
The focus of the survey is thus three-fold: i) to understand the institutional structures and mechanisms of monitoring and the processes that frontline bureaucrats undertake to achieve their goals; ii) to assess 'capacities' for monitoring at the frontline level iii) to place these findings against the theoretical discourse on bureaucracies and state capacity.

II. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Institutions and State Bureaucracies

Recent literature on governance recognises the importance of institutions in enabling the state to be effective. This study is situated within this theoretical tradition, and places the field evidence within the framework of institutional theories, especially those of street-level bureaucracies. However, since the state-building process is linked to the development of modern capitalism, public discourse has been skewed towards bureaucracies as agents of economic growth (Evans & Rauch, 1999; Chibber, 2002; Wade, 1990), whereas the bureaucracy as an agency of welfare goals has received less rigorous review, at least in the Indian context. Instead, there is an attempt to divert attention to non-state providers under the assumption that intrinsic to the design of welfare bureaucracies are inefficiencies, rent-seeking behavior, a high degree of subsidisation and corruption. Little effort has thus been devoted towards systematically identifying the areas of mal-functioning or seeking possibilities of reform within state institutions, even those that are charged with the delivery of its constitutional obligations.

Two strands of institutional analysis have dominated the discourse on bureaucracies: The first, in line with the Weberian and neo-Weberian tradition, emphasises formal arrangements within bureaucracies, especially those that seek to curb and control arbitrariness with enforceable rules and procedures. The second revolves around the literature emanating out of Lipsky's (1980) work on street-level bureaucracies and highlights the positive role of 'discretion' in responding to real life situations. In sharp contrast to the Weberian 'ideal-type', Lipsky's 'realistic' analysis acknowledges that street-level bureaucrats face complex situations, which cannot be accounted for in formal rules and procedures. For instance, when the New York State laws, in an attempt to deter drug trafficking, imposed mandatory severe jail sentences for drug dealers but relatively minor penalties for those caught with small amounts of drugs, the then New York District Attorney reacted in ways that 'attempted to provide the discretion demanded by a just court system in the face of legislation designed precisely to eliminate this discretion.' (Lipsky, 1980, p. 22) Rather than charging alleged offenders with crimes they had committed, he charged them with crimes for which, according to him, the punishments were compatible with the severity of the offence. The idea and practice of using discretion thus appears not just real and possible, but necessary for safeguarding the interest and motivation levels of the bureaucrats, while also addressing the needs of 'clients'.

However, both these approaches privilege mechanisms and strategies of operation over the social and political contexts of bureaucracies, and thus prove to be limiting as analytical frameworks for developing countries, characterised not only by high levels of social inequalities, but also by low provisioning of social services.

In the next section therefore, we attempt to move beyond the binary and delineate a theoretical framework that is better equipped to address the structural aspects of institutional functioning that impact governance. Our field evidence is presented later in accordance with this line of inquiry, with the hope to bring to the fore the particularities of context and social provisioning in developing countries.

The Political Economy of Government Education: Beyond Rent Seeking

State bureaucracies are commonly labeled inefficient and corrupt on account of patron-client relationships and rent-seeking behavior, which form the dominant narrative of institutional functioning. While this paradigm is applied to the education sector as well, it takes on a somewhat different form. One, since education is not an electoral issue, the children (or their parents) are not considered 'clients' to whom the state might extend patronage in exchange for votes. Two, as there is no conditionality placed on performance of teachers as part of the patron-client relationship, rent may accrue to the teacher or administrator in the form of leisure or other opportunities of work, but it does not translate into any performance goal. Three, patron-client relations within the bureaucracy may also involve individuals from across agencies. For instance, relationships between the Junior Engineer (JE), the education administration and/or the school management in respect of funds for infrastructure development are increasingly cited as examples of financial misappropriation. The JE submitting utilisation certificates for works that were either incomplete or poorly executed (use of bad quality material at inflated costs) is well known[2] . At any rate, this view has eschewed a more nuanced understanding of institutions and the constraints under which they function, virtually closing the door on thinking of areas where there could be scope for improvement. It focuses instead on seeking solutions outside or through methodologies that circumvent the state system such as privatisation of services, public-private partnerships (PPP) and technological fixes like 'teacher-less' classrooms. Unfortunately these amount to a mere tinkering at the margins. Delivery of education to the bulk of the population that still relies on the public education system cannot be addressed in this fashion.

The pervasiveness of political forces in the functioning of the education administration is perhaps most clearly evident in the involvement of teachers in the electoral process. Their appointment as the electoral booth level officer [BLO] allows them patronage directly from the political class - especially political aspirants[3] . Their use of this power to negotiate transfers and appointments is commonplace and has resulted in a lop-sided distribution of teachers – close to towns and away from interior areas - with no clear solution in sight.

While this direct involvement of politics is worth exploring in greater detail, the wider political economy within which the government education system is situated emerges as a crucial structural determinant of the behavior of individuals within institutions. As has been noted, their behaviour is moderated through a form of 'political settlement' (Khan, 2004) or 'negotiation' (Vasavi, 2015) reflecting the power imbalances embodied within the system. For instance, annual allocations to blocks and schools (in the form of teacher appointments or infrastructure allocations) depend on the influence that agents have to garner greater resources for themselves. As our survey revealed, while schools include their demands in the multiple formats they send for consideration

[2] Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS) like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) that are operated through "societies" are exempt from the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) process that other government departments and programmes must comply with. Instead, the SSA conducts its own financial audit through a private accounting firm. The records of these audits are not available in the public domain

[3] As a BLO, the teacher is in charge of drawing up and updating the electoral rolls, in addition to manning electoral booths at the time of election.

every year, eventually how many of those demands are fulfilled depends on how well the Head Teachers (HT) are able to influence the relevant officials in their favour. In situations where demand out-strips supply, and where there are no rubrics for ranking need, it is almost always a matter of political settlement.

Needless to say, this settlement is as sensitive to citizen action as to proximity to political power and can produce positive outcomes in areas where citizens are collectivised and can get their voices heard. Mobilisation of citizen demands and especially their inclusion in the agenda of political parties can also play a positive role in influencing the functioning of bureaucracies. The focus on social sector provisioning, for instance, as seen in Mid-Day Meals (MDM) in Tamil Nadu (TN) or elementary education in Himachal Pradesh (HP), are cases in point. Even though they are the exception rather than the rule, they demand greater attention, not just to build a more positive narrative around the role of political intervention but also in terms of the networks of practice they give rise to.

The Challenge of Social Inequalities

It has been argued that the 'declared rules of the game' account for only part of the evidence in implementation whereas the success of state delivery often depends on other factors such as culture and social context - the 'unstated dynamics' - that determine actual functioning of institutions and behaviour of individuals within them (Sharma & Ramachandran, 2009). In these sociological interpretations, institutional norms and procedures appear as culturally specific practices assimilated into organisations that do not necessarily enhance the formal means-end efficiency but 'provide the frames of meaning guiding human action' (Hall & Taylor, 1996). Deference to higher authorities without regard to actual goals of the job, resulting in poor performance, is commensurate with this line of argument. It leads to subversion of accountability- one of the primary causes of governance failure. Thus, the 'logic of social appropriateness' (Campbell, 1997), coupled with misplaced accountabilities is reproduced through the creation of symbols, cognitive scripts and moral templates, rendering the bureaucracy 'dysfunctional with regard to achieving its formal goals'(Hall & Taylor, 1996). This was amply reflected during our survey, where officials repeatedly described children in government schools as dirty, unhygienic, and poor – symbolic of those un-prepared and un-fit for an education. The cognitive understanding that follows such representation is one that sees these families caught in a vicious cycle of illiteracy and unskilled work, prioritising domestic responsibilities for children and disregarding education. Parents are believed to send their children to school for MDM, play no role in supporting them in schoolwork, allow them instead to 'while away' their time and return to school persistently a tabula rasa. Parental motivation being contingent on poverty, over which the education officials feel powerless, in their minds they see their own role in making a difference, diminished.

This script, repeated ad nauseum, allows the officials to develop a template of functioning that condones the slack in attention to their core goals, as morally acceptable. Quality is cast aside as an imperative, and goals are redefined in terms of performing 'official' duties. This pattern of behaviour is re-enforced by the fact that 'formal goals' are simultaneously perceived as unachievable and unnecessary by the social consensus within the system. Desultory filling of formats, perfunctory monitoring visits, accompanied by great deference to senior officials to compensate for the slack, assume the stature of norms – the new template. Progress is therefore based not on the positive impact on the school system or the achievements of children studying in them, but on compliance with written rules, and an abject respect for hierarchy.

However, more recent work on bureaucracies has pointed to the need to break out of the 'all or nothing', framework and instead, acknowledge the importance of both, rules and discretion (Evans & Harris, 2004); allow for flexibility in the functioning of the bureaucracy (Mangla, 2015)[4] ; create spaces for experimentation at the frontline level, while retaining a robust vertical monitoring system (Pires, 2011); and explore possibilities of state-

[4] Mangla's [2015] "deliberative" model of the bureaucracy in HP refers to bureaucrats allowing civil society inputs and local concerns to influence their action in the interest of the people, rather than stick to the "legalistic" rules of the system.

society synergy and co-production as a means of improving both delivery and accountability at local levels (Evans, 1996; Ostrom, 1996). While the empirical evidence from our survey corroborates in several ways this body of research, what is unclear from, say, Mangla's thesis, is why the bureaucracy in Himachal Pradesh, the focus of his study, is more deliberative than legalistic? What is it about the bureaucrats or the institutional arrangements, the social structures within which different type of 'norms' arise in HP that predict the more positive result? It would appear that one missing piece in this set of work is a full-scale reckoning of the social inequalities question. While Evans et al. admit that synergistic relations break down at the margins of deep social divisions and thus treat those situations as 'outliers' in their analysis, Mangla's work skirts the issue altogether. Pires, Evans and Harris have similarly omitted to address the inequities question. Instead, it is assumed that frontline bureaucrats, if allowed discretion, would be able to address the myriad different situations they face and find solutions to them. Unfortunately in the context of developing countries, including India, social and economic inequalities are not just the norm, they interfere in the discretionary process by increasing the social distance between bureaucrats and clients. In fact, a significant way in which inequalities play out at the frontline level, making it difficult for positive action to take place - irrespective of discretionary powers - is through the lack of empathy they engender towards the 'clients'. This is manifest in the communication between the officials and the parents being marked with disdain for the social station to which these families belong and derision for the attitudes of the poor towards the education of their children. This inevitably translates into 'blaming' them for the lack of achievements made by their wards in education. In other words, the onus for the malfunctioning of schools and the system is transferred onto the parents and their children, thereby absolving the officials of their part in it.

The observed lack of ownership of roles and responsibilities assigned to the officials, particularly those that go beyond the mechanistic or 'legalistic' ones also differs from research on street-level bureaucracies, which assume that motivation and ownership of roles are not a constraint. While it is true that other mitigating factors such as lack of an enabling environment, the incoherence of procedures and poor physical and financial resources influence the lack of ownership, social distance adds the last nail, as it were, leading to a virtual breakdown of action. Nevertheless, it is hard to decipher if the shifting of blame and lack of ownership of roles is a consequence, or a symptom of the lack of incentive to use discretion in the interest of children/clients. In other words, does this attitude stem solely from the social distance or does it also reflect frustration in effecting change due to poor resources and lack of power? It is our understanding that although the lack of resources is a constraint in terms of the ability to take certain kinds of action, the social distance acts as a restraint on the motivation to use discretion, irrespective of resources. The result is an inability to stretch themselves in the service of the people they are responsible for.

The Binding Constraint of State Capacities

The literature on state capacities broadly claims that even under conditions of rationality and autonomy (discretion), states may lack the capacity to intervene effectively[5] . While capacities include the basics of financial, physical and human resources, systemic deficiencies also play a crucial role. For instance, Chibber (2002) points to intra-agency relationships and 'internal cohesiveness' as important indicators of capacity while Evans (1995) argues that cohesiveness 'has to be complemented by a dense thicket of ties between planning agencies and firms to facilitate continued transmission of information between the two actors'. These, as we shall see later, emerged as significant constraints in our study of the education bureaucracy, too.

A related element of state capacity that tends to receive less attention is data and information systems. If the street-level bureaucrat does not have access to relevant information regarding crucial aspects of the programme or data on the situation s/he is dealing with, no amount of discretionary powers will make a difference. Our survey reveals

[5] Although the literature on state capacity is largely with reference to economic growth, it can be applied to the functioning of state institutions for delivery of public goods and services as well.

that there are gross anomalies not just in the collection process but also in the use of data. This mismanagement of information feeds into the planning process and exacerbates the vicious cycle of poor allocations and poor implementation. In addition, if basic physical, financial and human resources are inadequate, the system is essentially designed to fail. The lack of resources is both a result of the failed decentralisation project, which has not adequately devolved funds and functionaries to the level to which functions are assigned, and of poor budgetary allocations to lower levels of administration.

III. THE STUDY

With the foregoing discussion as the backdrop, this study focuses on the perspective of bureaucrats and their experience in discharging their roles on an everyday basis. This quotidian approach allows us to examine the functioning of the bureaucracy through the attitudes and perceptions of officials towards their clients, their ownership of policies or tasks at hand, and the capacities at their disposal, or available within the system, to pursue their goals. By incorporating the specific conditions encountered, we hope to take the discourse on street-level bureaucracies beyond the simple binary of rules and discretion and highlight instead incoherence in institutional design and insufficient state capacities, both of which lead to a lack of ownership of roles among frontline officials and add to the social and political conditions constraining their performance.

Sample and Methodology

The study was carried out in two rural districts each of HP, Odisha and Rajasthan, and one urban district each of Bangalore and Delhi. The focus was on rural areas, since they are given less priority in government policy (and by teachers who prefer not to be posted to schools that are geographically remote) than their urban counterparts, and cater to children of the most disadvantaged groups. The criterion for sample selection was literacy rates: HP is a better performing state (81.85 percent), Rajasthan a poorly performing one (61.44 percent) and Odisha a "turn-around" state (70.22 percent). From each these states, 48 schools were selected randomly (using District Information System for Education [DISE] data), across two districts, four blocks and 12 clusters, of which at least 12 were single teacher schools, in keeping with the national average of 10 percent. The total sample in rural areas was thus 142 schools (since we were only able to conduct the survey in 47 schools each in HP and Rajasthan due to unavoidable circumstances). In each city, 12 schools were selected across one district, two blocks and three clusters; the total urban sample size was 24 schools. The total number of monitoring officials interviewed was 98. Thus, the total number of interviews conducted across all levels of the education system was 264.

It should also be clarified that unlike Lipsky's (1980) definition of street-level bureaucrats as those in direct contact with the 'client', we do not include the teacher as a street-level bureaucrat since she is not considered a 'civil servant' despite having a significant administrative burden[6] . Additionally, since we have chosen the monitoring function within the education delivery system, the teacher is also the assessee in the monitoring process. The HT however, has been included, as she is a monitor of her own school, and in dealing with the frontline bureaucrats, is a crucial source of information on the monitoring system.

The Government's Structures and Systems of Monitoring

Secondary information on the monitoring system elaborately describes the architecture set up for the purpose, spanning a range of government and non-government entities [Table 1] However, the actual monitoring process is not described anywhere. In fact it is reduced simply to officials being made 'in-charge of' a select number of schools. This too, varies significantly across levels and between states [Table 2].

[6] See Bhatty et al (2015), for a discussion of the role of the teacher as a civil servant.

Table 1: The State Implementing and Monitoring Structures				
	Implementing Structure		**Monitoring Structure**	
	Department	Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)	Department	SSA
National	• Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD)	• MHRD		• State Education Secretaries & Project Directors • JRM by GoI
Regional				• State Coordinators
State	• Principal Secretary	• State Project Director (SPD)		• MI
District	• District Education Officer (DEO • District Institute of Education and Training (DIET)	• District Project Coordinator (DPC)		• District Level Committee
Block	• Block Education Officer (BEO)	• Block Resource Coordinator (BRC)		• BRC
Cluster	Department	• Cluster Resource Coordinator (CRC)		• CRC
Community				• Village Level Committee

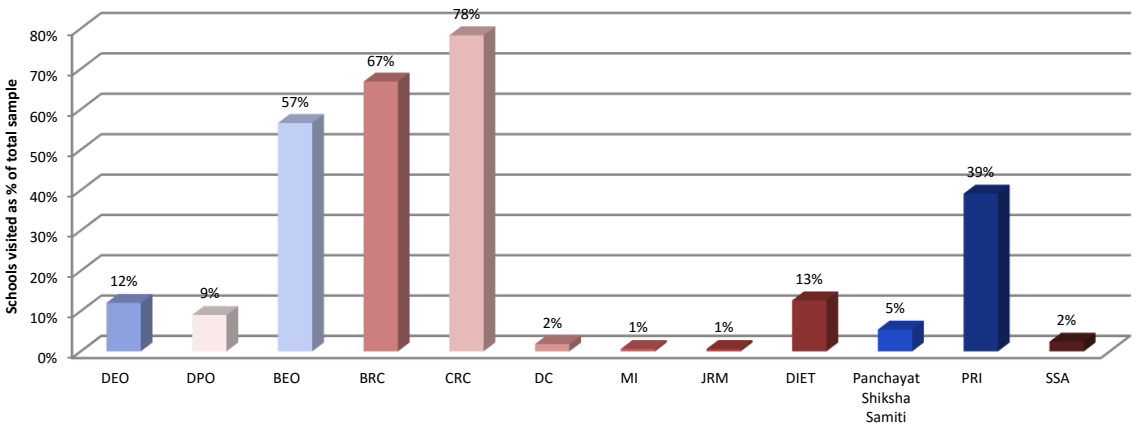
Table 2: Average number of government schools each official is in charge of				
	CRC	BRC	BEO	DEO
Himachal Pradesh	6	87	133	1766
Odisha	13	223	233	2586
Rajasthan	8	138	206	1399
Delhi	47	421	30	114
Bangalore	43	108	113	NA

Source: Field Survey 2014-15

Visiting schools to check on them is clearly a part of being in-charge. Typically, during a visit the officials look at a range of issues from infrastructure to classroom practices, accounts and teaching methods to midday meals, and make notes in pre-designed formats or write comments in the school register. The number of visits to be made at each level is apparently specified, but the extent to which officials are able to make the visits varies. Thus, as depicted in Figure 1, all the officials did not visit all the schools they were required to, and in some schools no official had paid a visit[7]. It is hard to tell if a school that does not receive a personal visit is being monitored at all.

[7] Sub-state variations do exist, for instance 100% of sample schools in Odisha had a visit by CRCs compared with only 43% in Rajasthan.

Figure 1: % of Schools that had a visit by monitoring officials



Source: Field Survey 2014-15

Interestingly however, despite the low frequency of monitoring visits by the Department officials, the HTs perceived them as more effective monitors than their SSA counterparts, as the former represent the state apparatus, where the real power lies. The school administration thus both fears them, and has greater expectations from them, in terms of finding solutions. In effect though, as we shall see, this expectation is mostly belied.

While quality of teaching and learning is checked using different methods, [Figure 2a], there is no uniformity or consistency in the process, and written documentation of observations, even on quality, is missing. Thus, while more than half the officials tested children in the class, the tests results are rarely recorded [Figure 2b]. Typically, observations are conveyed verbally and in the case of CRCs and BRCs, followed up by a model lesson. The lack of a record implies that the possibility of following up in a systematic manner does not exist.

Figure 2a: % of Officials who use the following methods for testing

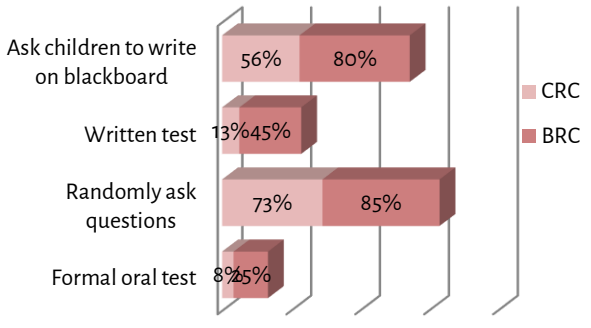
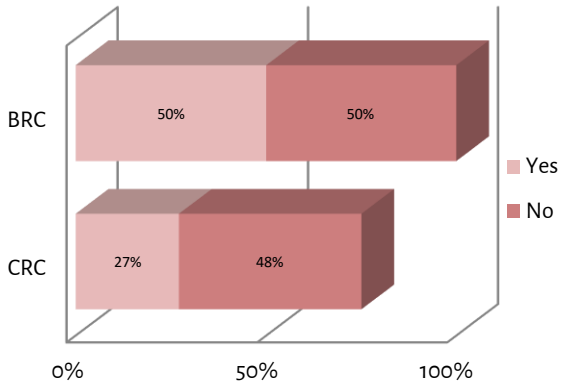


Figure 2b: Does the official include test scores of children in the school monitoring format?



Source: Field Survey 2014-15

Filling pre-designed formats however forms a big part of the monitoring exercise. Table 3 shows the number of formats each official is required to fill, included those that are not part of a personal visit, but sent down to the HT to fill. A simple back-of –the-envelope calculation for HP showed that as many as 480 formats had reached the Block for just the 48 schools in our sample! It is unfortunate that despite such a large number of formats filled, crucial information, on learning, is not included.

Table 3 : Aggregate number of formats filled by monitoring officials in the sample states					
State	**HT**	**CRC**	**BRC**	**BEO**	**DEO**
Himachal Pradesh	24	17	8	4	0
Odisha	17	17	5	1	3
Rajasthan	16	7	10	3	1
Delhi	15	7	1	1	1
Bangalore	11	17	6	2	NA

Source: Field Survey, 2014-15

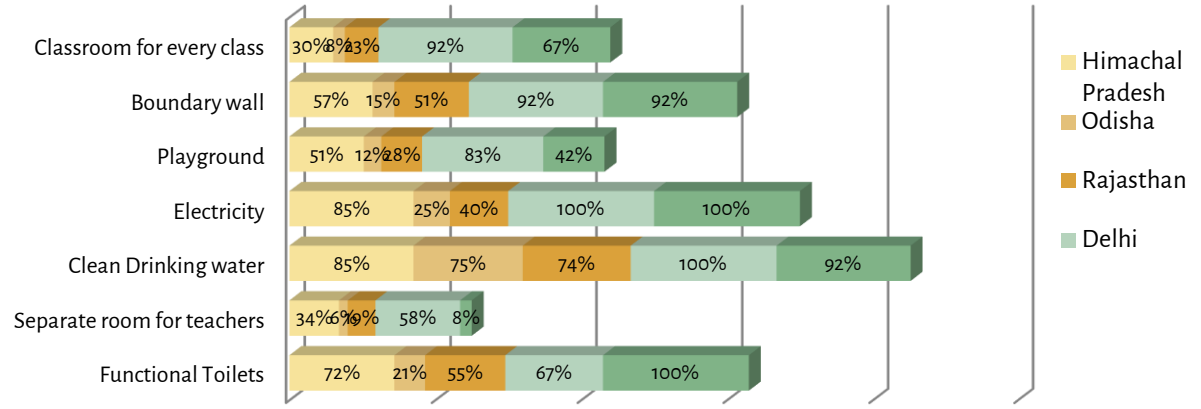
So, What Happens to the Information Collected?

Review meetings of both SSA and the Department are held at the cluster, block and district levels, but the agenda of these meetings is pre-determined and relates to routine administrative matters. A discussion on monitoring visits is considered rare. At the SSA meetings, matters relating to utilisation of funds, trainings and vacancies of SSA officials, and status of infrastructure are discussed, whereas the Department monthly review meetings revolve around routine matters largely related to data collection, distribution of salaries and incentives, completion of trainings and expenditures. The information that is so assiduously collected through ever-more sophisticated formats is neither analysed nor followed-up. Instead, the files remain locked up in school, block or district cupboards. The quarterly review meetings at the state level are also similarly conducted, with pre-fixed agendas and information from the ground finding no space for discussion. These 'business as usual' meetings leave little scope for addressing specific challenges or proposing new ideas from below. Any change that is initiated takes place from the top down only. In fact, copies of the monitoring report filled by the officials are often not even retained in the schools.

Are Schools Being Monitored?

Based on the existence of structures and systems it would appear that schools are being monitored. But, if one were to ask instead, if schools were being monitored with a clearly stated objective or goal, the answer would no longer be clear. The objective could be a process - inspection and fixing of accountabilities, feedback at the local level, follow-up and action at higher levels; or it could be an outcome - improved learning levels, improved infrastructure provision or better teaching quality. This survey corroborates the fact that on neither count the system can claim to be functioning optimally or effectively. Figure 3 shows the status of schools and it is evident that most leave a lot to be desired. If seen in conjunction with Table 4, which presents pending issues in sample schools, the ineffectiveness of monitoring becomes even more glaring.

Figure 3: Status of schools



Source: Field Survey [2014-15]

Table 4: How many schools face pending issues? [HT responses]				
	Shortage of teachers	**Infrastructure related problems**	**Finance related problems**	**Problem of textbooks**
Himachal Pradesh	60%	81%	30%	9%
Odisha	87%	98%	73%	19%
Rajasthan	38%	79%	13%	6%
Delhi	58%	75%	17%	33%
Bangalore	58%	50%	67%	8%

Source: Field Survey [2014-15]

What came across somewhat inexplicably was the fact that even a simple review of schools, throws up several interesting facts, which should be fodder for policy, but because they do not get recorded have fallen by the way side. For instance, 95% of rural primary schools functioned with multi-grade classrooms [Figures 4], even though the Pupil Teacher Ratios (PTR) are in accordance with the norm, that is 1:30 [Figure 5]. Unfortunately, the monitoring reports do not capture the multi-grade situation per se (only the PTRs), or the impact of multi-grade teaching on learning, and hence contribute to perpetuating the problem, rather solving it. It would appear that the system is choosing to ignore them for reasons that may have to do with priorities at a higher level, such as fiscal constraints.

Figure 4a: Multigrade teaching in rural primary schools

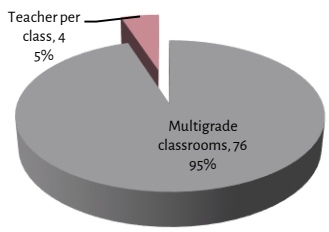
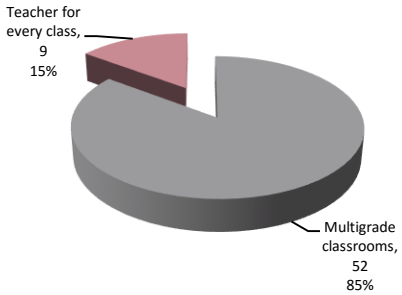
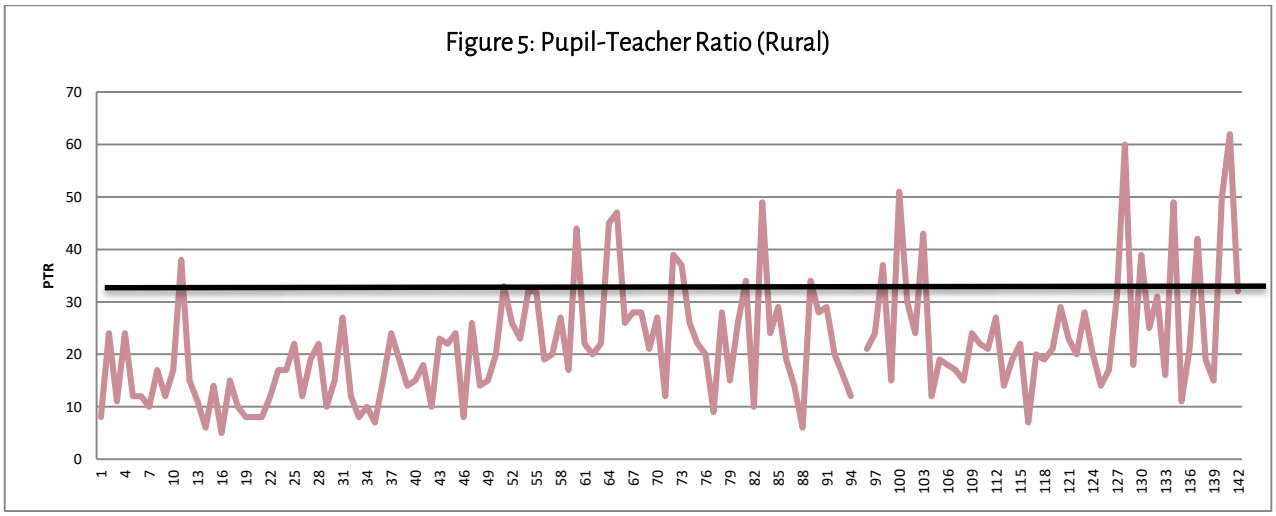


Figure 4b: Multigrade teaching in rural upper primary schools



Source: Field Survey [2014-15]

Figure 5: Pupil-Teacher Ratio (Rural)



Source: Field Survey [2014-15]

V. THE ANALYSIS

In the rest of this paper we provide evidence based on interviews with monitoring officials for three sets of factors that we found best characterise the frontline education bureaucracy. These are: i) Incoherence in institutional design; ii) Lack of ownership of policies and programme elements among the officials, and iii) Insufficient state capacities.

Institutional Incoherence

i) Structural Infirmities

SSA as Society and Department as State: The most fundamental form of incoherence within the education system lies in the parallel structures of the SSA and the Department; while both have monitoring functions, there are no clear lines of communication and convergence established between them. This divergence plays out in multiple ways in the day-to-day operations of the system. For instance, the monitoring function is not specified, but implicit in the Department's monitoring role, whereas the SSA has clearly delineated monitoring structures at different levels of administration, but no powers of action. Further, SSA is responsible for 'academic' matters while the Department for 'establishment' matters. The former includes curriculum, teaching-learning processes, 'quality', trainings and social exclusion, while the latter deals with appointments, salaries, pensions, trainings, transfers, court cases, disbursements of incentives, data collection and finance related issues. In field interviews, however, we found much overlap with officials monitoring issues across domains, but without convergence of either information or action. Further, SSA frontline officials – the CRCs and BRCS – who are essentially appointed to provide academic support to teachers have in effect become the main monitors since they are closest in proximity to the schools and make the maximum number of visits to them. But, at the same time, they are unable to effect any real change related to academic standards, because the core areas related to improving learning, such as teacher appointments or deficiencies in teacher education or training, lie outside their jurisdiction. The topics on which training is to be done, the schedules, the experts, and the actual training, is organised and conducted in a highly centralised fashion by Department officials that are far removed from the ground while the involvement of SSA officials is reduced to making logistical arrangements (MHRD, 2011). In some states like Odisha, CRCs are not even given the authority to look at teacher attendance registers, implying that they have no opportunity to report on the regularity of teacher attendance. Unfortunately, the Department officials make very few visits and hence issues such as teacher absenteeism do not get reported. In fact, on most matters of everyday functioning of the school – such as regularity of classes in accordance to a fixed timetable, adherence and timely completion of syllabus, or adoption of evaluation methods like Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE), or even

provision of MDM - the state bureaucracy is unable to check for itself. Instead, it must rely on formats filled by the SSA officials or by the HTs. The pitfalls in such a system are obvious; besides conflict of interest implied in HT reporting, filling formats without a personal visit is fraught with limitations of second hand knowledge.

ii) Incoherent Authority Structures and Recruitment Rules

Structural incoherence is also evident in the recruitment rules for the CRCs, who are hired from the teaching cadre itself and do not form part of an education or other administrative service. They tend to be young teachers, often several years (sometimes even decades) junior in position to the teachers they are supposed to monitor. Although the logic of hiring teachers appears to be in keeping with their primary role as academic support, teachers find it difficult to accept the authority of the CRCs and are even hostile in some cases. In a few instances, CRCs are appointed from within the cluster where they have been teachers, and return to their teaching jobs after a fixed tenure. As a result, not only are they wary of taking to task or 'monitoring' the HT and teachers, they have a sense of empathy with the teachers for the situations in which they work, which interferes with being objective about their performance. Further, the CRCs are not trained in the administrative tasks required of them, making their roles fairly de-motivating, in addition to ineffective. Many CRCs complained bitterly about their jobs and yearned to be back in their teaching posts.

iii) Incoherence in Operating Procedures or Norms

In what seems to be a contradiction given the highly centralised nature of institutional functioning in education, rules and procedures related to monitoring vary sharply across and even within states. This included rules for basic parameters such as number of monitoring visits, types of monitoring formats, and type and frequency of data collected. While some of these differences, particularly in types of monitoring formats, may be attributed to innovation by local officers, most others were because of lack of coordination between bureaucratic structures. Consequently, there is no unified code within a district or state for monitoring resulting in different data points being generated at different levels but collated and analysed in a centralised fashion at higher levels. It raises questions about the validity of the collation exercise and indeed of the whole process of collecting information. The dissonance created by the parallel structures is thus complemented by the dissonance in the norms and rules of their functioning.

It was particularly striking that incoherence of norms was prevalent across the entire process of monitoring - from personal visits to what and how to monitor, and from follow-up to action. For instance, the norm for the number of visits each official is required to make, does not appear in any written guideline, but is apparently conveyed verbally in meetings. What is inexplicable, however is that even at the same level, knowledge of what the norm is, varies [see Table 5].

Table 5: Norm according to BRC for monitoring visits (Himachal Pradesh)

	District Kangra		**District Kullu**	
	Dharamshala	**Nurpur**	**Naggar**	**Banjar**
BRC 1	Each school once a month	No fixed criteria	10-15 schools a month	No fixed criteria
BRC 2	Each school once a month	10 schools a month		2 schools a month

Source: Field Survey 2014-15

Since there are no written records of the norms, it is hard to verify if in fact the norms vary or if the officials are just not aware of the norms. Whichever the case may be, the compliance rate to self-declared norms, as reported by the officials themselves is quite low, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: School Visits made by officials according to their knowledge of norm

	CRC	BRC	BEO	DEO
Himachal Pradesh	42%	43%	25%	50%
Odisha	42%	33%	0	50%
Rajasthan	83%	50%	50%	50%
Delhi	50%	0	57%	100%
Bangalore	50%	50%	50%	NA

Source: Field Survey 2014-15

For example, in HP only 42 percent of the CRCs interviewed said they were able to meet the norms. It is worth pointing out that barring HP, all other states require the CRCs to visit private aided schools as well. On average, they account for roughly half the schools they visit (Bangalore is the exception with far fewer aided schools), although the latter visits are mainly for inspecting MDMs only.

State Capacity

i) Inadequate Financial Resources

The gross lack of capacities and resources – physical, financial and human - is a stark reality of the monitoring structure and a reflection of the low priority given to education by the state. Despite claims that 'money is not a problem', based on the absolute amounts of funds allocated to education steadily increasing (although mostly in SSA), there is little evidence of this on the ground. For instance, the financial allocation of Rs. 1500 (less than $25) per school per annum under the monitoring budget remains inadequate. There are other contradictions in rhetoric and reality as well. For instance, while data collection is a high priority, there is a glaring lack of computer facilities or even a regular supply of electricity, particularly in the Department offices. Further, none of the CRCs, except 8 percent in Odisha, had a computer in their office while only 8 percent CRCs in Odisha and 33 percent CRCs in Bangalore had regular supply of electricity. Moreover, very few officials of the SSA or Department get transport allowance or a vehicle for school visits, severely reducing the number of visits they make. Not a single CRC in any state and none of the BRCs and BEOs in rural states had a vehicle to conduct monitoring visits. It is not surprising that not one BRC in Odisha, Delhi or Bangalore and not one BEO in Odisha or Rajasthan thought they had adequate resources, while only 17 percent and 9 percent CRCs in HP and Rajasthan did.

ii) Inadequate Human Resources

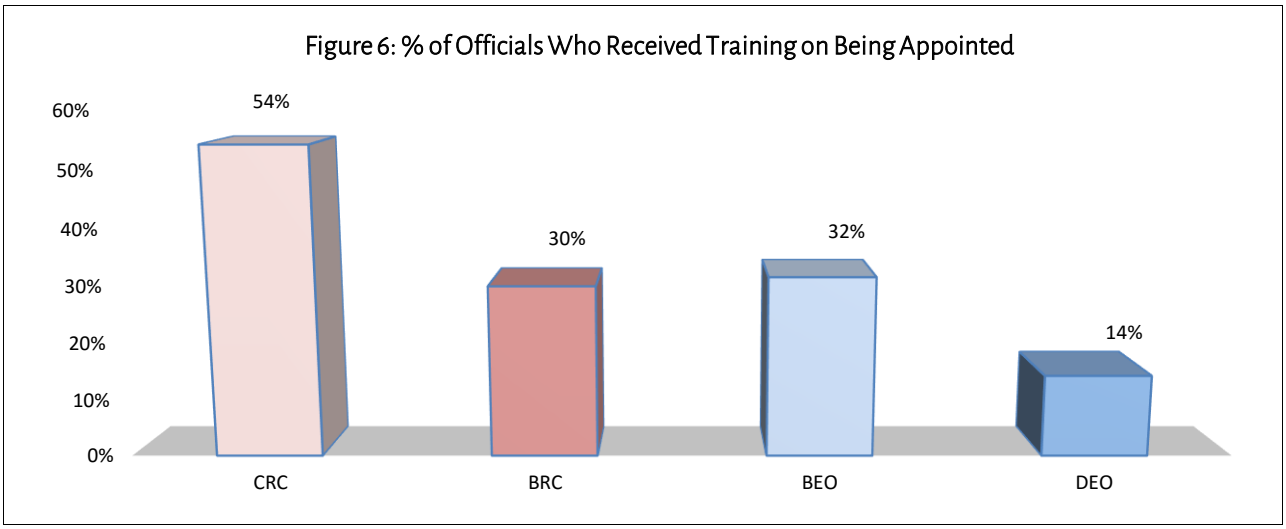
The inadequacy of resources is perhaps most keenly felt in terms of the vacancies in the sanctioned positions, as shown in Table 7. Not only does the high percentage of vacancies prevent timely discharge of duties at all levels of the monitoring system, including monitoring visits, data collation and analysis, feedback and follow-up, but in many cases, the filled positions are deputations from other schools. As a result, in drawing resources from schools an already under-resourced schooling system is further constrained with obvious impacts on teaching and learning. This again is not information reported on in monitoring formats.

Table 7: Vacancies in sanctioned positions at the BEO office			
	Sanctioned positions	**Filled positions**	**Vacancies** as share of sanctioned posts)
Himachal Pradesh	46	25	21 (46%)
Odisha	35	29	6 (17%)
Rajasthan	58	25	33 (57%)
Delhi	NR	NR	NR
Bangalore	34	32	2 (6%)

Source: Field Survey 2014-15

iii) Inadequate Training

While the officers have been given a long list of issues to monitor, with ever-increasing complexity of formats and tools to use, there has been little effort to enhance their capacities to do so, as is evident from the very few number of officials who receive training when appointed [Figure 6]. Training in using the tools is cursory at best and often results in non-usage of the tools, putting into serious question the time, money and effort spent in designing tools at a central level.



Source: Field Survey 2014-15

iv) Mismanaged Information System

The lack of coherence is particularly evident in the information generated and transmitted within the system. Several problems were found with the design and process, resulting not just in poor quality of information collected but also inadequate or inappropriate use of the information. Some of these issues are discussed below:

Poor Understanding of 'evidence', 'data' and 'information': There was widely perceived ambiguity within SSA and Department officials about the purpose of collecting information. Was it for use in planning or policy-making or for taking action or providing more resources or simply 'inspecting'? Having little understanding, if any, of the above purposes it served, data is collected as a routine task because it has been asked for. Invariably it leads to passing the task down the line: monitors asking the HT to fill out the formats, who in turn, ask the teachers to provide the information. Aside from creating a conflict of interest at the level of the teachers, it takes time away from their core teaching duties.

Poor design of formats and poor quality of information collected: Although the multitude of formats to be filled at fairly regular intervals, suggests the high quantum of data being collected, much of the information collected is inadequate or irrelevant. For example, in Odisha the quality format, Samikhya, has a total of 51 indicators spread across 6 areas of performance, few of which are useful or even usable. While the large number of indicators is

itself not conducive to aggregation and inclusion in planning and policy frames, inappropriate design such as asking a question that is subjective in nature in a Yes/No format, or unclear criteria for determining the existence of an objective, lead to responses that are bound to be arbitrary in nature. In the Odisha format, while it is expected that the response to 'Overall classroom environment is conducive for learning', be in the positive or negative, there is no criteria to assess 'conducive'. In another case, in HP, a format asks to describe the existence of 'teacher problem' without defining it. Is it scarcity of teachers, poor quality of teaching or indeed some other aspect of the problem?

On indicators of quality of teaching or learning, since there are no norms for how to assess quality, the monitors do not include documentation of random testing during monitoring visits. The Quality Monitoring Tool, developed especially for monitoring quality of learning was not found in any state, perhaps for lack of training in its use. It is thus unclear what information is included on quality in the monitoring formats, although school results are sent periodically to the Block offices. In states like HP and some parts of Odisha, where CCE has been adopted, this amounts to very meticulously prepared tables of test results being sent up to 6 times a year.8 This information was, however, not being used in any systematic fashion, except in Odisha. But there too, the analysis was highly centralised and did not result in significant follow up on the ground. In other states, where CCE was not being enforced, even maintaining pupil achievement records was limited. It would be fair to say therefore, that progress on quality of learning is not part of the monitoring records in any systematic fashion.

Irrelevant or too much information: While on the one hand, several important indicators are ignored, on the other, some information is repeatedly collected without a clear purpose. For instance, information on all infrastructure indicators and teacher appointments, both of which are unlikely to change over one financial cycle are collected several times a year. Not only is the information redundant, it is a gross misuse of the time of the teachers and the monitors. In another instance, a CRC in Odisha identified the same problems and provided the same recommendations (word for word) over four consecutive visits, reflecting both, a lack of training, as well as a lack of empathy. In many cases, the monitors and HTs disagreed with the routine collection of several data points but had no choice since they were being held accountable for filling formats even more than their other core tasks.

Poor use of information Information is of little value if the feedback loop is incomplete. The education bureaucracy, however, has not grasped this simple truth. The filled formats are sent up through the administration, but do not feed into the larger processes of review and planning. Even the mandatory school development plans (SDP) are de facto Data Collection Formats (DCF) used by DISE in lieu of the SDP since DISE is the basis for plans at the district levels. As a result, information not included in the DCF is neglected in the plans as well. Besides, as shown in Figures 7, DISE does not always capture the situation accurately. The distance between the two lines shows the difference between DISE and primary data collected by us.

Figure 7a: No of monitoring visits made by the BRC (Odisha)

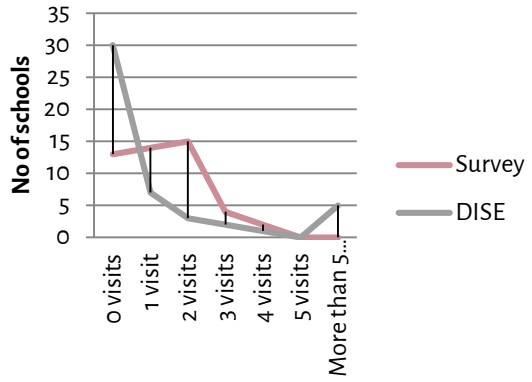
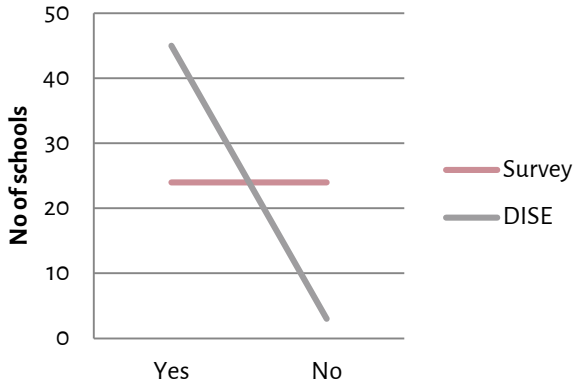


Figure 7b: Are there separate toilets for Boys and Girls? (Odisha)



Source: Field Survey 2014-15

Lack of Ownership of Roles and Responsibilities

i) Monitoring, Mentoring or Neither?

The division of labour and separation of powers between the state and SSA has also resulted in blurring of role definition. The SSA officials are treated more like 'mentors', than 'monitors' since they were primarily established for providing academic support to teachers. They do this largely through model lessons for improved teaching methods or advice on how to manage multi-grade classrooms. In single-teacher schools where the teachers are starved of support and guidance, their mentoring role is particularly appreciated, not least because the CRC may share the teaching load on the day of a visit. It is unlikely in these circumstances, that the CRCs are able to do much monitoring.

In reality, since the department has virtually abdicated its monitoring responsibilities as far as school visits is concerned, the SSA officials de facto perform that function as well, but without the commensurate transfer of authority or an adequate system of feedback. As a result, the purpose of monitoring itself has become obfuscated and takes on different meanings at different levels of government as well as at the school. Thus, for some, it means 'inspection', for others, 'mentoring' and for most it is simply 'data collection'.

ii) Misplaced priorities

The excessive handling of information has led to the widespread perception that CRCs and BRCs function as 'post masters', rather than academic facilitators (Aiyar & Bhattacharya, 2015). As stated by a CRC in Odisha, **'I am just a messenger. I have no role'.**

Monitoring has been reduced to data collection, irrespective of the quality or use of information as is evident from Table 8. Data delivery is used as performance markers by higher officials and has hence become the priority of frontline monitoring officials in anticipation of referrals for career advancement. As aptly put by a BEO in HP, **'Information is definitely being monitored, if nothing else'.**

Table 8: Has monitoring become a data-gathering exercise?– Yes					
	HT	CRC	BRC	BEO	DEO
Himachal Pradesh	43%	75%	43%	75%	50%
Odisha	58%	33%	0	0	50%
Rajasthan	41%	67%	16%	100%	0
Delhi	42%	50%	0	0	0
Bangalore	59%	83%	50%	0	NA

Source: Field Survey 2014-15

iii) Dual Charges and Unforeseen Tasks

The field survey also revealed that officials are often faced with a number of unforeseen tasks, such as appearances at court hearings or supplying information to higher officials without prior notice. This situation is made worse by the fact that a substantial number of officials have additional official charges, even though the primary role itself carries a fair burden [Table 9]. The knowledge that they cannot perform either role to their full potential, has an adverse effect on officials' motivational levels. Coupled with the system's resource constraints, it is implausible for any official to conduct the responsibilities of a single, let alone double charge effectively.

Table 9: Does the official hold any other charge? – Yes	
DEO	71%
BEO	42%

Source: Field Survey 2014-15

iv) Lack of Autonomy and Agency

Following from the separation of responsibilities and difference in authority structures between the SSA and Department, the former are rendered incapable of influencing change, as evocatively remarked by a BRC in Odisha: **'I am a snake that cannot hiss.'** Table 10 provides further evidence of the lack of agency invested in these frontline officials, especially the CRCs who are unable to take any action on the spot. Even the Department officials, who have more powers than SSA, fare only marginally better.

Table 10: Does the official take action on the spot? Yes				
	CRC	BRC	BEO	DEO
Himachal Pradesh	17%	43%	50%	50%
Odisha	0	25%	25%	50%
Rajasthan	17%	33%	50%	50%
Delhi	0	0	0	0
Bangalore	0	0	100	0

Source: Field Survey 2014-15

In this study, we set out to understand the system and perceptions of frontline officials with regard to the process of monitoring and its effectiveness. Our findings corroborate the hypothesis that the system is lax, even non-functional in parts, much of which has to do with social distance, institutional infirmities and poor state capacities. A surprising finding, however, is that despite providing evidence for the inefficiencies in the system, the officials unanimously believe that monitoring does have a positive impact on school functioning. At the school level, the HTs felt they received mentoring and support on both administrative and academic matters. The SSA officials too felt they were able to provide guidance to teachers during their visits while the departmental officials felt they were able to instill discipline and prevent laxity at the school level.

Table 11: Does Monitoring Have an Impact on School Functioning? – Yes					
	HT	CRC	BRC	BEO	DEO
Himachal Pradesh	51%	67%	71%	75%	50%
Odisha	52%	75%	100%	50%	50%
Rajasthan	51%	50%	50%	50%	50%
Delhi	75%	83%	100%	86%	100%
Bangalore	67%	50%	50%	100%	NA

Source: Field Survey 2014-15

However, both HTs and the officials accepted that there is little feedback and action on monitoring visits and that monitoring has become a predominantly data-gathering exercise, without feedback or follow-up, leading the monitor to feel frustrated at their inability to effect change. As remarked by an Assistant Block Education Officer (ABEO) in Odisha**, 'When I revisit a school and the teacher asks me where is the boundary wall you promised, I feel helpless.'**

VI. CONCLUSION

The study findings lead us to suggest that reform in institutional design, particularly better information systems, a robust feedback loop and fixing accountabilities across the system, could improve implementation and create a sense of ownership for the frontline officials. Other changes, such as increasing physical, financial and human capacities at the frontline are equally important. In fact all these elements are part of state capacity, without which the institutions cannot be expected to deliver on their objectives and officials within them cannot be expected to perform at their optimum. Even discretion becomes redundant when vacancies are at nearly 50 percent or feedback mechanisms non-existent.

As mentioned earlier, data and information form a key aspect of governance that needs serious reform. In a country like India where the periphery is far removed from the centre, it becomes particularly important that information is both locally generated and readily available. While the poor understanding of information and its analysis and use are striking findings of the study, the importance of developing a local information base emerged as a crucial aspect of governance reform. Centrally managed systems not only create a conflict of interest in collection and use, they alienate the people of whom and for whom the data is collected. Moreover, direct engagement of the community with the schooling system, which is a powerful tool in bringing about change, is also curtailed because of the lack of community involvement in the process of information generation or verification and use.

In fact, all respondents referred to links with the community as an important element in keeping the administration on its toes. In HP, for instance, the HT often said that parents were their best monitors, as they

would regularly visit the school and question teachers about their children's performance, giving and checking of homework and so forth. Unfortunately the institutionalised spaces for community engagement, such as the School Management Committees (SMCs), have been ineffective, due to elite capture and lack of resources including hand-holding support and facilitation. The exceptions to this have emerged in areas where communities are more cohesive, with relatively lower social inequality. Or, where strong civil society groups have been able to mobilise communities to demand accountability (Ackerman, 2004). In the former, all forms of community engagement – formal and spontaneous – have emerged, thereby eliciting positive responses from the bureaucrats, while in the latter, the incidents tend to be sporadic with short-term gains, not sustainable over time.10 One of the reasons of this is that they are based on a confrontational mode of interaction between the bureaucrats and the people. Instead, interventions based on equal participation between the two that are geared towards finding solutions collectively, rather than 'public shaming' of officials are more likely to achieve better results and be sustained in the long term. Bureaucrats are also more likely to be responsive if they are not projected as the objects of blame. Such interactions, however, require the intervention and support of higher levels of government as well as facilitation by local groups.

Finally, the manner in which the issue of accountability is addressed in discussions around governance also needs reviewing. Our study highlights that in the absence of adequate infrastructure, poor working conditions or less than market wage salaries to teachers, accountabilities are unlikely to be binding. Besides, accountabilities would need to be fixed at all levels of the system if they are to be effective, rather than imposed only at the bottom rung. Unfortunately, there is very little discussion around the accountability of bureaucrats, who are the officials responsible for education provision and must therefore share the responsibility for the conditions that prevail in schools. From the survey, we found that although the frontline officials answer in the positive when asked if they fix accountabilities for lapses they find in schools, their understanding of fixing accountabilities is more often than not, their perception of who is responsible and not who they officially hold responsible. Thus the accountability chain is perceived as follows: First the parents, then the SMCs, then the community and finally the teacher. Rarely is there even a mention of an official within the education bureaucracy. Intrinsic to this response is the tendency to 'blame' parents for the poor performance of their children and absolve the system, especially the 'state', from fulfilling its end of the social contract. Rather than pointing to systemic issues, the perception that these children cannot learn since they come from poor families whose parents are not interested or able to provide them with support, is seen as the primary cause of children's low learning levels and the deteriorating quality of government schools.

To sum up, the study finds that despite monitoring being recognised as a crucial aspect of governance, and steps being taken to put into place a structure and tools for the purpose, the real task is not being undertaken as desired and more importantly, it is not yielding the results one might expect. The main reasons that emerged through interviews with the officials tasked with the job point to poor state capacities, especially at lower levels of the bureaucracy, related not just to low levels of resources, but also to systemic infirmities that have resulted in poor implementation of the monitoring function. Further, the social distance between the frontline or street-level bureaucrats and the clients has exacerbated the low levels of motivation engendered by the poorly resourced and unorganised system, leading to low levels of discretion and high levels of inaction. Greater use of sophisticated tools and more stringent rules or norms, if unaccompanied by changes in the system that have become binding constraints to performance by the bureaucrats is thus unlikely to bring improvement. While some states, like Odisha and Rajasthan, have experimented with different formats and systems, they too have been ineffective, as the underlying institutional constraints are not dealt with in these experiments either.

The functioning of the monitoring system thus shows the endemic rot in education governance that requires far reaching administrative reform and financial resources to achieve the real outcomes of education - improved teaching and learning – that are now being increasingly highlighted in the policy discourse.

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