Rewriting the Grammar of the Education System: Delhi's Education Reform

A Tale of Creative Resistance and Creative Disruption

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Chapter 1: Laying Out the Reforms Puzzle

Back in 2010, one of us participated in a meeting on education reforms with some senior education officials and reformist politicians in Bihar. During the discussion, a senior official made an important observation. He said, "The government can change how it works in short bursts. We can reform teaching practices and innovate in summer camps and mission mode programmes, but when it comes to mainstreaming changes in our day-to-day work, inside classrooms, we fail." Some years later, another senior official of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) echoed this sentiment. Speaking at an education seminar in New Delhi, he described India as the "burial ground of pilots". Both officers were pointing to an important puzzle that education reforms (indeed all public service reforms) in India must confront. Government education systems are capable of change when it is small-scale, mission-oriented, and time-bound. But when it comes to embedding reforms and institutionalising new practices in its everyday functioning and scaling up, the system fails.

Reams have been written about India's dysfunctional governance and implementation challenges. The failings of India's bureaucracy—its penchant for red tape, inefficiency, bungling basic service delivery, and corruption—are well documented both in academic literature and popular culture. India's weak governance has animated significant political change even though this has rarely translated into real change on the ground. In 2014, when India's current prime minister first received a decisive victory in the national elections, "minimum government, maximum governance" was one of his most popular election slogans. During the election campaign, every effort was made to craft his image as a strong leader capable of reforming India's broken governance and incompetent bureaucracy. In 2015, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), whose education reforms motivated this book, emerged as a significant political force in the city state of Delhi on the back of an anti-corruption and good governance agenda.

Decades of research from scholars, policy practitioners, and international development institutions in India and across the globe have led to a plethora of research and evidence on the technical, "plumbing" solutions to the twin problems of governance and implementation in low-capacity governance environments like India. State capacity and capability is now a well-acknowledged binding constraint to social and economic development.

Deregulation, downsizing the state, changing the terms of the contract through civil service reforms and inducing deeper accountability (both internally and externally to citizens) have dominated the debate on what needs to be done. However, even as the problem is widely acknowledged along with a long menu of solutions, there is little understanding, consensus, or indeed real-world examples on what it takes to effectively transition dysfunctional state institutions towards greater functionality and embed high-performance practices (Mcdonnell, 2017; Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock, 2015).

In India, efforts to change laws and institutional practices, and induce new technical approaches have created occasional islands of success. However, for the most part, these reforms have resulted in "institutional isomorphism" and mimicry—institutional mimicking of what is considered "good bureaucratic practice" rather than real change in ground realities. (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Andrews et al., 2015). Routinely, implementation—the lack of political will, weak technical capacity, and sabotage by the corrupt and apathetic frontline, all of which were the very reasons for needing reforms—is blamed. India's flailing state, as Lant Pritchett (2009) evocatively described it—a state where the head was no longer reliably connected with its limbs—offered a useful explanation for why things went wrong. But the flailing state also raises the question of why repeated efforts to "reform" the state and gain greater control over its limbs have failed to engender long-term change at scale. This is the puzzle of the burial grounds that the bureaucrats we encountered were referring to.

In 2015, a fledgling political party, the Aam Aadmi Party, born out of an anti-corruption movement that shook Indian politics in 2011–12, came to power in the city state of Delhi, India. AAP positioned itself as the party of the marginalised and the urban poor, offering an alternative to "mainstream, corrupt parties". Soon after coming to power, the government announced its mission to "revolutionise education in Delhi". A powerful AAP politician, Manish Sisodia, the deputy chief minister, was given the education and finance portfolios. Sisodia made revolutionising Delhi's education system a personal mission, and appointed a team of young party workers led by Atishi Marlena and supported by a number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to lead the reform effort. The critical ingredient that is often credited with the success or failure

of reforms—political will—was firmly in place. Not only was the party committed to the cause of education at its highest levels of power, but education also stayed on the agenda well into the party's tenure in power. In February 2020, the party found itself in a fierce electoral battle to retain power in Delhi. The party's work on education was given pride of place throughout its election campaign. Even the party's harshest critics recognised its efforts at trying to reform Delhi's school system.

The uniqueness and longevity of the Delhi effort offer fertile ground to find answers to the critical questions related to the puzzle of education reforms and embedding long-term change that have concerned India's bureaucrats. What does it take to institutionalise education reform in India? When and under what conditions do reforms get integrated and absorbed into the everyday workings of the state? And when and how is change resisted, subverted, and consigned to the burial ground?

The unfolding of reforms in Delhi's schools offered an opportunity to understand what it takes to build state capacity. At the heart of the reform effort was a concerted push towards moving a demotivated, apathetic and low-capacity education frontline (administrators and teachers) away from its business-as-usual approach to the classroom and induce a new performance culture within schools. This created the opportunity to unpack processes and dynamics of institutional transition. How do low-performing, dysfunctional institutions respond to efforts at change and what are the pathways for effectively embedding new performance cultures? Understanding these transitions lies at the heart of the puzzle that preoccupies reformist bureaucrats and debates on state capacity more broadly.

To answer these questions, this study adopted an ethnographic approach. For three years, researchers deployed a variety of ethnographic methods, including participant observations, classroom observations, focus group discussions, and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders across a set of schools and key informants involved in the Delhi reform effort. The objective was to develop a thick descriptive account of what it takes to undertake large-scale institutional changes in education systems.

Broadly, the "education revolution" had three pillars. First, improving school infrastructure; second, improving learning quality; and third, improving accountability through enhanced parental participation in school

activities. The focus of this book is on the second pillar—the effort to improve learning quality. This was a unique effort that marked arguably the first time that any government (national or sub-national) in India had chosen to tackle head-on the challenge of improving learning quality in government schools and make it part of the government's political agenda. This reform pillar included a wide range of programmes aimed at changing the in-service training model, creating a new mentorship and support structure for teachers, and an active public campaign to motivate teachers and restore their professional status.

A key ingredient of the reform was a programme called Chunauti 2018, which was based on the principles of Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), a classroom instruction model designed and widely implemented across the country by Pratham, the country's largest education-focused non-profit. The core objective of TaRL is to break the classroom free of the constraints of the age-grade curriculum to refocus its efforts on teaching at the level of the student. In the TaRL structure, students are organised into groups by ability levels and are taught using level-appropriate teaching, learning activities, and materials. Learning goals are simple and clear, and ongoing measurement is used to assess progress (Banerjee et al., 2016). The approach itself has been subject to careful evaluation and research. These evaluations have demonstrated the positive effects of this approach. A series of studies conducted by the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) documents these impacts (Banerjee et al., 2016). In fact, in 2019, the Delhi government acknowledged its programme to be an adaptation of TaRL, inspired by evaluations on TaRL by Nobel laureates Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, in partnership with Pratham.

Even as evaluations of TaRL pointed to its effectiveness as a method, they also highlighted the grand puzzles that motivated this research—the difficulties of routinising TaRL into the everyday life of the classroom and the education system. Research studies offer some hints—they point to the importance of top-down support and monitoring, the importance of school-level leadership, and bureaucratic will as key ingredients of success. However, these studies also highlight the limits of success and lay bare the puzzle of embeddedness and organisational change in the long term.

The study was not designed to undertake an evaluation of the success or failure of reform. Nor was it specifically about the desirability or defects of the policy reform choices. It took these reform choices and the policy context

as a given. It is important to note that the Delhi reforms had its share of criticisms (Kumar, 2016; Rampal, 2016). However, our goal was not to comment on whether these were the "right" reforms or have their appropriateness measured in terms of their technical capability. This study sought to understand the pathways through which policy formulations, designed and promoted by committed leaders (the sound and functional head of the flailing state), transmit their ideas and how these are understood, resisted, and adopted on the ground. In essence, this is a study that sought to illuminate the multifaceted challenges of introducing change and transition in low-capacity settings. Its focus was on documenting the process of implementing reforms and the dynamics of resistance, distortion, and acceptance of reform efforts on the ground.

The provocative claim that this report makes is that the success and failure, and eventual institutionalisation, of reforms depend fundamentally on how the frontline of the system understands, interprets, and adapts to reform efforts. This, we shall argue, holds the key to upending the status quo of "pilot" burial grounds that characterise many education reform efforts in India. Reforms are never implemented in a vacuum. They inevitably intersect with the belief systems, cultures, values, and norms that shape the education ecosystem. The dynamics of this interaction, the frictions it creates, and reformers' ability to negotiate these frictions are what ultimately shape outcomes. In the ultimate analysis, we argue that reforming deeply entrenched education systems (and, more broadly, public service delivery systems) is not merely a matter of political will and technical solutions (although both are critical). It is about identifying the points of reform friction in the ecosystem and experimenting with different ways of negotiating these. The narrative presented here does not have any clear answers for what needs to be done right. Instead, it seeks to make visible the intricacies and potential levers of change that tend to be ignored in the rush to "evaluate" reforms and declare success and failure. Moving beyond success to understand the dynamics of change and resistance is the primary contribution of this study.

Chapter 2: The Delhi Education Revolution and Chunauti 2018

The Aam Aadmi Party made its electoral debut in 2013, creating history soon after by winning 67 out of 70 seats in the city state of Delhi in 2015. On assuming power, the AAP government identified improving the quality of government schools as a key policy priority. The party demonstrated its commitment to the cause by giving the charge of the education department to Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia, arguably one of the most powerful leaders within the party. The education minister was personally committed to the cause of improving access to and the quality of public education, which, he believed, held the key to bridging inequalities and developing a more humane nation. It was this commitment that fuelled the "Education Revolution". Throughout its tenure, the government remained steadfast to this commitment. In 2020, when the government sought re-election, its work on education featured high on its achievement list of its five years in power.

But reforming education proved a peculiar challenge for AAP due to Delhi's labyrinthine administrative arrangement and complex political make-up. Delhi is a city state governed partially by the state government and partially by the Government of India (the federal government). The federal government is headed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). At the city state level, BJP is the principal opposition to AAP. Through its first term in power, AAP was locked in an intense political battle with BJP, which often paralysed everyday governance in the city. The state is divided into five urban local bodies (municipal governments), two of which are under the jurisdiction of the federal government. About 95 percent of Delhi's population resides under the jurisdiction of municipal governments headed by the BJP. Specifically in the context of the key functions of education, pre-primary and primary education (nursery to Standard 5) in Delhi is within the administrative jurisdiction of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD). Upper primary, secondary and senior secondary education (Standards 6 to 12) is primarily looked after by the Directorate of Education (DoE), Government of Delhi. Effectively, AAP therefore has full political control over DoE schools in the city. The reform efforts were thus focused on these schools.

The education ecosystem that AAP inherited was typical of government schools in India, albeit marginally worse than the average. The most comprehensive data set on learning levels is the National Assessment Survey (NAS). NAS was conducted in 2017 for Standards 3, 5 and 8 in government and government-aided schools. It was designed to assess student-learning competencies in the subjects of math, sciences, language, and social sciences. Delhi's performance was below average in all subjects across the three standards. Secondary schools in Delhi, which fell within the political jurisdiction of AAP, also faced a serious problem of dropouts in Standard 9 (just before the high-stakes examination system kicks in). These were largely due to a high failure rate in the Standard 9 examination. In 2014–2015, 48.26 percent students failed to clear Standard 9 exams. This rose to nearly 50 percent in 2015–2016. Learning levels apart, the infrastructure in schools was very poor and, in AAP's assessment, contributed to low student–teacher morale. It was against this background that the Delhi government rolled out its reform effort.

2.1 The Delhi Education Reforms Package

The education minister put together a handpicked team of advisors (including Atishi Marlena, an AAP politician, and Shailendra Sharma, an education practitioner with decades of experience working in Delhi's municipal schools with the NGO Pratham). Sharma was formally recruited into the government in the summer of 2016 to design and implement the Chunauti programme. The first priority was to improve the overall infrastructure of government schools. In an interview with the research team, Manish Sisodia said that after visiting government schools, he was strongly of the view that they could not roll out learning improvement programmes when schools functioned under poor working conditions with broken infrastructure. The dignity, morale and confidence levels of both teachers and students were associated with the quality of infrastructure and these had to be addressed first. Thus, in the first year, the government launched a state-wide cleaning and construction drive in DoE schools. New schools and classrooms were constructed, cleaning staff recruited through private agencies, and estate managers appointed to exclusively manage infrastructure-related issues.

Even as the infrastructure work took off, the reformers initiated the process of charting out a roadmap for improving learning quality in schools. In 2015, with the support of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including the Pratham Education Foundation, Creatnet,

and Saajha, the government experimented with a set of interventions in 54 pilot schools. These ranged from testing supplementary teaching materials provided by Pratham and conducting extra-curricular activities with students to creating 'learning managers' who were responsible for providing pedagogic support to teachers. The experiments helped reformers crystalise their perspectives on the primary bottlenecks to quality education in the city. In particular, it made their articulation of two issues sharper—one, low levels of morale and motivation among teachers and, two, a classroom setting that privileged syllabus completion over student mastery. While engaging with schools, two related challenges within the classroom became sharper. The Chunauti programme was conceptualised to address the specific challenges of the classroom.

2.2 The Chunauti Programme

The Chunauti Programme was rolled out in July 2016. The first official communication from the government articulated the programme's objectives as follows:

- Building a strong foundation among all students in reading, writing, arithmetic, etc.

- Bridging the gap between current learning levels and the academic demands of their class

- Focused practice and learning through worksheets

To achieve these goals, the government adopted and adapted the Teaching at the Right Level method. The attempt was to restructure classrooms (within the confines of the age-grade matrix) according to student learning level. In the first year, the government grouped students within each grade from Standards 6 to 9 into two classrooms, called Pratibha (for students closer to curriculum-level expectations) and Nishtha (for those who were far behind), based on examination results. This was complemented by a specially administered baseline test to assess students' reading and math competencies. Students who had scored more than 33 percent in their examinations (the percentage was reduced to 25 percent by August 2016) were grouped under Pratibha, and those who scored less were grouped under Nishtha. For Standard 6 students, these categories were identified on the basis of a baseline assessment, as most students were newly enrolled into DoE schools. In the first year, Standard 9 students were also part of the Chunauti programme. A special section called Vishwas was also included in this year to encourage Standard 9 dropouts to re-enrol and pass the examination. In 2017, the

focus shifted to students in Standards 6 to 8. The Vishwas section was dropped and a new section called neo-Nishtha was created for students who entered Standard 6 with virtually no reading skills.

The programme was envisaged to incentivise schools to assign the most skilled and motivated teachers to students further away from grade-level expectations (students in Nishtha and Vishwas sections). In the first two months of the academic year, teachers were encouraged to focus on improving foundational skills. Once the academic cycle went into full gear, the expectation was that students would be taught their regular curriculum for the entire duration of the day, but teachers were encouraged to adopt "differential teaching methods". For Nishtha sections, the syllabus was truncated and difficulty levels of the assessment system were reduced to accommodate differential learning levels.

In addition, a host of interventions were launched to complement Chunauti. In 2018, Chunauti was supplemented and supplanted with a new set of interventions aimed at curriculum innovation. Some of the prominent interventions were as follows:

a. Building a pedagogical support cadre: A new cadre of educators—Mentor Teachers (MTs) and Teacher Development Coordinators (TDCs)—was created to support classroom interventions and learning in schools. The overarching objective of these positions was to create a learning environment in schools. The MT cadre, a pool of 200 teachers drawn from the existing teacher community, was created in 2016. MTs were envisioned as master resource persons, who visited schools regularly to support teachers in implementing Chunauti. They became the conduits between reform ideas and implementation in schools. Introduced in 2017, the TDCs were senior teachers, either nominated by the head of school (HoS) or self-volunteered. They were required to facilitate academic discussions among their peers, occasionally observe classes and give teachers feedback, and set up school-level Academic Resource Teams (ARTs) for major subjects.

b. Summer camps and reading melas: For three years, starting 2016, the government organised activity-based learning camps for Class 6 students during the summer vacations. Each year, a theme was given by the state to follow. The intent of these camps was to orient the new batch of Class 6 students to the DoE school setting, improve their foundational

skills, and involve parents in school affairs.

c. Pragati: A series of supplementary teaching–learning books called Pragati was developed in 2016, initially with the help of Pratham. Over the years, teachers, MTs and the government's formal pedagogical arm, the State Council of Education Research and Training (SCERT), got involved in expanding and editing the Pragati series, covering all major subjects for Standards 6 to 8.

d. Training and field exposure: Teachers and heads of schools attended regular workshops related to subject matter, pedagogy, classroom management, mindfulness and leadership-building in coordination with the SCERT and NGOs. This is perhaps one of the largest efforts to involve NGOs in the formal training process that the state has ever had. For heads of schools and MTs, domestic and international field trips were organised to countries such as Singapore and Finland to develop their leadership and teaching capabilities by attending workshops and observing schools.

e. Parental engagement: Strengthening parent engagement in schools was a key pillar of the overall school reforms undertaken by AAP. The School Management Committee became a key ingredient of the reforms package. Embedded in this was an effort to reshape the dynamic of parent–teacher engagements and structure it within a discussion on learning quality. To do this, a series of highly publicised "Mega Parent–Teacher Meetings" (PTMs) were organised, aimed at increasing parents' involvement and participation in their wards' educational progress.

f. Mission Buniyaad and Happiness Curriculum (2018): In 2018, the government introduced two new campaigns that effectively overtook the Chunauti initiative. The first was Mission Buniyaad (MB), a mission-mode version of Chunauti that introduced TaRL techniques to all students (including primary schools) for a three-month period. Drawing on the lessons from Chunauti, Mission Buniyaad was designed as a short learning campaign. Under this campaign, the targeted students (till Standard 8) did not study from their regular syllabus and only focused on the prescribed activities throughout the day. Standard 9 students were taught "easy" topics from the syllabus along with the prescribed activities. The goal of this campaign was to ensure all students could read fluently, write simple sentences and solve basic math problems. It was conducted in two phases, with classes taking place before and during the summer vacations, effectively continuing till end July 2018. Students were merged back into Nishtha sections as schools reopened. The intervention was conducted the following year as well for students, but the subset of targeted students was much smaller based on the results of the end-line test conducted for students under this programme in November 2018.

In 2018, the government also launched the Happiness Curriculum, which became a centrepiece of the government's school reforms. The curriculum was designed with the idea that one of the goals of education is to create happy, confident, and self-aware students, who will go on "to play a meaningful role in society". A designated period was assigned for this, where teachers read stories from a specially created handbook and facilitated discussions with all students in the class, on what was usually a story with a moral or a life lesson. A Happiness Coordinator was identified from each school to oversee the programme. Since the launch, this has become a critical component of the Delhi government's approach to curriculum reform.

The focus of our study was primarily on the Chunauti programme. However, to understand Chunauti, we had to necessarily turn our attention to the wide range of interventions that together influenced the implementation of Chunauti. These included the Mentor Teacher programme and new training programmes. We did spend some time engaging with the SMCs and other efforts related to strengthening parental engagement. However, understanding and evaluating the dynamics of these engagements was outside the scope of our study.

Chunauti roll-out inside schools

This section summarises the process of rolling out Chunauti in schools in the period 2016 to 2019. Through this summary we present to readers the dizzying pace, complexity, associated confusions, and dynamic nature of implementation as reform ideas move from policy rhetoric to action. This, in turn, has a direct impact on how reform ideas are understood, interpreted, and eventually implemented on the ground. We refer to several of these moments throughout our story as we seek to analyse and understand the reform experience. In debates on reforms, we often fail to pay attention to the question of what it takes to roll out reforms at scale. This itself is a challenge and can shape how reforms are perceived on the ground.

Year 1: The Big Roll-Out

July 2016

Days after Chunauti was announced, schools reopened for students after the summer vacation, beginning July. Teachers were told to take the two days left between reform announcement and schools reopening to analyse the previous year's exam results and regroup students on paper. Within the first week of schools reopening, many circulars poured in with instructions and plans to organise events in schools that went beyond reform plans. These included plans for parent–teacher meetings, setting up Aadhaar camps (biometric registration) in schools, conducting an analysis of the results of standard 10 and 12 students, construction of 8000 new classrooms, and schedules for upcoming training sessions.

Amid all this activity, schools remained confused over how to implement Chunauti. It was unclear whether new sections had to be created on the basis of students' academic performance in the previous year, the baseline assessment, or both. Subsequent circulars indicated that students in Pratibha were "readers" while Nishtha group students appeared to be "non-readers"—terms which were unclear to teachers. Another circular stated that schools had the "flexibility" of subjectively assessing and changing the section of students.

Mentor Teachers, who were still establishing relations with their "mentee" schools, became the key interpreters. MTs were the reform voices both interpreting instructions in schools (and adding to the confusion because of varying individual interpretations) and relaying feedback to the policy makers who were addressing gaps in the instructions and modifying criteria based on their input. All the while, school actors grappled to make sense of the theory of change surrounding Chunauti and its implications on the school routine.

In response to the rising number of queries and to reiterate the purpose of Chunauti, an eight-page circular was released on 21 July, addressing the most "Frequently Asked Questions". Among other points, this circular categorically stated that different teaching approaches and materials had to be used to teach Nishtha and Pratibha sections for a period of two months following the baseline i.e., till 18 August 2016. The goal was to bring Nishtha section students' reading, writing, and math skills at par with those of Pratibha section students.

September 2016

In September, schools had their first semester assessment (SA-1). Teachers were told that the syllabus would be truncated in order to enable differential teaching. A new syllabus had been shared in early August. However, coordination with the examination bureau failed and on the first day of the test, teachers and students of Standards 6–8 found that the questions and topics covered in their test papers included portions of the revised syllabus. This created significant resistance among teachers, who began to question the value and credibility of the reform. In addition, teachers, now with some understanding of their role in Chunauti, began to question the reforms. Which were now seen as an extra burden and routine complaining took over. Crucially, however, teachers began to challenge the programme, expressing concerns that the regrouping of students across learning levels into Nishtha and Pratibha categories was a form of unfair labelling that risked psychological impacts on children.

September–November 2016

In mid-September, even as Chunauti-related concerns were beginning to gain attention in schools, a reading campaign was launched. The Reading Campaign took centre stage. Chunauti circular number IX, issued on 2 September 2016, explained how "it was a matter of serious concern" that, as revealed in the July baselines survey, nearly 74 percent of students of Standard 6 were unable to read the textbooks of their own class, while 46 percent could not even read a Standard 2 textbook. To address the grave issue, it was decided that a separate "Non-Reader" (NR) section would be carved out from Standards 6 to 8 Nishtha sections.

The aim of this intervention was to convert all "non-reader" students into "readers" by 14 November 2016. In a press conference held on the same day, Mr Manish Sisodia announced that all government schoolteachers would take a pledge to this end, and that the government would take on the "challenge" to ensure that every government school student is at least able to read their textbooks by 14 November. A plan to assess the results of this intervention, through internal assessments by teachers themselves and independent assessments to be conducted by District Institutes of Education and Training (DIET) students inside schools, was also detailed.

The sudden shift in focus towards the reading campaign resulted in a dramatic change inside schools. Unlike the

fuzzy goals of Chunauti, the Reading Campaign appeared straightforward to process and execute. The roll-out was thus smoother than the launch of Chunauti circulars detailing specific action plans. MTs were more prominently involved in the Reading Campaign. The research team found them giving demonstrations to teachers inside the classrooms. Weekly assessments were conducted every Saturday, and students' progress was monitored directly by district officials. This involvement of the bureaucracy in this programme was also a new development compared to the general implementation of Chunauti thus far. SMC members, too, were involved in conducting "Reading Melas" on weekends, through direct appeals by the education minister.

It must be noted that the timing of the Reading Campaign overlapped with SA-1 examinations. Teachers who were used to finishing a certain portion of the syllabus by now had to learn very quickly to adjust to the new, focused syllabi prescribed for the different classes and sections under Chunauti and alter their instructions to students accordingly. Concerns around how the "non-reader" students would cope with the demands of their class curriculum were rife at the time, even though the reading hour, sometimes stretching into several periods across many schools, was in full swing.

December 2016

Building on the success of the reading week and the fact that much of the early confusion over Chunauti implementation had settled, in December 2016 reformers began to focus far more on what was happening inside classrooms. In December 2016, all teachers were made to attend a workshop led by their respective MTs. This was the first state-wide workshop launched following the implementation of Chunauti to discuss pedagogic practices with an emphasis on the meaning of differential teaching. The workshops were organised in response to the feedback key policy reformers had received about implementation challenges. This was also the start of an attempt to engage the bureaucracy through training workshops organised in partnerships with the NGOs.

By the start of January the following year, the schools' attention shifted to the end-of-the-year examinations and, even as teachers and education officials attended meetings, trainings, and seminar sessions related to Chunauti, inside schools it was all hands on deck to make students exam-ready. Teaching, too, was reoriented towards completing

the syllabus and ensuring that those who could would be ready to pass the examination, and in the process ensure that the one performance metric teachers are judged on was fulfilled.

Year 2: 2017–2018

The academic year 2017–2018 began with a significant shift in the school system. In 2017, the federal government announced the reintroduction of the high-stakes board examination for the 10th standard, an examination that had been stopped in 2010 when the Indian Parliament passed the Right to Education Act. With the reintroduction of the board examination, the stakes for students and teachers changed dramatically. Board results are closely monitored by parents, the media, and government. They are the one metric that can make or break a teacher's career inside schools. Chunauti's goal of restructuring pedagogical practice and breaking the syllabus–examination nexus now had to compete with expectations from board exams.

Undeterred, the Chunauti roll-out continued. Year 2 of the Chunauti programme began with a baseline assessment of Standards 6 to 9, conducted in the first half of April 2017 for the new academic session. While the existing classification of Pratibha and Nishtha sections remained, this year saw the formalisation of a separate section for non-reader students called Nishtha Neo-Reader (also referred to as Neo-Nishtha). Meanwhile, the Vishwas section was retained for those students of Standard 9 who had failed the examination twice in 2017, as well as those who had failed the first time but were over 14 years of age—if their parents opted for it. However, in our sample schools we did not see much enrolment in the Vishwas group and conversations around Vishwas as a section gradually faded. Another key development was the introduction of a new cadre of academic resource persons, called Teacher Development Coordinators, early on in the second year.

With teething trouble from the roll-out well behind, reformers now began to focus on interactions with schools though a greater emphasis on learning outcomes. Teacher feedback was sought on a new set of indicators to measure learning outcomes and model test papers. Along with this, a continued emphasis was laid on activity-based learning through the use of Pragati material. Based on learnings from the reading camps, it was understood that clarity, rather than flexibility, was needed at the school level. Guidelines were thus issued in August for the teaching–learning approach to be taken and supplementary

material to be used for all learning levels across Standards 6 to 8, along with the introduction of Weekly Reading Assessments. In this manner, teachers were continuously reoriented to the goal of strengthening foundational skills and enabling all students to attain grade-appropriate learning outcomes.

To further aid this process, a new cohort of MTs was inducted for 2017–2018, who were to conduct school visits, meet teachers of Standards 6 to 8, and discuss differential teaching. Meanwhile, bimonthly subject-specific zonal workshops were held. These workshops covered pedagogy for topics to be taught in the next two months with the objective of aligning them with stated learning outcomes.

Despite these steps, overall, in the second year, progress slowed down and it was getting to be business as usual. From conversations with reform stakeholders, it emerged that there was an expectation that schools would continue to take the programme forward—since they had been trained and equipped with the tools needed to do so, over the period of one year—and the constant focus from the top was thus reduced. Moreover, the political actors, too, found their attention divided. This was an important year for AAP as it sought to expand its political footprint beyond Delhi to new states in India. It was also time to fight the municipal elections. AAP lost the elections and a significant part of the year was spent in political activities aimed at re-energising the party and reorienting itself for the national elections, which were now only two years away.

In recognition of the lull, a decision was taken to introduce a new programme in mission mode. The year ended with the announcement of plans to conduct a special campaign called Mission Buniyaad to broaden the aim of Chunauti and include Standards 3 to 9, with a focus on improving basic reading and numeracy skills. The final round of Chunauti assessment data served as the baseline for this focused intervention for existing students. This was launched in year 3.

Year 3: 2018–2019

Mission Buniyaad (MB) was launched in the summer of 2018. The big success of MB was that the government sought partnership from primary schools that fall within the jurisdiction of the Delhi municipality. The programme was thus implemented across Standards 3 to 9. In its implementation, MB drew on lessons learnt from implementation mistakes made in the past. For one, goals were clearly articulated and stated. Mission Buniyaad was designed to ensure that all children could read fluently and solve basic math problems. An assessment was done in February for students of Standards 2 to 4, along with the final round of Chunauti assessment for Standards 6 to 9. These served as the baseline for the programme.

Mission Buniyaad was originally scheduled to run from 2 April to 30 June, however, it was extended by one month since government-reported data found that students showed a 20 percent increase in learning levels in the initial three months, and they were keen to build on this momentum. The campaign ran in two phases—the first (2 April to 10 May) as part of the regular school schedule and the second (11 May to 30 June) merged with the Summer Camp. Later, when schools reponed after the summer break, targeted students received continued support during regular school hours.

Although Mission Buniyaad was an extension and expansion of Chunauti 2018, we observed in conversations with teachers that it was not perceived as such. Despite the continuation of Nishtha and Pratibha sections in schools, when asked about the status of Chunauti, many teachers would state that the programme was no longer running. It had now become normalised within the schools' everyday life. Meanwhile, the Vishwas group was dropped.

Beyond MB, a key development in the third year of Chunauti was the introduction of the Happiness Curriculum and the

Chapter 3: Study Design and Methods

Enterprise Curriculum in July. The Happiness Curriculum was designed with the idea that that one of the goals of education ought to be to create happy, confident and self-aware students, who will go on "to play a meaningful role in society". These two reforms soon became an important flagship of AAP's school reform story and was a visible part of the education reform narrative from the perspective of the political leadership.

In 2019, AAP went to the hustings. These large-scale school reforms formed a critical element of their campaign. It was in this phase that our research study, too, came to a close. We had hoped that in the writing phase, once the election heat and dust had cleared, we would get a chance to re-enter schools and explore how much of the first three years of change had taken root and what was planned for the next set of school reforms. But this was not to be. AAP returned to power in February 2020. In early March, the COVID-19 pandemic made headlines in India and, soon after, schools closed. At the time of writing, schools in Delhi had been closed for an unimaginably long 17 months.

This study was designed to build a thick, descriptive account of the implementation of AAP's classroom-based school reforms, Chunauti, and other related reform activities. To capture key stakeholder perceptions, the study adopted an ethnographic approach and deployed a host of methods to capture data. In doing so, the study can be most accurately described as a policy ethnography. A policy ethnography is "a form of extended, multi-sited ethnography" that incorporates organisational and policy analysis alongside ethnographic observations and interviews, and "operates with a policy goal in mind" (Ryder, 2018). Policy ethnographies focus on unpacking policy processes and practices to develop a nuanced understanding of their ground level impact (Dubois, 2009).

This study was conducted as the Chunauti and associated programmes were evolving and unfolding across training sites and in schools. Trainings, meetings, and even new quality enhancement initiatives were usually announced at short notice, which meant that the research team had to be up-to-date with the government's ongoing and upcoming plans. For instance, reviewing the government's online information portal was crucial to track upcoming events and helped the team adapt in light of changes to existing plans and programmes in the fast-paced and fast-

evolving environment. Thus, the ethnographic "field" was conceptualised as a dynamic and multi-sited entity, while the study's design was iterative.

Our main focus was on the classroom—the main site where the programme "played out"—and the teachers who were ultimately responsible for interpreting and implementing the programme. The classroom, in turn, is nested in a system supported by the school, district and state-level administration. The scope of the study spanned the following:

a. A total of 337 classroom observations, conducted using a modified Stallings' Observation tool, which also captured descriptive details of classroom transactions

b. 105 days of school observations in eight embedded schools (where the classroom observations were conducted) spread across three districts, between October 2016 and May 2018.

c. 150 days of observations spread across state and district-level training/workshop venues, special events, such as parent–teacher meetings and summer camps, and meetings

d. Survey with 200 teachers from 39 schools outside the eight embedded schools, and a survey with 17 Director Deputy Education (DDEs) officers

e. Eight focus group discussions with teachers, Mentor Teachers, and DDEs

f. Analysis of 2000 circulars, directly related to Chunauti and its allied programmes

Schools, Classrooms, and Teachers

As mentioned above, a granular understanding of school activities and perspectives was developed through direct observations, interviews, focus group discussions, and a survey with school actors.

a. Embedded schools

The research team embedded itself in the day-to-day functioning of eight schools in Delhi. These schools were

identified on the basis of size, infrastructure quality and pass percentages to capture a variety of school types.

Inside schools, researchers documented the day-to-day functioning, undertook structured classroom observations (see Annexure 1 for methodology details), and interacted with school-level stakeholders using a combination of structured and semi-structured interview protocols at different stages, apart from holding free-flowing discussions.

Unpacking teachers' experiences and perceptions of the reform programmes and locating these in the everyday functioning of the school were critical to the reform story. Thus, semi-structured and unstructured discussions with teachers, especially key informant teachers, and heads of schools from the embedded schools were a staple of the school observations.

b. *Surveys and focus group discussions (FGDs)*

Between December 2017 and May 2018, 200 teachers from 39 government schools in Delhi (excluding the eight

embedded schools for long-term observations) were administered a two-part survey. The survey was conducted with the following two objectives:

- To explore how teachers perceived their roles and responsibilities, their experience of working in the current education system, and their motivations and professional goals. This data was captured through a combination of open- and closed-ended survey questions.

- To capture teachers' daily routines and understand the effects this had on their behaviour inside classrooms. This was done by filling out a timesheet, with details of every school-related major and minor activity performed by the teacher, a day prior to the interview.

This survey was complemented with six FGDs with teachers, conducted towards the end of 2018 and early 2019. This survey and FGDs were undertaken in order to validate findings that emerged from the eight schools under study and gather additional information on teachers' workflow

Table 3.1: Number of classes observed between 2016 and 2018

Year	Total Classes Observed	Pratibha	Nishtha	Mixed	Non-Reader	Vishwas
2016-2017	97	15	33	17	13	19
2017-2018	120	55	55	10		
2018-2019	120	52	57	11		

Table 3.2: Number of snapshots recorded between 2016 and 2018

Year	Total Snapshots	Pratibha	Nishtha	Mixed	Non-Reader	Vishwas
2016-2017	751	126	247	117	117	144
2017-2018	1,320	605	605	110		
2018-2019	1,312	621	571	120		

From the first two years of observation, we had learnt that schools more or less followed a similar routine with respect to the timing of lessons. As mentioned in the previous chapter, exams played a big role in determining this routine and schedule. By moving up the dates of classroom observations by roughly two weeks in the third year, inching closer to the term-end exams, we sought to document any shift in teacher–student engagement, classroom dynamics, and teacher perceptions towards Chunauti in the prevailing context.

To avoid skewing the findings in years two and three, the observed classes were always unique since no teacher was observed teaching the same subject and class twice. Just as the schools were divided into four categories for their diverse features, classroom observations were also divided into four categories. The number of classes observed in the schools was set in the ratio of 1:2:3:4. Within the Nishtha–Pratibha categorisation, an attempt was made to observe an equal number of sections in each school.

Chapter 4: Unpacking the Grammar of the Education Bureaucracy

Organisation matters. In their book Building State Capability, Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock (2017) make an important distinction, often forgotten in debates on public policy and institutions, between technical capacity and organisational capability. Technical capacity is about the ability of individuals within an organisation to recognise and act on a correct causal model. However, as is evident from the functioning of public systems around the world, technical capacity is simply not enough. There are enough instances to show that individuals in organisations know what to do but they choose not to do it. Absenteeism, low effort, and corruption that plague public systems in many parts of the globe are not a reflection of low technical capacity. Rather, they are a reflection of organisational capability. Organisational capability, Andrews et al. argue, is the ability of organisations to combine efforts of individuals in productive ways, such that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. When organisations fail to leverage individual technical capacity in productive ways, individuals within organisations tend to underutilise their technical capacity and, in fact, can be counterproductive in their actions. Organisational capability thus lies at the heart of how bureaucracies perform. Organisational capability itself is a product of organisational systems— the alignment between inputs, outputs, and outcomes and the normative goals of the organisation. The key difference, as James Q. Wilson (1989) stated in his classic account of American bureaucracy, between more and less successful bureaucracies lies not in their finances, client populations, or legal arrangements. It lies in their organisational systems.

Within days of interacting with Delhi's school actors, it became evident that Delhi's schools were trapped in a low organisational capacity equilibrium. Understanding responses to reforms required us to engage with their everyday organisational realities. Bureaucratic organisations, as Wilson has emphasised, are not black boxes that respond uniformly to top-down demands of supervisors and incentives designed by bureaucratic leadership. Rather, belief systems, attitudes, and professional norms of individual bureaucrats intersect with the organisational system within which they are located. In conversations with school actors in Delhi, we repeatedly heard references to feelings of powerlessness and to understandings of performance that appeared divorced from classroom needs, and encountered

attitudes to hierarchy and power that legitimised ennui. As we dug deeper, we began to unpack the relationships between belief systems, attitudes, professional norms and the peculiar organisational characteristics of the education system that allowed this ennui to persist. It is in the interstices of these interactions that education actors articulate their roles, define performance standards, and align (or misalign) tasks to the organisational mission and purpose.

Reforms are not implemented in an organisational vacuum. The organisational systems within which bureaucrats are embedded will inevitably shape how they identify with the objectives of reforms and, in turn, fulfil tasks assigned. It is thus important to situate the unfolding of Delhi's education reforms within its day-to-day realities. This is the focus of this chapter. It offers a descriptive account of the everyday life of the education system, the low capability trap it is caught in, and the technologies through which this trap is perpetuated. This, in turn, forms the backdrop against which to understand how the Delhi government's reforms were interpreted, resisted, distorted, and eventually accepted.

4.1 Talking Like the State

High-performing public sector agencies, as Kaufman's (1967) classic study of forest rangers amply demonstrates, inculcate a shared sense of commitment and purpose among bureaucratic agents. This shared commitment and purpose are ingredients of the organisation's culture—a shared sense of norms and values that shape behavioural expectations, attitudes, and interpretations of core tasks of the organisation (Wilson 1989; Grindle, 1997). High-performing organisations exist, as scholars like Tendler (1997) and Grindle have highlighted, even in the most unexpected of low-capacity settings in developing countries. The one characteristic common

> "
> *We are just post officers.*
> "
>
> *Bihar, frontline education bureaucrat, 2014*

to these agencies is an organisational culture aligned to the normative goals and purposes of the organisation. Based on a study of 29 bureaucratic organisations in six countries, Grindle concludes that the key ingredient of high-performance cultures is a clearly defined sense of mission or "mystique". The entire organisational system— management, hierarchy, rules, and incentive systems— aligns itself towards this mystique, fostering professional norms and standards of behaviour for individual agents that are mission-oriented.

> " What suggestions can I give? I'm in government service. My first priority is to implement government orders properly and then make any plans of my own. "
>
> *Andhra Pradesh, frontline education bureaucrat, 2012*

The converse of high-performing cultures are bureaucracies that function through what Mangla (2015) has called legalistic norms. Legalistic norms foster a culture of strict adherence to rules, hierarchies, and procedures, often at the cost of being responsive to local needs. Performance is shaped not in terms of effectiveness and outcomes but in terms of adherence to rules. The organisational mystique or purpose, such as it is, is limited to the fulfilment of rules and orders. Legalistic bureaucracies mimic the Weberian ideal in their form, but in their function fail to cultivate the bureaucratic ethos.

Much of the literature on the Indian State has taken the legalistic features of India's bureaucracy for granted, focusing instead on the social context within which the state organisations are embedded and its consequences on the bureaucratic ethos. These are emphasised as the primary reasons for persistent dysfunction. But this, as our account highlights, is only half the story. Legalistic norms foster a particular self-image of bureaucratic agents that legitimises behavioural patterns which undermine the creation of a high-performing culture and ethos.

Over nearly a decade of repeated interactions with India's frontline education bureaucracy across different states (and indeed bureaucrats across different sectors), we have, for the most part, encountered the quintessential legalistic bureaucracy. In the narratives presented by frontline bureaucrats, it is commonplace to hear them repeatedly

describe themselves as no more than powerless cogs in a wheel, mere post officers moving papers from one layer within the administrative hierarchy to the next. This self-description stands in sharp contrast to the reality of social mobility and power ascribed to government jobs. As has been widely documented in scholarship and popular culture in India, government jobs are widely sought after for the power they exude, and "government officials" (including the countless officers we have interacted with) routinely exercise discretion, bending rules and exercising power over the citizens they serve. Consequently, as Pritchett and Woolcock (2004) rather evocatively describe, the bureaucracy ends up "looking like a state" in the Weberian rational–legal sense but functioning under very different principles of patronage and rent extraction.

But for all the trappings of power and scope for discretion, when it comes to the core public service tasks that bureaucrats perform, the narrative of "powerlessness", of being limited by hierarchy and being cast officers as mere "post officers" dominates. This is what Aiyar and Bhattacharya (2016) termed the "post office paradox". This narrative of "powerlessness" and being "post officers" is the dominant self-image that we repeatedly encountered in our interactions with the Delhi education bureaucracy.

Documentary procedures, well-defined areas of jurisdiction, hierarchical sub- and super-ordination are all features of the Weberian bureaucracy ideal type, which together create the bureaucratic ethos. In its form, India's education system, too, operated within this Weberian framework. But it has done so by perpetuating norms that have reified hierarchy. Administrative functioning is deeply centralised and perpetuated, as we demonstrate in the descriptions of the education bureaucracy below, through a grammar that canonises hierarchies, rules, orders, and procedures in ways that undermine decision making power and autonomy at the lower rung to even make day-to-day decisions. Aiyar and Bhattacharya argue that it is this canonisation of hierarchy that has fostered the "post office" paradox. In our encounters with Delhi's frontline education bureaucracy, we witnessed first-hand how legalistic norms shape attitudes and belief systems and, in turn, distort standards of professionalism and understandings of performance.

The language of a hierarchal system

"They make us work hard, they make us prepare files, and they instil fear in us." This was how one HoS described his interactions with the upper echelons of the education

bureaucracy. The everyday life of an education bureaucrat is replete with instances of being "scolded" in public and rapped on the knuckles for failing to fulfil assigned tasks. Interactions within the hierarchy are one-way forms of communication. Higher levels of the administration give orders and demand action but rarely engage in a dialogue with teachers.

Teachers experience the education administration through interactions with district education bureaucrats or the DDE, who oversee school administration. This is the senior-most position that government teachers can aspire to, usually making the cut at the tail end of their careers. Just like the teachers, the DDEs' narratives emphasised their perceived lack of power and decision making authority. "It's one-way communication" was a repeated complaint. "A lot of information is asked from us, and we have no choice but to only listen, never speak. If we are unsure or confused about something, there is no guidance and no one to turn to." In meetings organised between the DDEs and their superiors, we regularly witnessed senior officials upbraiding DDEs for their failure to perform. Harried DDEs, many of whom were genuine non-performers, would be left searching for appropriate responses. DDEs strongly believed that the bureaucracy does not equip them well to perform their roles. They complained bitterly, through the course of our interactions, of lack of training and institutional support, of being treated like "clerks", and of being expected to respond to repeated last-minute requests for administrative data.

These complaints from Delhi's frontline administrators are certainly not unique to Delhi or to education. Aiyar and Bhattacharya (2016) report findings of a time-use survey in 2013 among block-level (one level below the DDE) education officers. The data collected across four states found that block officers work for an average of six hours a day and the bulk of their time is spent responding to district requests for data or chasing/communicating district orders. In other words, tasks are prioritised entirely based on signals from above. While we did not conduct a formal time-use survey among district officers in Delhi, through our focus group discussions and interviews with the DDEs we found that DDEs had a very similar workday to that of the officers below them in the hierarchy. Work prioritisation has little to do with school needs or the articulated "role" of a DDE. It is entirely based on "orders" from above, which, in turn, are passed down the hierarchy.

This hierarchical, top-down, order-driven task assignment has a disempowering impact on frontline administrators.

Legalistic bureaucracies, by their very nature, create a work culture steeped in authority rather than deliberation. Officials are "asked" for information but rarely provided the opportunity to participate in decision making or even understand the rationale behind actions. Constructive feedback is almost never given. But, and the Delhi case brings this into sharp relief, this hierarchal grammar is so entrenched that the very actors who feel victimised by hierarchy are also its perpetrators. DDEs repeatedly exercise hierarchy over school administrators and teachers, leaving them with little space to engage in a dialogue and debate. "I got a late-night call from my DDE," said one HoS, "telling me that my transfer orders have come through. How? I did not have a say in the matter and I was expected to go to a new school the next day." Hierarchy leaves the HoS with no option. "When you get these kinds of calls, you don't question anything."

The tyranny of circulars

The circular is the single most important document that animates schools and bureaucrats. Through the years of being embedded in schools, we heard daily debates over circulars received from the education department. It was circulars that determined tasks and it was circulars that shaped how school actors engaged with the classroom. And it was circulars that started off the cycle of complaints. So powerful is the circular to the everyday life of the school that our research team could not enter schools until a formal circular had been issued. Even the occasional recalcitrant HoS was forced to let us enter the school gates once we produced the circular.

Paperwork in the form of files and circulars or government orders play a central role in the Indian bureaucratic tradition. In a fascinating account of the evolution of bureaucratic practices in contemporary South Asia, Hull (2012) traces contemporary India's bureaucratic obsession with paperwork to the colonial bureaucracies' deep distrust in local Indian functionaries. Distrust in local government manifested itself in what Hull calls kaghaz raj or document rule: rule through files, papers, signatures, and bureaucratic hierarchy, where accountability was sought through careful, laborious documentation. "Only through a connection with a piece of paper (a bill, warrant, note, book)," Hull notes, "could an action be construed as an action." Contemporary Indian bureaucracy inherited this culture and has remained committed to its colonial passion for paper and procedures. Distrust perpetuates in organisational cultures that cohere around legalistic norms. Workers are expected to shirk and management, enforced

through strict adherence to hierarchy, is about finding tools to discipline shirkers. It is in this context that paper—files, written procedures, records—have acquired great relevance as instruments through which the bureaucratic hierarchy exercises control over its subordinates. The Indian bureaucracy's "passion for paper" (Baviskar, 2007) led anthropologist Nayanika Mathur to describe the Indian state as a "paper state"—one where papers, files, and circulars are the constitutive features of the state.

In the schools and administrative offices we visited through our research study, the paper state was conspicuous. Conversations would inevitably turn to the "order" of the day, and teachers and administrators alike would spend hours poring over them, analysing their content. It was the orders and not the classroom that shaped actions for the day. The language adopted in circulars acquired great significance in determining how bureaucrats and teachers interpreted their tasks. This is a ritual that the education system takes very seriously. "We fought for three hours over whether the circular meant to say the word 'and' or 'or'," said a teacher while describing the centrality of circulars to their everyday experiences. For teachers and administrators, adhering to the directions of circulars was absolutely crucial to their interpretation of tasks and performance.

Teachers and administrators were not exaggerating the importance of circulars. Over the three-year research period, we built a database of 8,763 circulars that were issued by the Department of Education on matters related to managing, administering, monitoring, and evaluating the education system. The average number of circulars received by education administrators (schools and district officials) through the official online portal during a school year ranged from 128 (lowest) to 342 (highest). The size of this database itself points to something teachers and administrators regularly complained about—the bureaucracy communicates a little too frequently!

But circulars did far more than simply talk to officials and determine their task assignment. The language adopted in the circulars sent a clear message. Follow the instructions, "or else". Teachers and bureaucrats frequently referred to "threats" and "sanctions" (including, in some instances, financial penalties) being made through circulars. Teachers were expected to follow instructions given through the use of words like "mandatory", "directed", "should do", "must do", "have to submit", "penalty", "strict action" and "defaulters". Circulars at the school level frequently used threats of show-cause notices, financial penalties, and mentions in the Annual Confidential Report (ACR—the government performance document) to incentivise compliance among teachers. Ironically, these threats amounted to no more than just that. Like many bureaucracies around the world, Indian bureaucrats, too, are protected from being fired. These "threats" are the vocabulary through which legalistic bureaucracies perpetuate norms of rule-following, and circulars are the tool. For workers, therefore, fulfilment of orders is what defines "performance" within the system. As one bureaucrat put it, "As long as we follow orders and respond to requests, we are doing our job."

Public policy scholar Dan Honig (2020) makes an important distinction between what he calls Route X and Route Y management philosophy in public administration. Route X management follows the route of a tight authoritarian management system. It relies on top-down control to align the agents' actions with tasks. Good performance is defined in terms of responsiveness to direction from the top. The ability to extract performance is entirely based on the management's ability to tightly monitor and control agents' actions. Management is thus about compliance with rules, quantifiable targets that Honig and Pritchett call "accounting-based accountability", rather than aligning incentives with the organisational mission. Route Y management is about supportive management. Management extracts good performance by providing structures that support and direct agents' motivation. It relies on "account-based accountability"—accountability extracted through the justification of actions to supervisors and peers.

Legalistic bureaucracies inevitably rely on Route X management. The vocabulary of command and control and the instruments of circulars that we describe above are the tools through which Route X management is fostered. India actually has "command and control centres" dotted across different parts of the country, set up by senior bureaucrats in a bid to tightly monitor and oversee the day-to-day functioning of their errant workers.

There are two limitations of Route X management that were visible in Delhi's schools. First, Route X management relies entirely on top-down command controlled through rules that curb autonomy as well as on easily verifiable targets. These tend to limit themselves to inputs and outputs—data collection, infrastructure, syllabus completion, pass percentages which often have little connection with outcomes (student learning levels, in this instance). This command-and-control approach inevitably lends itself to

the reification of hierarchy, as was visible in the "post office" narratives of frontline workers in Delhi. When a worker's self-image is dominated by the idea of the "post office", they cast themselves as passive agents of a hierarchical system, doing what is "ordered" or "demanded" of them. For the rest, it is, in the words of an education administrator we interviewed in the state of Bihar in 2012, "complete rest in comfortable conditions". This becomes their "account" and enables them to legitimise inaction and inefficacy as a necessary response to a system that fails to empower them, thus breaking the link between agents' actions and the organisational mission. Legalistic cultures with their "accounting-based" management systems can at best produce performance cultures that rely on compliance with rules rather than the organisational "mystique" that Grindle described. If anything, it is the rules that become the mystique and the core purpose of the organisation; its link to the goal—educating children, in this instance—is secondary, a happy by-product. This is an important reason why Delhi's schools and indeed several public organisations in India remain caught in a low-level performance equilibrium.

This brings us to the second limitation of Route X management visible in Delhi's schools: the choice of what is "performance". Route X management, as Honig argues, relies on "accounting-based" accountability tools that necessarily have to be visible, verifiable tasks that are easily quantifiable and measurable. This is what Pritchett calls "thin" tasks. However, good education—the real mission of an education bureaucracy—relies not on rules but on numerous and complex interactions between teachers, students, parents, and the classrooms, or, as in Pritchett's formulation, "thick" tasks. Legalistic bureaucracies with Route X management simply do not have the tools to extract accountability for thick tasks. This is why the entire education system prioritises tasks outside the classroom, thus further exacerbating the gap between agents, tasks, and organisational mission. The circulars we tracked sought actively to reduce the thick act of "teaching" and classroom engagement to visible, verifiable, compliance-friendly tasks. This, in turn, created its own pressures on the making and shaping of teachers' professional identities and their approach to the classroom. We discuss this in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: The Making and Shaping of the Government School Teacher

What does it mean to be a teacher in the government school system in Delhi? How do teachers and their belief systems shape their professional identity and associated behaviours within the classroom? How does the school ecosystem, in turn, construct these identities and what influence does this have on teachers' motivation and their response to the classroom? Teachers are at the heart of the education system and no discussion on the organisational culture of the education system is complete without engaging with belief systems, attitudes and professional norms that shape teacher behaviour.

The importance of the concept of professional identity lies in the link between professional identity and professional action. Who we think we are, as Watson (2006) points out, influences what we do. Unpacking the construction of professional identity, as research on teacher identity has highlighted, provides a useful framework to understanding how teachers construct their ideas of "how to be" and "how to act" (Sachs, 2005). These understandings shape teachers' dispositions, where they place their effort and what obligations they see as intrinsic to their role. The literature highlights that teachers' professional identity is shaped through interactions between teachers' self-efficacy, job satisfaction, occupational commitment, and levels of motivation (Canrinus et al.). Crucially, the social and organisational context within which teachers function, their interaction with and perception of this context plays a significant role in the construction of teachers' identity. Canrinus et al., in their study of 5,575 Dutch teachers, found that the extent to which teachers are satisfied with their colleagues, the support they receive, and the extent to which they feel competent in dealing with school administrators significantly influence the shaping of their professional identities.

In this chapter, we unpack the construction of teachers' professional identity in legalistic organisational cultures like the one we encountered in Delhi. Our explorations highlight the extent to which legalistic norms shape both teachers' ideas of "how to be" and "how to act" and how this, in turn, shapes teachers' perceptions and behaviour within the classroom.

Beyond just the organisational context, professional identities are also shaped by social context and expectations. What is "regarded" as good practice within

professions gains legitimacy from the broader societal consensus and associated expectations. In unpacking teacher identities, we thus also focus on how their own belief systems and perceptions towards the classroom coupled with their professional expectations from parents and society at large shape their identities and, in turn, influence behaviour within the classroom. Consistent with the literature on teacher identity, we recognise the complex and reflexive nature of identity construction. In this chapter, we seek to capture teacher identity primarily through the narratives that teachers create about themselves and their roles as teachers in the government school system. These narratives help locate how teachers understand the classroom and shape notions of performance and accountability.

The teacher vs the administrator

In the summer of 2018, our researchers conducted a survey of 200 government schoolteachers across Delhi. The objective of the survey was to understand teachers' perspectives of their jobs, specifically their intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to enter the profession, and the extent to which their lived experience as teachers have shaped their identity. The survey included a questionnaire that captured teachers' time-use (self-reported) to better understand how they allocated and managed their time to fulfil their various roles and responsibilities.

> **"**
> *Frankly, I have lost my identity as a teacher…
> we are more into clerical jobs.*
> **"**
>
> *Interview with a teacher, 2017*

The survey began by asking teachers what motivated them to join the profession. Intrinsic motivation dominated. For 63 percent of the teachers surveyed, the love of teaching, spending time with children, the social prestige associated with being a teacher, and contributing to society were the primary forms of motivation. This is best summarised in one interviewee's statement, "I became a teacher because teaching will help students become something in life."

Being a teacher was a matter of pride and status. Teachers said they loved to teach and interact with children—this is what sustained them. Despite the trials and tribulations of being a teacher, this love of teaching remained central to their identities throughout their careers. "In our hearts, we are still teachers," said one teacher who had climbed up the administrative ladder.

Even as teachers identify themselves with children and the professional goals of teaching, they also seek the status of a government job. Being a government employee is critical to shaping their professional identity. Many respondents spoke of the security of a government job as an important factor (in addition to their interest in teaching) that made being a schoolteacher an attractive career proposition. A useful statistic to understand the importance of the "government job" in shaping teachers' identity is that 38 percent of the teachers interviewed had been private schoolteachers before taking on government jobs. They made the switch for reasons such as job security, higher income, and social prestige. In the words of one interviewee, "Only those who have run out of options have to go for private sector options."

None of this is unique to Delhi. Government teacher jobs are prized jobs within the bureaucratic and social hierarchy in India. The power government schoolteachers exude within India's political economy landscape is a well-documented fact. Teachers are located in a complex network of political interests and governmental hierarchy that places them in a unique position of power and status, particularly in rural India (Béteille, 2009; Ramachandran et al., 2018). This is best evidenced in the fact that regular government teacher salaries are 20 times higher than what private schoolteachers earn, even as absenteeism and poor learning quality are rife (Kingdon, 2015; Muralidharan, 2013; Pritchett & Aiyar, 2015). Being a government schoolteacher is thus as much about being a teacher as it is about being a prestigious, powerful, and well-paid government employee. This combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations shaping teachers' choices is very typical of developing countries. Yan and Hin (20XX) point to several studies in developing countries as diverse as Brunei, Zimbabwe, and Slovenia, where salary, job security, and career status were valued as important in shaping motivations to join the teaching profession.

Once in service, the lived experience of being a teacher within a particular organisational context plays a role in shaping identity and associated motivation. India's school system has long struggled with the challenge of balancing

> *My observation is that as soon as a teacher is newly recruited, he says, "I can do anything." [Teachers] enter the system with lots of energy and determination, with dreams of overhauling everything. However, after two–three months, the environment, the system, the people—all break that attitude and they feel jaded.*
>
> *Interview with a head of school, 2018*

administrative functions for teachers with their teaching tasks. In the legalistic, accounting-based culture of the Indian bureaucracy, inevitably administrative functions have taken precedence.

Government teachers have a range of administrative duties assigned to them. These include election duties, census data collection, school-level administration such as the provision of mid-day meals, ensuring compliance of government directives to maintain audit norms, and responding to right to information (RTI) applications. Recognition of this reality resulted in the insertion of an important clause in the Right to Education Act, passed by the Indian Parliament in 2010, that explicitly exempted teachers from performing routine administrative functions, except for election duty and census enumeration. However, the stated goal of the RTE has never been achieved. A 2014 time-on-task study among teachers, conducted by the World Bank in three states of India—Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh—found that actual teaching time is only 81 to 87 percent of school-calendar days. The balance is spent on non-teaching and non-school tasks (Sankar and Linden, 2014). Non-teaching administrative tasks include organising events, managing midday meals, construction, collecting and maintaining data on students, facilitating visits of officials, and other administrative support demanded by the hierarchy.

Delhi schools followed this pattern. The everyday experience of being teachers involved performing a large set of administrative tasks. But more than the tasks themselves, it is the grammar through which tasks are assigned that play an important role in shaping teacher narratives. In fact, as we found in our survey, the actual time spent on administrative tasks is not as high as is perceived, yet this formed the fulcrum of teacher complaints. The issue

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From teacher to administrator: The journey of a government schoolteacher

Seema Kumari* was born into a family of scholars and educationists and brought up in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Seema's father wanted her to join the civil services. She was deeply influenced by her father, who was a school principal. She pursued her BA in Hindi, English, and Psychology and secured a position as a college lecturer in Mathura, but after her father's sudden demise, she and her mother moved to Delhi so Seema could fulfil her father's dream. However, despite her best efforts, she could not clear the central civil services exams and secured low ranks in two state services exams.

Encouraged by her friend to join teaching in order to secure a permanent government position, Seema pursued her bachelor's in education (entry-level qualification) from the prestigious Central Institute of Education (CIE) in Delhi. She was an avid reader and was inclined to teach, so she fit right in. After her under-graduation, she went on to pursue a master's degree from the same institute. In 2010, she joined the Delhi government as a permanent teacher and was posted to a densely populated girls' school.

It did not take her long to see how challenging the situation in school was and how underprepared she was to tackle what she encountered. She was assigned a section in the sixth standard, which had 78 students and, along with teaching, was suddenly expected to perform a range of non-teaching tasks. She had not expected this.

"At the time there did not exist a culture where new teachers were guided or trained to do the non-teaching school tasks. Most senior teachers in charge of various duties would scold the new teachers if there were any errors in the records but would not guide you directly. We were not taught about all the schemes in place in school at CIE!" Seema said.

The hierarchy and its associated vocabulary created its own challenge. "In the initial months, I experienced a lot of friction with my senior teachers who were bent on pointing out errors or pinning the blame for others' errors on the newer teachers, including me. I think a number of teachers assumed I was a guest teacher and treated me in such a manner.

"There was a senior teacher who was close to retirement who took me under her wing and taught me everything about scholarship distribution and its recordkeeping. She told me that the senior students would help me in this activity. That is exactly what happened. After my first few weeks, my students helped with maintaining discipline in the class and guided me through a number of administrative processes. I would tell my Standard 6 students to go study but they would insist on helping me with minor administrative tasks."

And thus, a teacher became an administrator!

The name has been changed to protect the identity of the respondent

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is that they were treated as administrators being ordered to perform lowly tasks that take them away from the classroom. Much like the education bureaucrats described in the previous chapter, in sharp contrast to the power, status, and political patronage that attract teachers to the job, teachers' narratives of their experiences within the education system are a repeated tale of disempowerment and being reduced to "post officers" pushing paper. Teachers reference themselves as no less than clerks in the system, being made to perform lowly administrative tasks that, they believe, are not central to their role as teachers or high-status government employees.

In the survey, teachers were asked to identify what they believed were tasks critical to their role as teachers and contrast these with tasks they are asked to perform. The response was clear. Teachers strongly believe their primary tasks relate to classroom activities. However, a majority of tasks they perform relate to activities outside the classroom, at least in the teachers' perception. Of the teachers surveyed, 66 percent complained about being tasked with non-academic administrative functions, which they firmly believe are ancillary to their jobs as teachers, and 93 percent of teachers argued that administrative paperwork took up the bulk of their workday. While teachers acknowledge some administrative tasks must be performed by teachers, such as noting attendance, grading and updating students' academic records, these are

understood as tasks central to the classroom and therefore, essential to "teaching". It is the tasks that spill beyond the classroom that form the bulk of their complaints.

Consistent with the behavioural expectations of legalistic, accounting-based bureaucracies, administrative activities shape the bulk of the interaction between teachers and the education hierarchy. In schools, each day began with a daily morning visit to the HoS office. We inevitably found the office buzzing with activity and the HoS on the phone taking instructions from the education hierarchy. These instructions were mostly related to paperwork and administrative tasks assigned to schools, which the HoS passed on to teachers. The emphasis on paperwork is not surprising. After all, in legalistic cultures, teachers and schools are located within an accountability structure that is designed to cohere around schooling inputs. Accountability from schools is extracted on the basis of their performance related to paperwork demands linked to compliance with inputs. Data is routinely collected as a means of ensuring compliance and this compliance with paperwork animates the hierarchical interactions between teachers and the education system. Time-use data (self-reported) found that teachers spend about 36 percent of their "work time" engaged in non-teaching tasks and related activities. This work is part of a regular workflow. It is this set of activities that reinforce the "administrative", "government officer" identity of teachers but in ways that teachers strongly felt undermine their status and role in the system. "Our job," as one teacher described, "is to teach. Not to do the job of a division clerk."

In our interactions with teachers over the three years, we heard repeated complaints about the burdens of administration. In fact, the time-use study referred to above was commissioned by the Delhi government precisely to respond to teacher complaints and get to the heart of the issue. In the words of a senior teacher:

> *Teachers spend a lot of time doing paperwork…These are the routine paperwork charges. But even one-off recordkeeping tasks tend to drag on for so long that everyone feels like it takes over their entire day…this process can go on for long…information provided by students is frequently flawed so it takes even longer. Then there's the education department, which likes to ask for the same information in different forms throughout the year.*

Several studies have pointed to the fact that this constant burden of administrative jobs served to take teachers further away from the classroom and encouraged an accountability culture linked to completion of administration rather than focusing of teaching–learning inside the classroom (Ramachandran et al., 2008). But the pulls and pressures of the constant burden of routine administrative tasks inside schools has another, arguably more important but far less understood, effect on teachers and their identity construction—it serves, as the above quote highlights, to reinforce the narrative among government schoolteachers that the "system" actively undermines their status and professional identity as teachers, treating them as no more than administrative clerks. In doing so, it shrinks the space for teachers to perform their teaching functions and legitimises a narrative of victimhood among teachers.

This tension between teachers' identities as teachers vs administrators is reinforced by the way teacher trajectories are shaped within the hierarchy. The pinnacle of a teacher's career trajectory is becoming a district-level administrator. The second most commanding position teachers can aspire to is that of a HoS. But here, too, the role is more administrative than pedagogical. The message is clear. Good teachers can rise up the ranks and are rewarded for their administrative tasks rather than their skills inside classrooms.

Teachers, like administrators, therefore legitimately shape their account as powerless cogs, who are unable to perform their core functions. This, in turn, closes off the space, as we discuss in the section, for teachers to interrogate their belief systems and understandings of the teaching–learning process and the classroom. Like administrators, teachers engage in a discourse that shapes their "account" as victims of a system which does not accord them the status and opportunity to perform their jobs. And it is this narrative, more than the political powers that teachers exude, that shapes their professional identity and legitimises absenteeism and low levels of motivation vis-à-vis students and the classroom.

Teacher belief systems: The classroom consensus

By July 2016, weeks into the launch of Chunauti, schools had completed a baseline assessment, which was to form the basis of the Chunauti intervention—a learning exercise for teachers and parents alike to acquire an understanding of student learning levels and reassign classrooms to learning levels. Days after the baseline, the government

organised its first Mega Parent–Teacher Meeting, an important effort by the reformers to bring parents into schools and initiate a dialogue on school reforms. The event was widely publicised. On the appointed day, our research team arrived at a school to observe the meeting. The school was abuzz with activity. Students had made a special effort to decorate the school for parents (a first in Delhi's government schools). The day's proceedings began with a welcome plenary. Parents then dispersed to have individual meetings with teachers. The research team made its way to the HoS's office, the epicentre of the school. The HoS was busy dealing with queries and complaints from parents. Minutes after we settled down, a large group of angry parents stormed into the room to ask the HoS to revoke decisions linked to the baseline assessment. "Why did you test our children [for the baseline]," they asked, "without any prior warning?" "How can the school take decisions on tests if children haven't revised and prepared and teachers haven't helped them in advance?" "How can children pass an exam they are not prepared for?"

The voices from teachers and parents in Delhi captured above point to a widely acknowledged defining characteristic of the Indian education system—the system's primary goal is to prepare students to master the examination. Exam results or "pass percentages" signal student (and teacher) achievement and are the centrepiece of the accountability system around which the classroom coheres.

The Indian education system has often been described as a sorting system in which the best students are identified and made exam-ready (Banerjee & Duflo, 2011; Muralidharan, 2019), leaving the rest to fend for themselves. The classroom in this system is a space where students are prepared to pass the exam rather than acquire knowledge and subject mastery. This is not just the perspective of the school system. This is a broad-based social consensus that has been built around the goal of the education system. Parents, as the voices described above highlight, judge the classroom through the prism of achievement by way of examination results. This is what we call the "classroom consensus".

Professional beliefs and standards are critical to shaping how "professions" develop norms and performance standards within bureaucracies. As Wilson (1989) argues, even within bureaucratic systems, the behaviour of professional groups tends to reflect the standards of the external reference group, i.e., the "profession" rather

than merely the preferences of the bureaucratic agency. In Wilson's telling, this is best reflected in the functioning of the US forest service of the 1950s and 1960s, where forest rangers, trained as foresters and moulded in doctrines developed by professional schools and societies, interpreted tasks and responded to professional standards as articulated through the doctrines of professional forestry, not the bureaucracy specifically. This association with professional norms of forestry played a critical role in inculcating a shared sense of commitment and organisational purpose, which Kauffman documented in his classic book in the 1960s. But it also meant that in later years, Wilson points out, when attempts were made to change the nature of tasks and actions, that change was hard because it clashed with their professional identities. Ultimately, changing the way the forest rangers interpreted tasks required making equivalent changes in the doctrines of forestry.

In India's education system, the classroom consensus is widely entrenched among parents, teachers, and administrators. When mastering the examination is the goal, classroom instruction and teaching practices inevitably focus on getting students exam-ready. Teachers dedicate themselves to fulfilling curriculum expectations by making syllabus completion the goal. This is the one metric teachers are held accountable for. And in the race to the examination, rote learning and "chalk and talk" methods of teaching dominate classroom practice. Worse, teachers incentivised to maximise pass percentages focus on those students who are closer to curriculum-level expectations. Students who fall behind curriculum-level expectations learn precious little even as they progress from grade to grade. This is one critical reason why student learning profiles in India remain stubbornly flat (Pritchett, 2013; Das, 2008; Banerjee et al., 2016). The classroom consensus lies at the heart of India's learning challenge.

The classroom consensus is a well-recognised challenge in India. For decades, education policy documents have committed themselves to shifting teaching–learning practices, moving the system away from rote learning towards learner-centric teaching (National Curriculum Framework, 2005; National Education Policy, 2020). But with relatively little success (Brinkman, 2015). Part of the challenge has been that policy has failed to engage with the underlying classroom consensus. In our interactions with teachers, we found that the classroom consensus not only shapes teaching practices, but also frames how teachers understand the challenge of poor learning outcomes in their classrooms. These perspectives are, in turn,

reinforced by the bureaucratic culture of orders and rule-based accountability within which teachers are located. We describe, in this section, how teacher beliefs shape classroom practice and teacher understandings of the very challenge that the Delhi school reformers were seeking to resolve. We also look at how teachers' professional identities, or rather the conflict between their identities as administrators and teachers, and the narratives of victimhood that teachers have appropriated shape how they approach the classroom and, more importantly, how this shapes their understandings of why students' learning outcomes remain stubbornly low.

5.1 A Typical Classroom in Delhi

How does the classroom consensus unfold? What kind of teaching practices does it privilege and how does it shape teacher behaviour? A key feature of this study, as mentioned in Chapter 3, was to deploy classroom observation tools to understand the dynamics of everyday teaching and learning in the classroom. Drawing on data collected from our observations, in this section, we present a brief sketch of the teaching–learning dynamic with a view to reflect on the effects this dynamic had on teacher perceptions about the classroom and teaching in particular. These perceptions, as we discuss later in the next chapter, played a significant role in shaping teacher responses to the Chunauti experiment and hold the key to long-term transformation in the school system.

Over three years of our classroom observations, we found that the time period of an average class ranged between 30 and 50 minutes. Usually, teachers would arrive about 10 minutes late and begin the class with routine activities—taking attendance, disciplining children, and getting them to settle down. In a typical classroom, teachers remained on task (i.e., focused on activities related to imparting knowledge linked to the lesson) for about half the class period. We did observe differences over years—in year two,

> " *The teacher wrote the formulae and sums on the board and asked the students to copy it. After writing each sum or problem, she would ask the students whether they had understood, and if they had not, she would explain it again. She used the textbook for writing and posing questions.* "
>
> *Math class, Standard 7*

> " *He wrote names of biological processes in English on the board, asked questions related to it, and then wrote their definition on the board, which the students had to copy. He referred to the textbook while writing on the board. When students were unable to answer, he would tell them to memorise answers so that they could answer when he would ask later.* "
>
> *Science class, Standard 8*

teachers were on task for 58 percent and in year three for 49 percent of the time. Classroom management, including disciplining students, took up a significant 19 percent in year two and 25 percent in year three.

Once teaching began, lectures and posing questions to students were the dominant modes of teaching. When lectures needed to be supplemented, teachers would write questions/explanations on the board and students would copy this in their notebooks. Teachers rarely used interactive teaching methods—this was, at best, limited to teachers posing questions from the textbook and students responding. Our qualitative observations highlight that this usually involved a few students responding, while the rest would copy the answers into their notebooks. Demonstration methods (using activities/teaching aids other than the textbooks) were rare. Academic interaction (where the teacher was giving feedback or directly interacting with students) over the three-year period was rarer still. It was common to see teachers limit their interaction to students in the front row of the classroom, who were more responsive and engaged. This characteristic of "teaching to the top" was so ingrained in teacher behaviour that often this would happen subconsciously. For instance, in one class, our observer notes, as the lesson progressed, the teacher positioned herself in a manner where she was facing a group in the right-hand corner, because those students were more responsive in class, thereby turning away from the other two rows.

Through our observations, we also noted a significant shift in teaching method as the school calendar progressed. Our classroom observations in the third year of the study began a week later compared with previous years. This brought the school calendar one week closer to the semester-

end examination. Teachers in this phase had changed their teaching styles to focus entirely on examination preparation and revision. In this phase, demonstration and teacher–student interactions were even lower. Revision meant teachers focused their time on lecturing and reading from the textbook and posing questions to students to judge their exam readiness. The average time spent on academic interactions dipped from 14 percent in second-year observations to 8 percent in the third year. A week can make a real difference to how teachers teach and what students learn.

Unsurprisingly, individual teachers make a significant difference to the learning environment. In a number of instances, the observers sat in the same class consecutively, noting students behaving differently as a new teacher came in to teach them. A stark example of this was the case of a classroom described by the head of school as the unruliest in the school. Our observations began during the social science period. Students, we noted, were disengaged, talking among themselves, and fighting with each other, as the teacher read and attempted to explain the lesson from the book. The teacher spoke harshly, shouting and using abusive terms, which seemed to have little effect on the class. Forty-five minutes later, the entire atmosphere changed dramatically when the math teacher entered. He had a stern expression but did not have to shout in class as students eagerly opened their notebooks and engaged with the teacher. The noise reduced to a murmur and if the noise level started rising, the teacher would jovially comment and make students laugh. He first solved problems step by step on the board, explaining as he went along, while students copied the same in their notebooks. Following this, he gave problems to students to solve on their own. Students were completely engrossed in the exercise, going up to the teacher to have their work checked. The teacher corrected and discussed their work individually.

5.2 Teachers and the Learning Challenge: The Cognitive Dissonance

Teacher perspectives and what they understand as key metrics of performance inevitably shape teaching practices. Throughout our interactions, both formal and informal, we observed an important contradiction in teachers' perspectives towards the classroom. First, most recognised that children were falling far behind curriculum-level expectations. This is an accepted fact. Second, most also recognised that the race to finish the syllabus and maximise pass percentages was an externally induced pressure that inevitably led them to focus on children who were more likely to succeed. Teachers complained bitterly about the pressures of the syllabus and examinations and its negative consequences on student learning. Crucially, the syllabus rarely featured as a goal when teachers were probed on their understandings of the classroom. In the teacher survey, when asked specifically to articulate their self-defined goals for the classroom, 64 percent responded saying their primary goal was to make sure students understood concepts, while only 6 percent referred to syllabus completion.

Yet, when repeatedly probed on the question of the challenges teachers experienced inside their classrooms and the factors that impede student learning, the dynamic of the classroom in relation to the syllabus–examination nexus rarely featured. The syllabus–examination nexus was critiqued for the pressures it placed on teachers but rarely questioned for the role it played in hindering student learning.

In fact, the narrative of victimhood was extended to the classroom. The classroom failed not because of specific teaching-related weaknesses but because the system was fundamentally anti-teacher and anti-classroom. Limited school infrastructure, the no-detention policy (introduced in 2010 under the Right to Education Act that mandated schools to promote children through till Standard 8), administrative burdens, pressures placed on them by the bureaucratic hierarchy, and the socio-economic

> " *Everyone knows that children enter the classroom with a weak base. But the system doesn't allow the child to move forward … the teacher doesn't have the freedom to teach.* "

> " *As teachers, we are supposed to teach not for syllabus but for life. But we don't do that.* "

Quotes from interviews with teachers

background of students were the most frequently cited reasons for the difficulties teachers confronted in teaching. There were several instances where teachers would complain about students (their socio-economic backgrounds, lack of discipline) and the difficulties this presented to them, but this never translated into a serious conversation about teaching–learning practices and what was needed to reframe these to respond to student diversity. In essence, teachers strongly believed they knew how to do their jobs and that it was factors outside the classroom that impeded their ability to be "good" teachers.

In part, this reaction to the classroom is an expected consequence of the professional norms that shape teacher identity. Teachers (like parents) view the classroom through the prism of the syllabus–examination nexus and see themselves as victims in a system that disempowers them. Teachers have cast themselves as mere cogs in the large administrative wheel, victims of a system that rarely privileges their role as teachers. This lack of fulfilment of their teaching role has meant that they rarely critique the nature of teaching. Their problems lie outside of the classroom. It is the system and not the classroom that hinders teaching.

The extent to which examination success dominates teaching practice is best illustrated through our detailed discussions with teachers on the art of teaching. In the third year of our study, we identified six "dedicated" teachers in our sample, to probe teacher perceptions and understand the teaching–learning dynamics further. When pushed to discuss teaching methods, many teachers would speak about tactics they deployed to keep students engaged and make sure that they understood the concepts being taught. But all teachers designed their teaching strategies with examination success as the goal. In one instance, a Standard 12 geography teacher requested the "toppers" in the class to teach other students. This strategy, he said, would help the topper revise while ensuring that more students learn. Another who taught students between Standards 7 and 10 spoke of how he emphasised those aspects of the syllabus in Standard 7 that were needed as the foundation for Standard 10 (when students give the high-stakes examination). The point to emphasise here is the deeply entrenched view that performance in examinations is the goal of the classroom and "good" teachers are the ones who devise innovative strategies to better equip students to achieve this goal.

Even as teachers resented the pressures this accountability structure placed on them, they did not challenge its

fundamental premise. Indeed, they embraced it despite the fact that they recognised its limitations and the constraints it placed on their understanding of effective teaching. This cognitive dissonance is what shapes teacher attitudes towards the classroom and their responses to reform efforts. Importantly, it entrenches an unquestioned acceptance of the consequences of the syllabus–examination nexus as a dysfunctional property of the classroom and legitimises the low-level equilibrium within which classrooms operate.

This is not to say that many teachers do not go out of their usual routine of teaching to the test to ensure students are learning with the intent of understanding concepts and applying themselves. Through few and far observations and many more self-reported anecdotes, teachers shared their experiences of teaching students "differently". This was often presented by the teachers themselves as a deviant act against "the accepted system". However, even among these teachers, the focus on pedagogic practices that support learning outside the boundaries of the syllabi was rarely a topic of deep discussion nor was it identified as the key binding constraint.

Delhi's teachers are not unique. Several studies on classroom practices in India have highlighted the centrality of teacher beliefs in shaping this cognitive dissonance. Writing on teacher attitudes back in 1996, Dyer reports that teachers simply did not accept responsibility for the fact that children who had attended school for over four years had failed to learn to read and write. They did not feel that their own pedagogical practices required attention. The problem lay outside of the classroom. In the years that followed, and despite a significant expansion in schooling undertaken by the national Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan and the subsequent Right to Education Act, these belief systems remained entrenched. A study by Brinkman in 2015 conducted with 60 teachers in 12 states is a wonderful illustration of this. Brinkman documents that a majority of the teachers she interviewed described their professional duty as completing the syllabus while maintaining discipline in the classroom. When asked about challenges associated with student learning levels, Birkman reports that most teachers appeared to have resigned themselves to the idea that some students will simply fail to learn, and that teachers cannot be held responsible for that. When asked why some students fail to learn, most teachers, just like the Delhi ones we interviewed, blamed a variety of factors related to family background, children's own ability level, or schooling-related factors. Only eight teachers assigned responsibility to teachers themselves for not

effectively performing their role in ensuring all students learn. In describing their response to "weaker" students, only 14 teachers believed that if they as teachers gave extra efforts to help these students, they, too, could learn at par with others.

The teaching profession, along with stakeholders, especially parents, have together shaped and entrenched the classroom consensus. This consensus has been reinforced by the organisational norms and culture within which teachers are located—norms that privilege rule-following and administrative tasks as measures of performance. In response, teachers have constructed their professional identities in ways that legitimise a narrative of victimhood and passivity and, in doing so, fail to challenge teachers' fundamental beliefs about the classroom consensus. For decades, attempts have been made in policy to shift the classroom consensus away from rote learning towards learner-centred approaches. The National Curriculum Framework (2005) and the Right to Education Act (2010) envisaged a pedagogical approach that sought to engineer a shift away from "chalk and talk" teaching towards a child-centred approach that gives "primacy to children's experiences, their voices, and active participation" (NCF, 2005). However, none of these "policy" shifts attempted to engage with the entrenched realities of the classroom consensus. This is best illustrated through the debates on the RTE, which introduced a no-detention policy and replaced it with "comprehensive, complete evaluation" for students up to Class 8. In crafting this policy, which is widely supported with research, no effort was made to engineer a consensus among teachers and parents. The no-detention policy has been so widely contested that several state governments have, in fact, reversed this policy. As our deep dive into Delhi's classrooms highlights, reforming school education requires engaging with the dynamics of the classroom consensus and reshaping the organisational context within which the consensus thrives. This is one crucial reason why schools remain burial grounds for reform "pilots" in education.

5.3 Conclusion: Delhi's School System and the Challenge of Worker Motivation

It is well recognised in public administration literature that management practices, hierarchies, and organisational systems play an important role in shaping organisational culture and, in turn, worker motivation. Our description of Delhi's education system serves as an important illustration of precisely this. The consequences of the hierarchical, circular-driven culture, its language, and tonality in shaping professional norms, incentives, and motivations at the front lines of the school system, as our description above highlights, are significant.

Scholars of organisational theory have long argued that worker motivation and performance is shaped less by a system of rewards and sanctions and far more by the sociology of the organisation. Perceptions of fairness, understandings of performance standards, degrees of autonomy, and clear demonstrations of employee success (Bloom and Van Reenen, 2007) determine whether, to paraphrase Brehm and Gates (1999), workers are "working", "shrinking" or "sabotaging" at the front lines. These perceptions are what shapes the bureaucratic ethos.

Ryan and Deci (2000), the chief proponents of self-determination theory, which is widely used in the literature on worker motivation, identify three key psychological needs that must be fulfilled to fuel worker motivation. These are autonomy, competence or self-efficacy, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Autonomy refers to the feeling of choice and discretion. Competence is feeling capable and useful within one's organisation. It is about acquiring mastery of skills needed to achieve organisational goals. Relatedness is about feelings of connectedness and belonging. It is about work environment behaviours that privilege being heard, trust, friendship, a sense of belonging and purpose.

In our account of the Delhi education system, it is clear that the grammar of hierarchy and the tools deployed to perpetuate this grammar have served to create conditions that diminish and undermine intrinsic motivation and, in this vacuum, the "post office" self-image has been internalised. Legalistic norms and Route X management processes have been so reified that supervisors across the hierarchical chain deploy tools and technologies that actively undermine autonomy, fail to build competence, and create a sense of worker alienation that moves workers and organisational expectations far away from the normative organisational "purpose" of the education system: to educate children. The opposing pulls and pressures of being teachers and administrators that shape teacher identities are a very vivid illustration of this.

In undermining worker motivation, legalistic norms have served to legitimise a narrative of victimhood visible in the consistent stream of complaints about the "system", and

the unfair burden it placed on employees, that we heard through our interviews. For teachers, this has resulted in distancing them from the classroom and entrenching a deep cognitive dissonance between their lived experiences within the classroom and their interpretations of the challenges they experience within the classroom.

The excessive emphasis on sanctions and penalties, the hallmark of legalistic systems, and the constant references to the "circular of the day" inside district offices and schools left our research team with the impression that the entire education system was paralysed by the tyranny of circulars. In response, district education officers, teachers, and school leaders legitimised behaviours that encouraged shirking and sabotage. In their inaction and apathy, frontline actors are products rather than perpetrators of the low-performance culture that defines the education system.

In popular culture, policymaking, and academia, this inaction and apathy is articulated as an accountability failure—a failure in the system to effectively monitor, audit, and ensure compliance at the front lines. Inevitably public debate and policy measures emphasise the need for more "accounting". This clamour for accounting is what has further entrenched the classroom consensus rather than create conditions to question it. After all, syllabus completion and pass percentages are visible, easily verifiable indicators that can be tracked to ensure that "errant" workers can be identified, This is why the "sanctions", "threats", and "penalties" from authorities expressed in circulars were so critical to the everyday life of the education system, even if the threats are rarely implemented.

But rather than making the system "accountable" by aligning worker motivations with organisational purpose, these instruments of legalism have legitimised inaction and apathy through a narrative of powerlessness that casts

workers as passive victims responding to the demands of a tyrannical system. For administrators, this has enabled them to craft an "account" (a set of justifications for their behaviour to their peers, managers, and citizens) that is limited to bare minimum compliance. For teachers, this "account" has limited the space for reflexive engagement with the challenges they confront inside classrooms. India's history of failed pedagogical reforms is, in part, a consequence of precisely this failure of engagement. Ultimately, when workers' "accounts" diverge significantly from organisational purpose and when the only means of motivation deployed serve to entrench "accounts" of victimhood and alienation from purpose, organisations fail.

That legalistic bureaucracies produce cultures that lead employees to feel powerless and alienated is well known in the literature on public sector management. By unpacking frontline workers' narratives of alienation and identifying the tools through which this is perpetuated, this chapter seeks to bring forth the everyday realities that reforms must contend with. Changing systems often risk introducing technocratic fixes through the very tools of bureaucracy, as we will describe in Chapter 6, that created organisational dysfunctionalities that reformers set out to fix in the first place. This is the reality that reformer debates need to recognise. In the final analysis, success and failure of reforms will depend on how effectively reformers are able to shift workers "accounts", not the system's capacity for better "accounting".

Chapter 6: Negotiating the School System and Introducing Reforms

The leadership of the Delhi education revolution was acutely aware of the low-capability equilibrium within which they were launching reforms. Low teacher morale and low motivation in the education bureaucracy were well recognised by reformers. Changing how teachers approached their jobs and giving greater autonomy to schools was critical, in their understanding, to the goal of improving learning in schools.

Without articulating it explicitly, the reform effort was anchored in the notion that improving education outcomes required shifting the organisational culture of the education system away from its current low-performance equilibrium and transforming the education system. As will be evident in our account below, through their interventions, the reformers sought to introduce changes that were aimed at empowering schools and motivating teachers to work towards the collective mission of improving schools and learning outcomes. As observers of the reform processes, our research team documented what is clearly an effort to actively construct an organisational mystique, as Grindle described it, and to mobilise teachers and parents around this mystique. Building a mission-oriented performance culture, and motivating teachers and administrators to imbibe shared professional norms was at the heart of the reform (even if it was not always articulated in these words). We imagine that the reform leadership would nod in wide agreement with many of the public administration classics that we reference in this book. In their vision, Kaufman's Forest Service, Tendler's bureaucracy in Brazil, and Grindle's divergent cultures were exactly the high-performing systems that they were striving to build in Delhi.

But to achieve their goals, reformers had to confront the realities of an entrenched system. The existing legalistic culture, its hierarchical grammar, and instruments of doing business including Route X management had its own logic. Even as the reformers set out to alter the everyday experiences of schools and restore teachers to their professional identity, they had to rely on the very administrative instruments that they sought to change. And in this lay the primary reform challenge. Powerful, committed reformers were trying to communicate messages that the grammar of the system was simply not designed to convey. It is in the interstices of the tension between goals and instruments, the frictions it creates and the reformers' ability to negotiate these frictions that

reform outcomes are shaped. Our narrative highlights precisely these dynamics and through this seeks to better understand what it takes to embed reforms. In the ultimate analysis, we argue that reforming deeply entrenched education systems is not merely a matter of political will and technical solutions (although both are critical). It is about identifying the points of reform friction in the ecosystem and experimenting with different ways of negotiating these frictions. The success of negotiating these pilots is what makes the difference between the "dead pilots" and "failed missions" that the reformers we referred to in the opening para of this book were worrying about.

6.1 From Hierarchy and Legalism to Deliberation

Beginning with teachers

The language of reformers actively adopted a pro-teacher stance. From our early encounters with reformers, the importance of respecting teachers and giving them their due place within emerged as a regular discussion point. A conscious choice was being made, said Atishi Marlena in interviews with the research team, to reinforce the message that teachers are valued. This emphasis on teachers and the need to reset the dynamic of the relationship between teachers and the schooling system was repeatedly articulated by reformers. In his book on the Delhi education effort, Deputy Chief Minister and Education Minister said:

> " I am of the opinion that no matter how much money you spend, how beautiful your schools are or how good your courses are, unless you show your teachers respect and involve them in decision-making, no work on education is possible. The teacher is not a delivery person. Teachers are institutions that convey the knowledge of one generation to another, point out the faults of the previous system to the next generation, and develop new knowledge. "
>
> Sisodia, 2019

One effort that became emblematic of the reforms and repeatedly found pride of place in the narrative told by reformers was about the inadequate provision of basic necessities—food, water, seating arrangements—during teacher training sessions, which had come to be accepted as the part and parcel of the education system. This was the starting point for the reformers to reset the terms of the relationship between teachers and the system. Efforts were made to proactively improve the quality of basic arrangements made for teachers during training sessions organised to introduce reforms to teachers—better chairs, better carpeting and tenting, and better food. In the narrative of the reformers, this simple step marked a critical breakthrough moment with teachers and was the first step towards restoring the dignity of teachers.

Improving the conditions of trainings was only one step. The reformers, in particular Manish Sisodia, regularly spoke in public, on radio, in interviews, and in speeches about the critical role that teachers play in society, the constraints under which they operate, and the importance of giving them a role in shaping education reforms. This was perhaps the first time that any school reform effort sought to actively engage teachers, in the public sphere, by invoking their professional role as teachers and seeking to reinstate their dignity and status. It was a conscious effort to try and restore the balance between the competing professional identities of teachers and administrators that shape teacher behaviour. In his book on the education reform experience, Manish Sisodia makes repeated references to precisely this challenge. He wrote, "The government viewed teachers as government employees." This understanding of the reality of government teachers was the starting point for change.

An important means of restoring this dignity was to involve teachers as partners in the reform effort. In early media interviews, as reform ideas were being crystalised, Manish Sisodia made regular references to the importance of bringing teachers into the fold of the reform processes. One crucial effort was to engage teachers in debates on syllabus reform and improved teaching materials. In early 2015, an attempt was made to "invite" suggestions from teachers on curriculum reform (40,000 suggestions were received) to promote the message that "teachers are the real experts". This gave way to a more concerted effort called Pragati, which was designed to involve teachers in preparing teaching material that would be used inside classrooms (we return to this effort in the next chapter, where we discuss the reform efforts and their impact on the classroom).

In addition, tactile steps were taken to strengthen the government's relationship with teachers. In September 2015, the government launched a special teachers' award on Teachers' Day. Awards are part and parcel of everyday government functioning and rarely taken seriously. But what made this different is the importance they were given by the government and the publicity surrounding it. In the days following the award, billboards and posters honouring teachers were posted all over the city. These billboards were complemented with a grand award ceremony to give teachers, in the words of one of the reformers, the "red carpet treatment". This practice continued all through the three years under study.

Reformers were also acutely aware of the long-run administrative failures in teachers' service conditions. Vacancies in key positions, temporary contracts, and the presence of guest teachers with weak terms and conditions were only some of the consistent niggling administrative failures that added to the environment of low motivation. To bring teachers into the reform fold, it was important to at least give the appearance of being responsive to their service grievances. Delhi, like many other parts of the country, has a large number of contract teachers (18,000 out of a teaching force of 50,000) who, unlike permanent teachers, are hired on short-term contracts and paid far lower than regular government salaries. The salary disparity is significant. In Delhi, the average permanent teacher earns a salary of Rs 80,000–1,00,000 per month, while guest teachers earn around Rs 10,000. The Aam Aadmi Party needed to make guest teachers their allies in the school reform process, and it was quick to initiate legislative changes to make service conditions more equitable.

Of course, realpolitik was never far behind. Guest teachers were an important political constituency, and in the early days of the government's tenure, the education minister found himself in repeated confrontation with these teachers. The efforts to address concerns over service conditions was as much about restoring teacher dignity as about responding to demands of an important political constituency. In the end, it served both. Interviews with key stakeholders from the Guest Teachers Association, towards the end of AAP's tenure in government, revealed a clear appreciation for efforts undertaken by AAP to protect guest teachers, who, in turn, emerged as reform supporters (or at any rate, they did not actively sabotage reforms). Guest teachers saw the government's interest in schools as an opportunity to extract benefits and secure their own relevance and position in the schooling system.

We return to how these efforts shaped the relationship between teachers and reform ideas later in this chapter.

It is important to note that amid the teacher-friendly, teacher empowerment rhetoric, reform leaders also introduced controversial measures that appeared to be in direct contradistinction to the stated goal through the reform period. The most visible of these was the policy to introduce closed circuit television cameras inside classrooms aimed at monitoring students and teachers. This policy move was widely criticised, including by teachers. Beyond the specific concerns about the policy, policies such as this highlight an important tension that we note throughout the reform effort—the impulse to use Route X management tools while attempting to introduce a new approach to management and schooling. It is this tension that shaped the experience of reforms inside schools. This is the running theme that readers will encounter throughout this chapter.

A new vocabulary

How does a system steeped in the grammar of hierarchy respond to a new language and mode of communication? AAP and the key actors associated with the "education revolution" trace their legacy to grassroots social movements. Consequently, their instincts and the form, shape, and modes of their communication were rooted in a language distinct from that which legalistic bureaucracies are familiar with. As the reforms process was unveiled, the legalistic traditions of the education administration encountered a new language and wrestled to interpret and absorb its meaning. It is in the interplay of these wrestling matches that the reform mission was articulated and made visible to school actors.

In his framework of bureaucratic norms, Mangla contrasts legalistic bureaucracies with "deliberative" ones. Deliberative bureaucracies operate on norms that encourage bureaucrats to work collectively, where a value is placed in seeking inputs and participation from all actors within and outside the system, and where bureaucrats are encouraged to collectively solve problems and bend rules where necessary. In many respects, social movements and NGOs follow deliberative norms. Their language of communication and modes of engagement are thus distinct to traditional legalistic bureaucracies. However, even as reformers deployed a new language, they had to rely on the traditional instruments of the state for implementation. Circulars, orders, communication through the existing hierarchy, meetings, and trainings remained

the key modus operandi. How were these reshaped? And how did the school ecosystem respond?

Circulars and meetings

The difference in tonality of the reform messages was visible across the multiple sites of interaction between reform ideas and the administration. Meetings and training sessions were the primary forums where reform ideas were presented and school-level actors were given instructions for implementation. Through our multiple observations of these meetings, we witnessed this struggle between the two distinct languages repeatedly. There were countless episodes when the reformers would speak to school actors and administrators in a language that, at least on the surface, sought inputs and participation: "You are the boss of the school. You have to create your own vision and implement it, with the support of the government." "Tell us what you did to improve learning in your schools." "Report vs share—these are two different words with different meanings. We want to inculcate a culture of sharing."

But this new language of deliberation and participation found itself lost in translation within the bureaucracy. As soon as the reforms leadership would leave the room and the administrators took over, the discussions would default back to the grammar of hierarchy and one-way communication style.

Circulars presented their own unique challenge. The only known form of communication to schools was through the circular route. This was important also because without circulars, schools would not follow instructions. So, reformers tried to find new ways of working with circulars by changing the language. "Every time we wrote a letter to communicate the reform goals and actions to schools, the Department of Education would convert it to a formal, bureaucratic circular, with checklists and penalties." This is how a key reforms stakeholder described the struggle between the bureaucracy and the reformers as they sought to introduce the Chunauti programme in schools. In the early days, files would go back and forth as letters were reinterpreted and converted into "bureaucratese", and messages were lost in translation. One of the most vivid illustrations of this was a circular sent to schools in response to a letter to schools and parents written by Manish Sisodia. In July 2016, the Delhi government launched what it called the first Mega Parent–Teacher Meeting, a widely publicised parent–teacher meeting. This kind of publicity for a routine school activity was unprecedented. In the run-up to the meeting, Manish

Sisodia wrote a letter highlighting the importance of the PTM as a deliberative forum: "Education should be about learning not teaching, learning should be discussed between teachers and parents." This letter was received by schools along with a circular that translated the "message" of the letter into bureaucratic parlance, intelligible to the school. The circular was written as an "inspection pro forma", instructing schools to respond to a checklist about school arrangements for the meeting.

Over time, reformers and bureaucrats in charge of drafting circulars found a way of working together. "Eventually, they left the content of the message intact, commenting on my grammar instead," said one of special advisors to the education department who had been brought in to spearhead the reform. These changes were visible in our analysis of circulars, which found a distinct difference in the language of circulars related to the Chunauti and subsequently Mission Buniyaad programmes. In contrast to the language of instructions and penalties, these circulars "encouraged" schools to be flexible to adapt approaches to school specificities. Even circulars for PTMs introduced phrases like "sharing student report cards and emphasising student strengths with parents". This was an important step in the direction of engineering a norm-changing shift in the system.

But schools and administrators responded to this new deliberative language with trepidation. For a system steeped in legalistic norms and where accountability was defined strictly in terms of adherence to rules and instructions, the idea of flexibility was hard to understand. When told to be "flexible" and identify modes of implementation specific to the school, the education administration was baffled. Instead, they searched for ways of defaulting to the familiar.

Our observations in schools found teachers agonising for hours over how to interpret the flexibility offered to them in circulars. Education administrators, familiar with a structure where measurable metrics, inspections, and penalties formed the basis of interactions, struggled to identify new modes of interacting with schools. Stories of fines being imposed, of teachers (and district bureaucrats) being rapped for not following instructions to the letter, and of the threat of penalties abounded in schools were doing the rounds. Thus, the tyranny of circulars remained intact, despite a new language and form of communication. This conundrum was well articulated by one interviewee who said, "Schools are conditioned to work through circulars only. If I only know how to drive using GPS and

the connection breaks, I'd be lost!"

Faced with the continuing tyranny of circulars, teachers interpreted appeals from reformers as "rhetoric" rather than a real systemic shift. "I'm just moving from circular to circular, and I know I will follow these instructions in an unquestioning manner. Because I don't want my DDE scolding me." This persistence of the circulars meant that reformers were unable to credibly build a sense of shared ownership towards the mission and goals of the reform. Moreover, the proliferation of circulars (even those dealing with the classroom) served to reinforce a view that schools are run on the basis of responsiveness to "orders" rather than an active engagement with their specific needs. So, when teachers were asked to be "flexible", they simply lacked the tools to interpret what this meant. After all, how can you be "flexible" about a circular?

Ironically, even as circulars were a problem undermining reform messages, they also performed a crucial role in acting as a device for reformers to use. Here is one illustration. "The director was going to issue a circular penalising you," said a trainer in a session organised with teachers where they were being extremely resistant to ideas being shared. "I told her not to because, in our experience, circulars lead to misinterpretations." This statement immediately changed the tone of the discussion. Teachers who had been complaining stopped interrupting and started engaging. But the discussion that followed stayed focused on circulars, as teachers got involved in an animated discussion over circulars that were issued and requests made through them.

The circular remained an ever-present phenomenon. Even when used as a device for communicating reform, it remained tyrannical.

6.1.1 From On-Way Trainings to Meetings and Seminars

Anyone familiar with the Indian administrative system will have observed the central role played by in-service "training" and "capacity building" in the everyday life of the frontline state. Training and capacity-building workshops are the means through which new skills and ideas about new programmes are imparted within the system. The Indian administration has a large number of dedicated training institutions. In the education system, this role is played by the State Council for Education Research and Training (SCERT) that oversees District Institutes of Education and Training. Despite the overwhelming presence of in-service training, this remains one of the
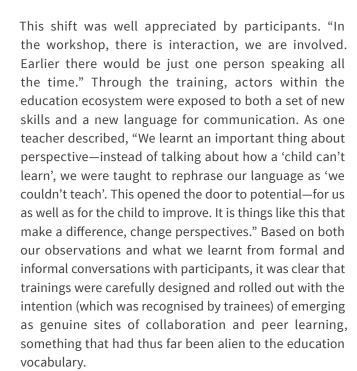
weakest links in the education chain in India. Most teachers and administrators described trainings as a nuisance, yet another reason for them to be pushed away from the classroom. It is a mechanical process that is low in quality and dependent on content that was disconnected from the everyday realities of the school (Ramachandran et al., 2018).

The education reformers in Delhi saw an opportunity in the defunct training ecosystem. This was the platform that they could use to share their messages, motivate teachers, inspire leadership, and discuss the nitty gritty of reform. But to do this, they needed to revamp and revive training by bringing in new players to design and implement training. For the reformers, this could not be done internally within government. NGOs working on education and with frontline administrators were the right partners. Each was tasked with organising training for specific cadres within the education system. These trainings ranged from leadership and mentoring trainings, trainings focused on self-motivation and on strengthening pedagogy linked to the goals of the Chunauti programme.

The trainings consciously sought to redesign the training site from a space for imparting information and skill to a space for strengthening leadership, morale building, and motivating teachers. This was a significant transformation. Training was reconceptualised as an interactive space geared to motivate rather than merely inform trainees. More importantly, these were spaces where trainees were encouraged to engage in dialogue and debate with one another. The shift in trainings was visible both to us as observers of the trainings as well as in the descriptions of training sites given by key stakeholders. In the words of one DIET principal:

> **"**
> *Trainings definitely looked very different before. Earlier what would happen is that a resource person would be called, he or she would come to the venue, show a PowerPoint presentation, perhaps deliver a lecture, sign the slip we had for trainers, and leave … What has happened in the last few years is that they have shifted to a workshop mode and also the group size in the workshops is smaller … [On the very tactile shifts that were made in the trainings] There are smaller groups now. We usually sit on the floor or pull up chairs in a large circle … it's a friendlier, more realised setting so it puts the attendees at ease. Now if you sit in one of the workshops, you will not be able to tell who is who—the trainer and the trainees all speak equally.*
> **"**

This shift was well appreciated by participants. "In the workshop, there is interaction, we are involved. Earlier there would be just one person speaking all the time." Through the training, actors within the education ecosystem were exposed to both a set of new skills and a new language for communication. As one teacher described, "We learnt an important thing about perspective—instead of talking about how a 'child can't learn', we were taught to rephrase our language as 'we couldn't teach'. This opened the door to potential—for us as well as for the child to improve. It is things like this that make a difference, change perspectives." Based on both our observations and what we learnt from formal and informal conversations with participants, it was clear that trainings were carefully designed and rolled out with the intention (which was recognised by trainees) of emerging as genuine sites of collaboration and peer learning, something that had thus far been alien to the education vocabulary.

However, the new approach to training also encountered a unique set of challenges. For reformers and NGOs alike, the starting point for the training was the recognition that agents within the education ecosystem needed to be re-energised and motivated. The language of self-motivation and leadership provided the framework for trainers to engage with teachers.

However, this perspective contrasted sharply with how actors within the education system saw themselves. As we have described earlier, in their "account", teachers and education administrators were not "intrinsically demotivated" but victims of a system designed to undermine them. In fact, the language of "motivation" reinforced the view for many teachers, that the system saw them as a problem and their complaints about being mistreated were merely dismissed by those who spoke of empowerment and motivation. That this message was being communicated by NGOs, outsiders who were not involved in the education system, made it easier for teachers to resist and challenge the raison d'être of the training themselves. In discussions outside the training, our research team repeatedly heard teachers express the view that the training had little to do with their everyday lives in schools. More often than not, teachers resisted using the opportunity for dialogue as platform for professional deliberation and growth. Instead, trainings became a site of resistance. Teachers and administrators would inevitably resort to complaining and airing grievances and seek refuge in these to avoid a deeper dialogue linked to training goals.

Notes from the field

With the help of a PowerPoint presentation, the facilitator started discussing the factors that led to the success of a scheme co-designed with the government of state X. This scheme was designed to improve the public image of government schools and resulted in an increase in enrolment rates, including widespread press coverage. The government's middle management played a significant role in the scheme's success story.

After the presentation, a DDE stood up to question the institute's source of funding and the nitty-gritties of programme management involved in this scheme. Another DDE asked why there was a need to send students to private schools in the first place. The discussion veered off into a debate about private schools. The facilitator attempted to get the conversation back on track—"What we are trying to focus on here is the point that if the middle management decides to take the onus of something, if they set their mind to it, nothing is impossible." Yet another DDE insisted on talking about an MLA's financial contributions to the programme as being unethical. The heated discussion only broke off when a second facilitator announced that it was time for tea and snacks.

6.1.2   Motivating Management

Shifting entrenched behaviours requires deep, system-wide engagement. This posed a real challenge to the reformers. The activist, anti-establishment roots of AAP shaped its relationship with the bureaucracy throughout its first term in power in Delhi. The political instinct (combined with a unique set of political factors) resulted in pitting AAP in an adversarial relationship with the establishment as it sought to negotiate its own place in a complex political landscape. In education, the reformers were quick to establish a working relationship with the higher-level bureaucracy in charge of decision making within the Department of Education. But they also realised that any large-scale systems reform, including changes in the organisational structure and accountability system, would be difficult to implement in the early days. Thus, the initial focus of the reforms was directly on changing the frontline rather than introducing organisational changes within the education department.

At the front lines, AAP's anti-establishment instinct led it to the conclusion that entrenched education administrators, specifically the DDEs, may not be amenable to the kind of norm-changing reforms it was implementing. They were not wrong. In our interactions with the DDEs, particularly in the early days of reform, we heard complaints and deep resistance towards reform ideas. "This has all been said and done before … how is any of this useful?" Jaded DDEs said they had seen it all. Ideas came and went, but they rarely addressed the real everyday challenges that DDEs believed the education system confronts. Add to this, as we highlighted in the previous discussion, DDEs were in the twilight of their careers, entrenched in accountability

structures and modes of behaviour that were difficult to shift without fundamentally reshaping the organisational system of the bureaucracy, including DDEs' career trajectories. The reformers' response to these realities was to find ways of bypassing the DDEs and investing their efforts directly in schools and teachers. But DDEs remained central to the everyday life of schools. They are the officers who have the most direct contact with schools. Teachers recognise their role within the hierarchy and no "new" activities can be initiated in schools without the DDEs' involvement. Thus, the reformers had to engage the DDEs, but they did so by limiting their roles to functions they were familiar with—monitoring logistical arrangements, filling out inspection pro formas, monitoring school-level assessments, and developing school-improvement plans. As far as the reformers were concerned, these were background supporting roles.

But reformers underestimated the dynamics of the relationship between schools and the administration and the critical role that DDEs and other frontline workers play in this process. The power DDEs wielded in schools could, if leveraged by reformers, encourage greater acceptance of the reform process. But this was a double-edged sword. Once DDEs were deployed, their mode of functioning reiterated the legalistic culture, even as it created conditions for reforms to gain greater compliance. To illustrate, one of the key instruments for communicating the reform message was a new position called Mentor Teachers (we discuss the role of Mentor Teachers in the next section). In the first year, MTs struggled with embedding themselves into the everyday life of the school. They were seen as a cadre that bypassed the hierarchy and one which did not have a role in schools. In response,

reformers instructed DDEs to organise regular meetings with MTs. This immediately changed school conduct. In a district meeting between MTs and the DDE in February 2017, MTs discussed specific challenges they were facing inside schools. One MT requested the DDE to speak with the HoS of a school who was making students stand outside the compound if they turned up after 8 a.m. This was done with immediate effect. In an informal discussion with researchers, after the meeting, the MTs described how much more confident they felt in doing their work inside schools knowing that they had the backing of the DDE. Even HoS took them more seriously.

Perhaps aware of the limits of engaging DDEs, once reformers came to terms with the need to engage with DDEs, they also begun the process of investing in DDEs and making them part of the reforms. Towards the end of 2016, efforts were made to invest in DDEs by focusing specifically on leadership training in partnership with NGOs. The training continued sporadically through the course of the three years. It was an important step in the direction of initiating deep, system-wide reforms, which were complemented by some early thinking on structural reforms of key parts of the education administration, including the SCERT, a critical institution in charge of pedagogy and training. However, the training also brought to the fore new challenges that needed negotiation.

Like the teacher and HoS training, the emphasis of the DDE training was on building administrative leadership and institutionalising a new language of communication. But administrators, jaded and locked in the realities of their everyday experiences, were not very receptive to new ideas. Once again, the training reduced itself to a mere site where district officials found a new platform to air their grievances against the system, on the one hand, and demand more hands-on support in fulfilling their roles, on the other. That these demands were coming from soon-to-retire but extremely senior members of the teaching establishment made it harder for the "outsider" NGOs to respond adequately.

This scepticism towards the reforms persisted throughout the three years that we tracked schools. For DDEs, their everyday frustrations with their role as administrators dominated their account of themselves. This translated into a continuation of the legalistic, hierarchy-based grammar through which they engaged with schools. For schools, the daily reminders of orders to be complied with, circulars to be read, inspection forms to be filled up from the DDEs dominated their understandings of what was "required" of them from the reforms. They saw the reformers' appeals to teachers' values as nothing more than rhetorical claims to change. This was evident from our FGDs with DDEs in 2019. "We have added so many more activities to their (teachers') day, yet the time in school remains the same. Naturally they will be stressed. They have to run the youth club, Happiness Curriculum, among other things, in addition to their regular teaching. It's the same for us (DDEs) too. Our mind is so overburdened and overwhelmed all the time …" "When they create any policy, we as DDEs should be involved because we have knowledge of the field. Otherwise, policy after policy gets imposed upon us from the top."

Their everyday experiences continued to be shaped through hierarchy and instruments of the past. Reformers, too, were caught in a bind. Bypassing the DDEs simply did not work. They were part of the school system and their presence was essential to the reform process, yet their long-entrenched careers caused them to be sceptical and resistant to reform. This is not to say perceptions did not change. Amid the ennui and scepticism, DDEs were unanimously appreciative of certain initiatives, including installing estate managers and dedicated cleaning staff in schools. DDEs were also eagerly seen following task-

Notes from the field

Self-reflection and "non-violent communication" were recurring themes in the three-day residential workshops organised for DDEs in 2016. The intent was to get DDEs to reflect on the way they approached their work circumstances and communicated with school actors. During the training, the DDEs were asked to role-play an "official visit" to a school and an encounter with an agitated parent. This was recorded and played back in front of everyone to review the language, approach, and tone applied by the DDEs towards the HoS. While DDEs actively engaged in the exercise, they struggled to come up with new ways to talk to the HoS that was different from their de facto, top-down approach, all the while insisting that the facilitator needed to understand that within the bureaucracy, they had to behave in a certain manner to get a task completed.

specific training sessions targeted at them—sessions which had not taken place earlier, resulting in repeated patterns of administrative errors.

6.1.3 Identifying "Principled Agents" and Making Them Change Agents: Mentor Teachers

In an effort to understand the conditions under which bureaucrats acquire public spirited behavior, John Dulilo (1994) identified what he called "principled agents". These were workers who did not shirk, subvert, or steal on the job, and who remained motivated (often under very difficult conditions and with little visible reward) to strive and support the mission of the organisation. Agency leaders can, Dulilo argues through his account of the Bureau of Prisons in the United States, create an organisational culture where principled agents are the norm, not the exception.

One of the most important changes undertaken by the education reformers was the introduction of a new cadre of Mentor Teachers into the Delhi school system. The raison d'être and expected role to be performed by Mentor Teachers, as we articulate below, had glimpses of a serious effort by the reform leadership to create an organisational culture of principled agents through a network of change agents.

"When I took over charge … I realised the government schoolteacher did not have anyone to guide them … to hone their skills or look for solutions in teaching … in a hierarchical order, teachers have school principals … who have other duties, leaving them with no time to mentor teachers." It was to address this gap, said Manish Sisodia, that the MT programme was first envisaged. Launched in early 2016, months before Chunauti, this programme was designed to identify the 200 "best" teachers, whose primary responsibility would be to enhance the pedagogic and academic capacities of the nearly 50,000 teachers who work in Delhi government schools. Each MT was assigned five–six schools, which he/she was expected to visit at least once a week, to assist and support teachers of that school, by providing learning and assessment material and pedagogic assistance, among other things.

The idea of "mentoring" is not new to the education system. In the early 2000s, the Government of India launched the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), a national-level programme to meet the goal of universalising elementary education in India. The programme created a new cadre of education administrators called the Cluster Resource Centre

Coordinators (CRCCs), who were assigned the responsibility of mentoring schools by providing "academic" support to teachers. The CRCCs existed in Delhi as well. However, the logic of a legalistic bureaucracy had inevitably taken over. Over the decades, this position had morphed into an administrative one. Academic mentoring was long forgotten. Arguably, it never came into being. For a system dominated by Route X management, mentoring was an alien concept (see Aiyar et al., 2015 for a longer discussion on CRCCs). Thus, it was inevitable that "mentorship" was no more than guidance on compliance.

Delhi's reformers made a conscious choice not to mobilise the existing cadre of CRCCs for the MT programme. Instead, they chose to use the MT programme as a vehicle to bypass existing failures in the education administration and create a new cadre of change agents. The reform was designed to provide substantial inputs to MTs. This, from the MTs' own narratives, served to motivate and inspire a set of teachers, who were certainly less resistant to the classroom reform ideas introduced under Chunauti. In the words of one MT, "I feel like my capacity building has been very good … I attended many training sessions … I went to Singapore as well and the kind of mentorship and training I got there from their people was excellent. I enjoyed that exposure … Even when I went to Bangalore, I met so many innovators … I experienced growth."

Although envisaged to fulfil the broader role of "mentoring" inside schools, the MTs came to play a different role. They became the "voice" of the reform efforts in schools; the change agents seeking to create a mission-oriented shift among schoolteachers. In the early days, as Chunauti was being rolled out and schools were confronted with new instructions every day, MTs became the chief interpreters of the circulars and guides to schoolteachers. Over time, they were given charge of teacher training, observing classrooms, and engaging in dialogues on teaching–learning practices inside schools (we discuss the strengths and limitations of this aspect of MTs' roles in the next chapter). By default, MTs emerged as the conduit between the school and reform ideas. They played the role of messenger and translator. This served two important purposes.

First, it ensured that there were regular discussions and dialogues inside schools about reforms, as they unfolded. This made the reforms a "live" and active process, translating instructions in circulars to actual practice. This was critical, particularly in the first phase of Chunauti. As the programme waned, so too did this specific role

played by MTs, which broadened to motivating teachers and liaising with the government. Second, it created the space for a more open and participatory training environment for teachers. Because MTs were teachers themselves and were expected to spend time engaging with teachers, the training sessions adopted a different tone. In our observations, the MT-led teacher trainings were far more participatory than even the NGO-led ones as teachers were more comfortable, often to the point of challenging the very premise of the training itself! But hidden in this challenge was the opportunity of engaging in a conversation with teachers about the school and the teaching environment, which in itself is a starting point for seeding change.

Of course, these interactions were not without conflict. Many teachers resisted the MTs, questioning their authority and role. The seasoned education administrators, particularly the DDEs, too, saw in the MTs a potential challenge to their role and often positioned themselves in an adversarial relationship with them. The entrenched administration saw the MTs as a "parallel bureaucracy", and in many instances, we observed MTs behaving quite like one. In order to mitigate the "threat" and bolster MT credibility in the eyes of school actors, in 2017, the government instructed MTs to submit "monthly progress reports" in connection to Chunauti, along with their attendance record, to the DDE. The government sought to leverage DDEs' legitimacy and project them as MTs' reporting authority. By doing so, the latter would be perceived as institutional actors rather than mere advocates of the reform initiatives.

However, despite receiving focused attention from the reformers, MTs, even the more proactive ones, never quite escaped the ennui prevalent in the system. Nor did they escape the tyranny of the circulars. Powerlessness was a commonly expressed problem brought on by the resistance they faced inside schools. And even when it came to interpreting Chunauti circulars, the MTs fell back on the familiar narrative of following the "letter" rather than the spirit of the circulars. After all, the MTs, too, emerged from the very same belief system and incentive structure within which teachers were embedded. Once inside classrooms, as we discuss in the next chapter, just like teachers, the MTs, too, found it difficult to offer teachers useful interpretations of the goals of differential teaching and flexibility offered in the programme.

These limitations notwithstanding, the presence of MTs was an important step in the reforms process. It allowed

> "
> *There is a clear difference in the way my colleagues talk to me now … There was visible scepticism around how I could help them (teachers) when I became an MT but I feel so good when I enter the staffrooms now and teachers talk to me about certain students they're struggling with. It's very different from my time when I was just another teacher. These types of conversations rarely took place in the staffroom earlier.*
> "
>
> *MT from a sampled school*

reformers to identify a set of core actors, expose them to a variety of training and ideas, and offer them a direct line of contact with reform ideas. In the third year of our study, we conducted detailed semi-structured interviews with a group of six MTs we had identified as key informants. Each of these interviews told a similar story. Despite the ennui, the focused attention the MTs received sparked a sense of commitment and pride. This was visible in the public image they sought to construct. We tracked twitter accounts of several MTs who wrote enthusiastically and with pride about the trainings and activities they were undertaking in schools. The increased exposure to training helped build their confidence and differentiated them from the rest of the teaching cadre. Most important, these trainings and the broader sense of pride in the reform process pushed them to spend more time inside classrooms. This ensured that there was a conduit to reforms ideas inside schools. They adopted a language that reflected the values and belief systems implicit in the reformers' perspectives, repeatedly emphasising the importance of long-term, deep engagement with teachers and schools. Some even acknowledged the slow changes they had begun to witness in schools.

Members of the research team also witnessed the kind of interactions between MTs and teachers as described by the MT above during the school observation period.

In 2017, the reformers sought to build on the MT programme by creating a new post called the Teacher Development Coordinator. The TDCs were based in schools and were expected to provide more embedded mentoring to schoolteachers. This was a step in the direction of deepening the gains from the MT programme by ensuring

sustained engagement with teachers inside schools. The programme, however, lacked the momentum and energy of the MT effort, partly because the reformers themselves shifted their focus to the Happiness Curriculum. When we closed our fieldwork in early 2019, it was the MTs rather than the TDCs that remained the face of the reforms inside our study schools. Importantly, the pride instilled in being identified as "change agents" continued to shape how many MTs approached their role within the education system. In 2018, when the government introduced Mission Buniyaad (a follow-up to Chunauti), the MTs remained its most enthusiastic champions.

6.2 A New Vocabulary for the Classroom? Chunauti: Creative Disruption or Creative Resistance?

At its core, Chunauti was an effort designed to challenge the classroom consensus by reshaping norms and behavioural expectations within the classroom. As the discussions (noted above) during the first teacher orientation highlight, in reorganising classrooms by student learning levels, the attempt was to push teachers to reimagine the classroom beyond the syllabus and examination results and shift focus to student learning. Chunauti unfolded within an organisational culture and belief system that was deeply entrenched. This entrenched consensus became a site of resistance to change. In this section, we explore the dynamics of resistance, subversion, and distortion inside the classroom.

Examinations vs learning

From the day it was launched, the narrative of change embedded in Chunauti sat in deep tension with the classroom consensus. By design, the programme was constrained by the fact that it was rolled out within the boundaries set by the existing curriculum and examination structure. And perhaps for this reason, reformers were aware that bringing stakeholders in a deeply entrenched system on board required adopting a language that they could relate too.

Examinations provided a tempting lever. In speeches, training programmes and informal conversations, success in examinations repeatedly found its way into conversations. Speaking at the press conference to launch Chunauti, in early July 2016, Manish Sisodia made repeated references to the no-detention policy and the struggles students in Standard 9 face in passing the examination.

Before announcing the details of the programme and its emphasis on teaching at the right level, Sisodia made his case— "ensuring that all students … will be mentored to pass the Standard 10 examination in 2018." This statement contrasted starkly with the rest of his speech, which focused on the importance of foundational learning and the reorganisation of classrooms to facilitate teaching at the right level. The emphasis on the no-detention policy and linking the Chunauti experiment to examination-based success was strategically wise as it sought to introduce a new approach using a language that was familiar to stakeholders, thus potentially blunting resistance. Importantly, it was also meant to signal to teachers steeped in the classroom consensus that the reformers were on their side.

In the years to follow, as Chunauti and other ongoing programmes gained ground, Delhi schools significantly improved their performance in the high-stakes Standard 12 board examination. The successes in improving pass percentages were a watershed moment for the Aam Aadmi Party's education reforms in Delhi. Mainstream newspaper headlines praised the government and began increasingly to report on its efforts at "revolutionising" education, bringing its education work into the public and political discourse. This was an important opportunity for the party to gain political mileage and entrench its work on schools into the front and centre of the party's political narrative. But success was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it served to put the party's education reform effort into the political mainstream, marking arguably the first time that any government in India sought to politicise education. This was important in signalling to stakeholders (especially at the school level) the party's seriousness

> "
> *We have focused on the first four children in the class, but what about the rest? … If the student hasn't learnt then the flaw lies with the teacher … it's our responsibility to teach all the children in the class.*
>
> *Instead of being in a race to complete the syllabus, can we focus on teaching some parts where the concepts are most important? Where we know the student will be able to understand better? Can we focus on the student learning rather than us teaching?*
> "
>
> *Teacher orientation for Chunauti, December 2016*

and commitment to long-term reforms. The reformers leveraged this opportunity well. But, inadvertently perhaps, this moment also entrenched the classroom consensus by re-emphasising the significance of examination results as a metric of success, thus complicating their own communication with the school and its stakeholders. This is best illustrated in an interview given by Atishi Marlena in 2018, days after the Standard 12 examination results. Marlena spoke of the success of the government's initiatives through the lens of the improvements in pass percentages of Delhi government schools. In particular, she emphasised differences in results between government and private schools (widely considered to be better schools in India) and highlighted this as a significant achievement. At the same time, she spoke about the tyranny of the syllabus, emphasising that their reforms were about moving away from the examination–syllabus nexus (even as this was the indicator they deployed to claim success).

This tension between classroom reforms and the classroom consensus at the policymaking level was also visible in the everyday life of the school. Teachers struggled to understand and implement the spirit behind Chunauti. The tyranny of syllabus completion and maximising pass percentages loomed large in teachers' minds as they went about implementing the programme, especially in the first year. "This is all very well, but how will I complete the syllabus?" was a constant complaint we heard from teachers. Sceptics wondered how the goals of Chunauti could be achieved at all. "I am well aware of my students' learning levels, but I still have to complete the syllabus." As the years progressed, this obsession with the syllabus did not disappear. Rather (as we see in the discussion below on classroom observations), teachers found ways of routinising their known teaching practices into the new reorganised classrooms, linked to syllabus completion and maximising on the exam readiness of those students closer to the curriculum expectation.

As the Chunauti programme roll-out unfolded, in training sessions and informal discussions with researchers, teachers began to express concerns and fears that the goals of the programme would impact performance in examinations. The tyranny of circulars and hierarchies wasn't far behind. In response, the planners and MTs repeatedly sought to assure teachers. In fact, reformers went so far as to clarify that they expected the results to be lower than previous years as they expected teachers to teach and score students accurately. None of these promises were met. In their telling, several heads of schools were asked to show cause in DDE meetings for

doing poorly in the semester examinations.

It is important to acknowledge here that Chunauti did not attempt to tackle many critical elements of the classroom and the syllabus–examination nexus. Large-scale curriculum reforms and changes in the assessment structure were beyond the ambit of the reforms. Teachers were expected to deploy new methods of teaching but within the existing constraints of the syllabus and rote learning–based examination system. This imposed constraints on teachers' imaginations, no doubt. But these limitations do not take away from the larger point we are seeking to make simply because the spectre of pass percentages was so deeply entrenched in the minds of the education administrators and teachers that it would have caused resistance to large-scale reforms as well. A system designed to cohere around thin accountability goals inevitably privileges measurable outcomes like syllabus completion and pass percentages. Confronted with the challenge of administration without measurable outcomes, the education administration simply could not articulate an accountability framework. Administrators repeatedly demanded examination results in discussions and meetings with teachers. Teachers, too, remained unconvinced of the possibility of teaching without being held accountable for the syllabus completion. This was evident during training discussions.

In one conversation between Mentor Teachers and trainees, the MT made a strong case for teachers to engage with a critique of the syllabus race:

> "
> *Instead of being in a race to complete the syllabus, can we focus on teaching some parts where the concepts are most important? Where we know the student will be able to understand better?*
> "
>
> *MT*
>
> "
> *Sir, but we will have to bear the consequences of this. We will be scolded. You can't just forget about the syllabus.*
> "
>
> *Teacher participant*

We quickly learnt that teachers were not exaggerating the emphasis placed on the syllabus. In numerous meetings between the administrative hierarchy and schoolteachers, pass percentages were repeatedly discussed, mostly as a tool to assert administrative hierarchy over teachers. In one meeting we observed, teachers were made to literally stand at attention and answer questions related to their schools' performance in the examinations. This inevitably left teachers with the impression that the goals of Chunauti were to be achieved within the framework of the syllabus–examination nexus and arguably served to reinforce the centrality of this framework.

A clash of beliefs

Undoubtedly, the biggest challenge that Chunauti faced was the cognitive dissonance in the teachers' approach to the classroom. Even as teachers complained bitterly about the pressures of the syllabus–examination nexus, when given the opportunity to challenge this nexus and alter teaching practices within the school setting, they rarely did so. When Chunauti was launched, the overriding question in the minds of teachers and administrators was about the impact this would have on examinations. Over time, we heard much less from teachers about the challenge of syllabus completion. The reason for this became evident from our classroom observations. Teachers had interpreted "differential teaching" within the framework of the syllabus–examination nexus. Our classroom observations between 2017 and 2018 showed no significant differences in teaching practices across Nishtha and Pratibha classes. The only visible shift was in the teaching pace as teachers moved through the syllabus slowly, with repeated revision classes in the Nishtha classroom. Across the sampled schools, the common approach to teaching Nishtha students was to pace lessons by asking more questions, getting students to practise reading and writing, and revising lessons in class. When it came to teaching methods, the top activities were the same in Nishtha and Pratibha, with only marginal differences in percentages.

The real difficulties came from the fact that teachers were unable to grasp the application of differential teaching strategies. In training sessions, teachers were asked to develop lesson plans and hold mock sessions to demonstrate different pedagogical tools that could be applied to students in Nishtha and Pratibha classes. But teachers and trainers lacked the vocabulary to engage with what this meant. The syllabus–examination nexus remained the dominant framework. Trainers, too, had built their experiences and understandings of the classroom within the context of the classroom consensus and thus lacked the tools to adequately facilitate this dialogue. It could be argued that the inability to adequately prepare trainers was a crucial flaw in the reform. The truth is that when a particular belief system is so deeply entrenched, even articulating new concepts and finding a vocabulary to share ideas is difficult. Moreover, the consistent pressures of examinations dominated teachers' minds. Thus, their willingness to engage with new frameworks to discuss teaching methods and, more importantly, to engage in a critique of their own teaching styles was limited. When the training focused on students' learning (as opposed to exam performance), teachers would lose interest and trainers struggled to find ways to engage them. This continued through the course of the reform period. The following snippets from an MT-led workshop on teaching strategies illustrates the persisting trend and the general trajectory of the observed trainings two years into the programme.

One of the reasons for teachers' lack of interest in discussing teaching practices was the fact that they strongly believed they knew how to teach; what they needed, they would argue, was the opportunity to "teach". The classroom consensus meant that teachers and reformers saw the problems of the classrooms very differently. To expect teachers to willingly engage in ideas aimed at changing what they do without resistances and distortions of the kinds we witnessed was simply unrealistic.

One of the most interesting and subtle forms of resistance was in how teachers appropriated reform ideas into their own worldviews. When presented with the reform vocabulary, specifically the attempt to link classrooms to student learning levels, teachers sought to find meaning in this new vocabulary by resorting to the familiar. Students in the two classes (Nishtha and Pratibha) were referred to as "weak" versus "good", defined in terms of their ability to grasp the syllabus. Inside classrooms, teachers were often heard trying to use these categories as motivational tools to get students to "perform": "You are a Pratibha student, so how can you say this?" "Do you want to move to the Nishtha section?" It was not that teachers were blind to differences in student learning levels. They were well aware of these. But they responded to these differences through the lens of the classroom consensus. The challenge did not lie in teaching practices but with the context in which they taught—factors which were beyond their control. Teachers saw students who were not able to perform as expected by the curriculum as "weak". This was not on account of an overambitious curriculum or even because of the syllabus–examination nexus. It was because they were not given the opportunity to "teach".

22 December 2017, MT-led TGT Math Workshop

10:55 a.m.

The facilitator went on to discuss the common strategies that could be adopted for teaching neo-readers of Classes 6 to 8. He wrote 6, 7, 8 and made a triangle, square and rectangle over the numbers respectively. Then he asked the teachers to discuss how the perimeter of a triangle could be taught to Class 6 students. One teacher raised the point that perimeter was not part of the Class 6 syllabus. The facilitator responded by saying that it was mentioned in Pragati-IV (supplementary support material). The teacher replied, "Hum nahi padhayenge" (we will not teach), since it was not in the syllabus.

At the other end of the hall, a group of teachers was busy discussing the confusion caused by the upcoming second periodic test (some teachers were calling it a pre-board exam) and how they were struggling to revise the syllabus for Classes 9 and 10 due to this test. A teacher said that she had to make her students memorise the theorems so they would score better. Looking around the hall, it was evident that most of the teachers were not interested in the discussion the facilitator was having with the group of teachers closest to him.

11:20 a.m.

Facilitator 2 took over. She said that, in a lot of schools, students from Classes 6 to 8 who had just acquired basic reading skills (neo-readers in reform parlance) had to be taught together because of teacher shortage and infrastructural constraints. To help students understand better, teachers had to make worksheets for them to practise. The next activity in the workshop involved grouping teachers and preparing worksheets. They were given half an hour to prepare and then present.

Tea was made available during the discussion; teachers complained that it was too cold. As for the discussion on the worksheets, none of the groups seemed interested. They could be overheard discussing family issues and politics in general. After about 15 minutes, the facilitators reminded them to complete the worksheets. Two–three members in each group began writing down on the sheets provided, discussing what would be useful for the worksheet, while the others continued talking.

13:00 p.m.

After lunch, the groups were again called for presentations. One teacher was overheard saying that they have also become like neo-readers because they are not able to come up with a worksheet. Another teacher said that it was most difficult to make a worksheet for math. The groups were still busy talking and nobody paid attention to the facilitators. Facilitator 1 tried to change gears, suggesting that they discuss the pedagogy they used in Classes 9 and 10. One teacher said, "Sunn lenge" (we'll listen), to which the facilitator replied, "Sunne ka hi nahi hai, wahaan jaake karne ka bhi hai." (don't just listen, act on it as well). The teacher didn't say anything and just looked away.

14:20 p.m.

More groups came forward to make presentations on the area of right-angled triangles and decimal place. Participants had stopped paying attention, with some teachers seen talking on their phones. Some of them started demanding that they be allowed to go. Facilitator 1 told them it was not possible because the DDE was expected. He collected the worksheets from the groups and then distributed the attendance slips. By 14:55 p.m., they wrapped up the session and the teachers left immediately.

The reading mission

What made this dissonance between reform goals and teachers' perspectives even sharper was the fact that when presented with an opportunity to teach children differentially in a setting outside the four walls of the classroom, teaching practices shifted dramatically.

In September 2016, the Delhi government announced the launch of a reading camp where all non-readers—children in Standard 6 who could not read a Standard 2 textbook—were to be taught in specially created classrooms to "catch up" and become readers by November 2016. Small batches of up to 30 students were taught through specially provided teaching material and resources. Through the two-month period, teachers were given daily cue cards through WhatsApp messages sent by their respective MTs. Storybooks and a schedule was also given along with short videos and photos of best-practice classrooms. Teachers were given clear goals and the flexibility to tailor their methods, and they were reassured that the results of the campaign would not negatively affect their own performance assessment.

During this phase, our classroom observations showed a dramatic increase in the application of alternative teaching methods. Compared to other sections, NR classes recorded the highest percentage of academic interaction at 18.6 percent, compared to 1–10 percent in the other sections, and posing questions was a preferred method. While lecturing and writing on the board were rarely used, teachers were often seen helping students at all points, reading with them, interacting and constantly checking progress verbally.

The most significant difference, however, was the use of joyful activities and games, music, dance, etc., as methods of teaching and explaining to students, along with materials such as flashcards, paper cups, straws, and films. Such methods were not observed in any other classroom. In most of these cases, the engagement level of students was extremely high and students were very responsive to such activities by teachers.

NR students had the highest levels of engagement across all class types, at 95.4 percent of all NR class snapshots, while the teacher was on task. The percentage of "seatwork" for non-reader students, at 25.6 percent, was also the highest among all categories, compared to 15 percent for Pratibha classrooms, while the teacher was on task. Student activities like copying directly from the board

were also lowest in the NR sections, and students spent a substantial 12 percent of the time answering questions, which was not seen in other sections.

Teacher response to the reading campaign brings the cognitive dissonance that shapes the classroom consensus into sharp relief. Teachers welcomed the opportunity to experiment with alterative pedagogical tools. In fact, recognising their value, they deployed them with great enthusiasm. The very teachers who enthusiastically participated in the reading camp had complained bitterly when it was announced. This was another distraction, they complained, one that would take them away from their core responsibilities inside the classroom. They also argued that the goal of converting non-readers into readers in a two-month period was near impossible. Yet, as soon as the setting for the camp was moved out of the classroom and into mission mode, their behaviour changed. But none of the teachers believed that these teaching practices could be adopted within the formal classroom setting.

Repeated interactions with teachers on this issue inevitably drew them back to concerns with external factors to the teaching–learning process. This was re-enforced by the lack of clarity surrounding what differential teaching entailed for students in higher classes with complex curricula. While using joyful and engaging teaching methods to improve reading levels was possible in the short run, it was not enough to make up for the years of accumulated learning deficit among students, especially in the higher classes, especially with the inevitable pressure on teachers to shift their focus to teaching to the test as the examination cycle neared.

While teachers may well have been right about the obfuscation around the concept of differential learning, what made their resistance sharper was the fact that they were mostly unwilling to use the platforms made available (through trainings, workshops, and Mentor Teachers) to unpack the idea and develop an alternative discourse on the teaching–learning conundrum. Ultimately, for teachers, the classroom is a place of learning but within the confines of the syllabus–examination system. And this belief system remained entrenched through the period of our reform engagement, despite teachers' own experiences with the reforms.

This belief in the syllabus–examination nexus was further entrenched by the conflicting messages teachers received from the planners and senior bureaucrats. One of the reasons why the reading campaign was popular among

teachers was because they were able to track students' progress in real time and share these achievements with administration without fearing backlash. But in late 2016, the federal government made an important announcement—the return of federally assessed and designed central board examinations for the 10th grade. The announcement brought with it familiar responses. The high stakes and high visibility associated with examination results caused the system to default to past practice with administrators cracking the whip on schools to improve results by the end of 2016 and early 2017. Teachers commented on the pressure to show continuous growth and sporadic rumours of teachers getting memos from their seniors for "showing" poor results in exams, which dampened the hard-earned trust of teachers and learning gains made through the reading campaign. The experience of one principal in our sampled school illustrates this reality and its consequences:

> "
>
> What do I tell you about this, it was so embarrassing the way they treated HoS in the meetings with the department. Everyone was really worried, scared even. My hands and feet went cold … we were told categorically, "Chunauti is all well and good but focus on results, that should not be ruined." We were told in no uncertain terms that we had to make sure the 10th and 12th results do not suffer. As for Chunauti, we were told to literally stop it in its tracks and start working for the results. It was almost like telling us to just cut the umbilical cord and move on … That was quite disheartening, to be honest, because I had really thought the policy could help. Besides, all of us had focused so much attention on this and
>
> "
>
> *HoS recalling a meeting with a state-level bureaucrat*

From resistance to slow disruption

Amid this narrative of resistance, there were also very important shifts that Chunauti initiated, which will likely make a significant dent within the classroom consensus in the long term. The one most critical transition that

took place in these three years was the emergence of a platform within the school system for debate and discussion on learning levels. The vocabulary of learning deficits, variances in student learning levels, and the need to strengthen foundational skills slowly made their way into staffroom conversations by the end of the first year of the intervention and stayed steady through the many transitions that took place in the second and third year. In 2018, when the Delhi government launched Mission Buniyaad (a mission mode campaign designed around Chunauti), the programme met with far less resistance than Chunauti. In informal conversations in the sample schools, many teachers shed their initial scepticism and spoke of the programme and its impact on the classroom with great enthusiasm.

Teachers continued to frame their understanding of differences in student levels using the familiar language of weak versus good, drawing upon curriculum-level expectations as the benchmark. However, there was a subtle difference. In the early phase of the reforms, teachers were merely categorising students, but as the reforms wore on, they drew on these categories to articulate teaching strategies. As one teacher said in the classroom, "One doesn't simply become a reader or non-reader. One needs to study." To this, he added that students should turn to him if they were struggling to read certain words and that no one should stop them from asking as everyone had the right to do so. Conversations like these became relatively more common in classrooms and in staffrooms.

In our last interview with a teacher we had engaged with repeatedly for three years, she drew on her experience with Chunauti to speak of the different ways in which she focuses on teaching her students within the confines of the syllabus–examination nexus. She spoke of how she trusted her Pratibha students not to falter in the examination. However, she needed to work differently with her Nishtha classes. She spoke of how she first focused on their writing skills so they would be able to better understand examination requirements. She also spoke of foundational skills that she needed to emphasise in the early part of the academic year in order to ensure the students were syllabus-ready. These conversations rarely took place in the first year of the programme. Increasingly, the need to define differential teaching became less necessary as teachers began to articulate these realities of their classrooms and engage with them in their everyday teaching lives. Perhaps for this reason, in 2018 when the government introduce Mission Buniyaad, a three-month learning camp, there was far less resistance from teachers.

And crucially, even primary schools run by the municipal government (that were run by the key political rival party, the Bharatiya Janata Party) participated with relatively less resistance.

6.2 Conclusion: Understanding the Dynamics of Reform

The tensions and distortions unfolding within schools as reformers navigated the complex ecosystem of the education administration highlight the very real dilemma that reformers of entrenched systems confront—how do you negotiate reforms when the instruments and tools available are simply not designed to communicate and implement reform ideas? After all, reforms do not unfold in an organisational vacuum.

As reform ideas made their way into Delhi's schools, they confronted an organisational culture whose internal logic was designed to resist and distort implementation. Actors steeped in a particular grammar of hierarchy struggled to rewrite the rules, as was expected for the reforms to succeed in its goals. How teachers, heads of schools, and administrators interpreted what was asked of them was shaped significantly by the very belief systems that reforms set out to change. Reforms are not about new rules, circulars, and launching new programmes. Rather, they are about negotiating with people, their deeply entrenched beliefs, and the practices that shape people's accounts, which the reforms seek to change. Several reform ideas, from trainings to challenging the syllabus–examination nexus, found themselves trapped in the hierarchies, belief systems, and attitudes that they were expected to challenge. Reform efforts within schools were, as we have demonstrated, repeatedly confounded by the very norms and accounts that they sought to change. And here is the

dilemma: to initiate reforms, reformers have to rely on precisely the very instruments (circulars, rules, hierarchy, and meetings, in this instance) that the reforms seek to change. Ultimately, the successes and failures of reforms are determined in the interstices of these negotiations.

But change is also about exposing entrenched systems to new possibilities. The two most important reform actions included the MT programme and bringing in NGOs to conduct leadership and motivational training. These programmes encountered their own share of resistances and distortions but, in their approach, served to create spaces for change agents within the system to emerge, thus holding the promise of disruptive, norm-changing shifts in the long run.

Within classrooms, despite all its distortions and eventual lapse back to business as usual, the introduction of Chunauti eventually saw the emergence of a new vocabulary for understanding and debating students' learning trajectories. None of this was radical, nor was it entirely within the spirit of the reforms. A cursory glance at classrooms could well lead a casual observer to the conclusion that the reforms barely took root. But changing deeply entrenched systems is a slow, incremental process. The fact that Chunauti reintroduced the classroom as a space for discussion inside schools and actively demonstrated to teachers the possibility of change was the first and most crucial step in the direction of a long-term transformation. It also showed how mission-mode injections (even if they remain pilots) of change in the system are critical to reforms, as they demonstrate to teachers the possibility of change. Embedding these missions requires long-term engagement with the classroom. Three years of Chunauti were the critical first step.

Chapter 7: Steadying the Ship While Changing Direction

In an interview with Atishi Marlena in July 2019, we asked her to reflect on the four years of reforms and describe what she thinks had been achieved. "Steadying the ship and slowly preparing it to steer a new course" is how she articulated the journey. "We inherited a sinking ship in 2015. We knew we could not abandon it in mid-course. But we also knew that plugging the leaks without trying to change direction was only postponing the inevitable. So, our focus was on trying to steady the ship and slowly but surely preparing it to steer a new direction."

The temptation in public debates on reforms, especially high-octave, well-publicised, politically visible reforms, is to pass quick judgment on its success or failure. Over the years of our engagement with Delhi schools, the few questions we were repeatedly asked were: Did it succeed? What changed? Have learning outcomes improved? These are important questions that reformers, observers and independent evaluations must answer. But in the early phase of reforms, they also serve as a distraction from the realities of change.

The story we witnessed over the years we spent observing reforms in Delhi's schools reveals the one obvious truth that many reform debates have little patience for—deep change in low-capability organisations is slow, complex, and riddled with distortions. The ability of reform ideas, no matter how technically sound and sophisticated, to navigate these distortions holds the key to success. Reform outcomes are shaped by the internal dynamics of organisations, by how new ideas and technologies intersect with entrenched beliefs and patterns of behaviour, none of which lend themselves to easy success stories. What we unravelled through the years is the story of an entrenched, broken system both resisting and embracing the push to steer a new course. The reality of reform outcomes lies in these small preparatory steps. Delhi's education revolution lay in the everyday nurturing of the system and its slow, often flawed, navigation towards a new course.

The education system we encountered was trapped in a low-level performance equilibrium. Mired in narratives of powerlessness, bureaucratic agents faced incentives that distorted standards of professionalism and performance. This is not unusual for India or the education system in particular. There is a vast body of literature that has documented India's dysfunctional bureaucracy

(particularly at the frontlines). These have provided valuable reference points throughout our analysis. Our study design enabled us to dig deeper and gain a granular understanding of the precise ways in which the low-level performance culture and practices shape belief systems and attitudes and how these respond to new demands for change. At each step along the way, we witnessed the interplay of the everyday lives of bureaucrats and the expectations of change from reforms. The narrative of powerlessness, what we have called the post office paradox, and victimhood that teachers and frontline administrators have constructed is shaped by their defined roles and career trajectories within the hierarchies of the education system. These are entrenched through the ritualisation of hierarchy and bureaucratic practices that govern the education ecosystem. The consequent flourishing of legalistic norms promotes a very narrow, rule-based culture of performance, one that is well aligned with wider societal perspectives on the classroom, or what we call here the classroom consensus. The consensus is that the classroom is designed to achieve the goal of maximising examination marks rather than genuine subject mastery. Performance goals in the classroom consensus easily lend themselves to simple, verifiable metrics of syllabus completion and pass percentages, which can be extracted through top-down monitoring—typical of ritualised hierarchies. This, coupled with tyrannical circulars, "carrot and stick" vocabulary deployed by supervisors, and the consistent flow of administrative instructions to schools from the top have together enabled a culture where teachers and administrators have come to believe that they have little agency and autonomy and must, at best, focus on following circulars and complying with limited expectations the system places on it. The dynamics of the classroom, particularly the reality that a large number of students are not at curriculum-level expectations, while recognised, is not seen as a challenge that teachers have any agency to respond to. Few teachers engaged with the dynamics between pedagogical practice, demands of the curriculum, and the realities of students' learning levels. The problem of low student learning was recognised. However, teachers and administrators did not accept responsibility. After all, they, too, are victims of a system. In sum, what we encountered was a system that has lost all sense of public purpose. This is the challenge of governance and state capacity that must be at the forefront of all debates on reform.

As reforms unfolded, we gained insights into what it takes to build organisational capabilities by changing performance cultures. The top leadership of the Delhi reform story (indeed this is the case for the many pedagogical reforms that have been rolled out in India—the dead pilots that the bureaucrats who motivated our study referred to) understood the importance of directional change within the education system. To bring about this change, they recognised that their reforms had to build the foundations of a new organisational culture in the education ecosystem.

This effort to build a new organisational culture required breaking down entrenched beliefs and practices. This, as our account demonstrates, is not a task that can be achieved through new rules, circulars, or even launching new programmes. It is about introducing a new performance vocabulary. In this new vocabulary, individual worker belief systems, professional expectations, and tasks have to be aligned with reform goals. The overarching vision for reforms in Delhi was to move the education system to a high-performing agency, peopled with Dan Honig's "mission-driven" bureaucrats: employees working together towards a shared purpose, motivated to accomplish their objectives through guidance, support, and management practices designed to empower. This is what Honig calls Route Y management. The challenge for Delhi's reformers, and indeed reformers across the globe who are trying to induce performance in broken organisations like Delhi's education system, lies in identifying the tools and levers through which organisations can make this transition.

This is not a challenge unique to the public sector. Gibbons and Henderson (2011) point to the complexity of inducing new performance cultures and organisational capabilities in large private firms. They argue that these high-performance organisational cultures are not built through traditional, formal contracts between workers and managers, where expectations are clearly spelt out in ways that are visible, verifiable, and thus enforceable—in other words, Route X management. Rather they are built on "relational contracts"—informal agreements or norms that are developed based on shared understandings of appropriate behaviours, sustained, in turn, by the shadow of the future. Relational contracts matter when organisations confront circumstances where actions cannot be predefined on the basis of easily verifiable, pre-agreed objective measures. For instance, innovative, problem-solving behaviour—after all, these will vary based on circumstances. A set of judgments will have to be made that are difficult to identify in advance, much like

what was expected out of teachers once they confronted classrooms organised by learning levels. Developing a shared understanding of appropriate behaviours (what defines "innovation", for instance) lies at the heart of the challenge. This is not information that can be clearly articulated; rather, it is tacit knowledge embedded in organisational norms and practice.

Clarity and credibility, Gibbons and Henderson argue, are the two key ingredients for establishing relational contracts. Clarity is about getting the other party to understand the objective and associated action needed for extracting performance. But clarity requires credibility—persuading employees that managers will keep their promise. For large organisations, establishing clarity and credibility is a communication challenge. Managers must communicate not just task knowledge but also tacit relational knowledge. They require engineering changes in organisational practices, regular dialogue, and careful building of trust between actors. In essence, establishing relational contracts requires steering organisations towards new practices. This requires adopting Honig's Route Y management.

Clarity and credibility were precisely the bottlenecks Delhi's reformers faced. On the ground, reformers had to relay their messages through administrative tools and instruments that were simply not capable of translating their message with credibility. Reforms, as we have argued repeatedly, are not implemented in a vacuum. Reformers have to necessarily rely on the very actors and instruments—frontline workers, circulars, and even training systems—that they were seeking to change to communicate their messages. But this was, unsurprisingly, an uphill task. The ability to translate messages hit a wall because the messengers simply lacked the vocabulary (and often the belief) to credibly speak to core reform messages. We saw this repeatedly in discussions over circulars and in meetings between bureaucrats and teachers. Each occasion reduced messages into a language that emphasised legalistic norms rather than convincingly challenge them. Thus, despite the reformers' new stated vision and priority of giving all students a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy, of moving the system away from rote learning, and above all of empowering teachers and restoring their professional stature, teachers remained sceptical and unconvinced of change.

Credible communication was made even harder because several reform goals could only be articulated through shared experience. For instance, Chunauti sought to shift

the classroom consensus by breaking it free from the tyranny of syllabus completion goals through differential teaching. In principle, this was expected to free teachers from the syllabus and textbook-associated goals and allow them to alter their pedagogical practice in ways that enabled them to respond to student learning levels. But this idea had to be communicated through a system that was steeped in the classroom consensus. In training sessions, in classrooms, and in parent–teacher meetings, we saw trainers and teachers struggling with this new vocabulary. The idea of differential teaching and of new pedagogical practice had still to be developed. More importantly, accepted practices of what it meant to teach needed to be challenged. For teachers who saw themselves as victims of a system, adopting new pedagogical practices or, at minimum, identifying a new vocabulary to challenge their own views and bridge the cognitive dissonance required adopting a reflexive stance. This could only be achieved through shared experience and constant dialogue—or what Gibbons and Henderson call "thick knowledge"—not through the fiat of orders, trainings, and endless demands for compliance.

Reformers faced their own constraints. Success in examinations, as we described in Chapters 5 and 6, proved a powerful tool for reformers to gain political legitimacy and thus sustain political will needed for long-term reform. But by leveraging this success, reformers sent confused messages within the school system. Teachers and administrators remained convinced that for all the rhetoric, pass percentages remained the key metric on which the classroom ought to be judged and reformers were not able to credibly challenge this belief. After all, they, too, played into the classroom consensus, in order to gain legitimacy. Therefore, even when teachers were exposed to the possibilities of change through short-term missions like the reading camp, these did not translate into changed behaviours within the formal classroom.

However, even though dramatic changes did not take place, what we witnessed was a slow churning. Teachers still spoke about students in terms of their exam readiness and of the classroom in terms of syllabus requirements. But now the distance between student learning levels and exam readiness had become a topic of conversation among teachers, preparing the ground for a dialogue on what it meant for students to acquire subject mastery and how to teach in this reality, not just syllabus completion. Discussions in the staffroom and, occasionally, in the trainings with Mentor Teachers about difficulties of teaching students who were "weak" and the need to

extend measures like the reading camp became more common. Resistance to ideas like Mission Buniyaad slowly dissipated. In our interpretation, this is one illustration of how "thick" knowledge for long-term change can be built.

7.1 Identifying Levers of Change

The forms of resistance and distortions that the Chunauti programme encountered are well known to students of public policy and, more specifically, education reformers. What is less understood are the subtle everyday negotiations between reformers and frontline actors charged with implementing reforms. It is in these dynamics that the real story of reforms, of what works and what does not, unfolds, thus illuminating the bigger research puzzle of what it takes to embed reforms in entrenched systems.

Through the many distortions and challenges encountered in the Delhi reform agenda, we found important levers of change that hold the potential for shifting course in the long term. These were visible in frontline narratives and found their way to dominate conversations over the years, despite the endless complaints, innovative forms of resistance, and distortions. In these narratives, we identified the seeds of tacit knowledge that could, if leveraged well, serve as the foundations of eventual long-term change. We discuss some of these seeds below.

First, investing in relationship building. The repeated interactions between school-level actors (teachers, heads of schools, and administrators) through training, meetings, and regular visits from the reforms team played a critical role in bringing the bureaucracy and the school in close contact with one another. The reforms process, regardless of whether its goals were understood, accepted, or resisted in schools, forced schools to forge a regular connection with different levels of the bureaucracy, in different forums and through different modes of interaction. Just this frequency and proximity have created the context in which greater clarity and shared understandings between reform goals can be achieved. "One big change," said a DDE we interviewed, "is that now everyone knows everyone. There is less distance between actors in the system … the hierarchy has started to break. It's still there—I'm not saying it has completely vanished—but it's starting to break a little." For a bureaucratic ethos that has canonised hierarchy, just this break is an important step towards long-term change. It also harbours the possibility of new forms of communication that are more conducive to relational contracts.

Second, nurturing disruptive, principled change agents. The frequent interactions, regular training, and creation of new cadres within the education ecosystem like the Mentor Teachers provided fertile ground for principled change agents and reform champions to emerge. Even dysfunctional systems, like the one we studied, have their share of dedicated workers whose commitment and motivation are visible (despite the system finding ways of undermining them). The training and the creation of new cadres became an opportunity for these mission-motivated, dedicated teachers to thrive and deepen their commitment. Admittedly, these dedicated workers were few and far between. But they do exist—we found them in schools, in training sites, and even in the bureaucracy. The creation of platforms for the exchange of ideas, debate, and dialogue through the reforms became an opportunity to nurture potential change agents and harness their commitment. Of course, these change agents remained caught in the very structural constraints of the school system that undermine their motivation. But the presence of new platforms helped to rejuvenate them. The MT programmes, the exposure visits, and the new training programmes together provided the opportunity to do just this. Testimonies from a number of MTs highlighted how the programme became an opportunity for them to learn and build their self-confidence. They became proud voices of school reform—visible in their social media engagements and motivational speeches during training sessions. This internal growth found quiet, occasional expression in how they approached schools and teachers. One of the MTs attached to our sampled school went on to join the new state-level examination cell, participating in redesigning test papers and assessment patterns, while another became a part of a state team dedicated to creating new teaching–learning materials. Dedicated school actors also found in each other allies, to share ideas and complaints. In the long term, these slow changes can play a critical role in disrupting the status quo. The challenge for reformers lies in leveraging these change agents and steering them in the direction of genuine disruption.

Over the years, the MTs, Training Development Coordinators, heads of schools, and even some teachers emerged as key messengers of reform ideas inside schools. This ensured a steady presence of reform ideas (even during periods when reform momentum ebbed) in schools, and engineered quiet, subtle changes inside the classroom. The most significant change we observed over three years was in the form of subtle shifts in teachers' classroom vocabulary. Teachers had slowly begun to acknowledge the reform efforts (even as they complained) made to re-engineer classrooms. In 2016, as the reform was rolled out, teachers were complaining about the work overload and haphazard planning of Chunauti. By the end of 2018, teachers were still complaining but this time around the need to introduce chapter-wise learning outcomes for every class!

These changes were slow and limited, but the presence of change ensured that teachers began talking about the realities of the classrooms they confronted. The discussions had moved from pressures of exams to what it meant to teach students at different learning levels within a grade. For a system incentivised and accustomed to focusing on the front rows in the classroom, this subtle shift is significant. The permanent presence of principled change agents in schools helped anchor these conversations, thus playing an important role in engineering this subtle change.

Finally, missions and pilots, embedded in a larger narrative of change, are necessary. We embarked on this study to try and understand what it will take to move a system designed to be responsive in mission mode to embed changes into its everyday practices. At the end of our three-year exploration, we also came to the conclusion that mission-mode pilots, in fact, play a very critical role in achieving precisely the goals we were interested in. But to do this, unlike the summer camps and pilots that the Bihar administrators were referencing, they need to be embedded in a larger vision of change.

In the three years we followed schools, we found that the infusion of short-term missions like the reading week in the first year and Mission Buniyaad in later years played a crucial role in shifting the school ecosystem and breaking down resistance. What worked in these missions was the articulation of clear, simple, and easy-to-achieve goals and taking children outside the travails of the classroom environment. In these new settings, alternative teaching materials and pedagogical tools were welcomed and embraced. The problem, quite as the Bihar administrators described, of course, was that when expectation shifted from mission mode to incorporating change into everyday practices, the system defaulted back to business as usual. This, as our study demonstrated, was a consequence of an organisational ecosystem of passive rule-following that views the challenge in the classroom to be a consequence of problems outside rather than inside the classroom. We also highlighted the routine work expectations and priorities that the frontline actors had to manage, which fuelled resistance towards the initiatives. Yet, we found that these infusions of missions played an important role

in the larger effort to shift systems of thought. It did so by exposing the actors to the possibility of change and building trust in alternative approaches. The reading camp in late 2016 helped break some of the conceptual resistance that Chunauti was facing to the idea that students without basic foundational skills could, in fact, catch up in a short span of time. This experience helped teachers understand the need to teach students in Nishtha classes differently from those closer to grade-level expectations. Of course, they struggled with what this means in a classroom context, where the syllabus and examination weigh heavy. But this recognition is an important step for long-term change. The very fact that we saw far less resistance to Mission Buniyaad when it was launched in 2018 is evidence of precisely this.

Another important lesson in the importance of missions came from the recognition that legalistic systems only function well when the system is mobilised into mission mode.10 In Chunauti, by the end of the second year, as the process was getting routinised into the daily life of schools, the circulars, meetings, and discussions naturally begun to lose momentum. This was explicitly acknowledged by the state in a circular issued in late 2017 encouraging schools to not lose momentum. For a system geared to respond to circulars, the absence of circulars on specific issues results in default business as usual. This default form needs to be regularly broken. This is where repeated injections of mission mode efforts can play an important role in re-energising the system. Mission Buniyaad, introduced in the summer of 2018, played precisely this role. Perhaps then, rather than dismiss missions and camps (a bias we had as we embarked on this study), these need to be better understood as incremental steps necessary for long-term disruption. Missions may well be the real creative disruptors. But they have to be embedded in a larger vision. This larger vision and recognition that missions are about moving organisations towards breaking the low-level performance equilibrium was missing in the buried pilots that motivated our study on Delhi.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that Chunauti was a very limited intervention in the face of a much larger challenge. The classroom consensus has been forged on the back of a much broader societal consensus on the goals of education in India. Importantly, it has been built around an assessment, training, and administrative system that coheres around the goals of rote learning and maximising examination results. Changing the dynamic of the classroom requires deep shifts in the social and institutional norms and practices of education. Chunauti

was not designed to achieve any of these larger goals. Rather, it was a starting point for seeding changes. In doing so, it offers important insights into the complexity of changing entrenched systems, learnings from which could help reformers as they shift gears towards the larger goal of reimagining education. But in this story of resistance, distortions, and slow adaption, there are important lessons for what it means to seed large-scale, norm-changing shifts in entrenched systems. As we put the final touches on this book, the Delhi government had already shifted gears towards reorienting the assessment criterion by setting up a new education board. However, before the process could gain momentum, schools had to be closed down because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

7.2 Revisiting Understandings of State Capability

The narratives and argument we present here have relevance beyond Delhi's education effort and ongoing debates in India and indeed across the globe on reforming education systems. They speak to the larger challenge of administrative reforms and building state capability for public service delivery, and advance our understandings of what it takes to build genuinely capable organisations.

The puzzle of how to build state capability and reform public sector functioning has long animated development debates and policy interventions across the globe. The dominant narrative for building capability has largely cohered around one simple view: state capability is about steadying the ship.

In much of the literature, the challenge of state capability is broadly understood as an accounting or compliance problem. On this view, state capability is about bridging the chasm between the Weberian ideal type of a rule-based bureaucracy and the reality of a broken public sector, particularly, at the frontlines. Efforts to improve performance all too frequently focus on accountability by strengthening accounting processes and extracting performance through high-powered incentives—tighter monitoring, pay for performance—more targets and less discretion. This is one reason why new public management continues to dominate debates on administrative reforms, even as a new and powerful body of literature (Tendler, Grindle, McDonnell, Honig) has challenged its relevance. In its most recent avatar, technology has proved to be a great accomplice in achieving this goal. In India, for instance, nearly every administrative reform effort of significance has a technology element built into it with

the goal of tighter monitoring from data dashboards to biometric monitoring systems. This is the classic legalistic approach to building state capability and one that has great acceptance in the public discourse on administrative reform in India. As Mehta and Walton (2014) have argued, the dominant cognitive map is that India's government workers are corrupt, unresponsive, and caught up in distortionary local political and social networks. It is these workers who need to be disciplined to ensure that policy ideas translate into practice.

Our exploration into Delhi's schools challenges this very simplistic assumption about state capability. The narratives of frontline administrators and our detailed account of its response to an attempt at change draw attention to the relational, cultural aspects of organisations that shape performance. We highlight a much-ignored reality in debates and policy action—the chasm between the Weberian ideal type and the reality of public sector dysfunctionality is not simply a matter of broken rules and failed compliance. Rather, it is an outcome of the ritualisation of hierarchy and a bureaucratic grammar that conflates accounting with accountability. This has resulted in the emergence of self-enforcing arrangements where bureaucrats and frontline actors have willingly cast themselves as passive victims of a hierarchical system, in which inefficiency and apathy has become a legitimate account. Any attempt at extracting accountability simply by steadying the ship, through greater focus on compliance, tighter monitoring, and even performance pay will inevitably result in reinforcing the very behaviours that reforms are expected to break because they simply do not challenge the organisational realities which lie at the heart of the dysfunctionality. We saw in Delhi that even as the reformers attempted to change narratives within the school, the continued use of legalistic instruments to communicate messages—the circulars, the vocabulary of carrots and sticks, the demand for compliance with rules—merely entrenched the self-enforcing arrangements within which the education system is trapped.

Delhi's story is not unique. Evidence of attempts to strengthen capability through tighter compliance from different sectors across India and indeed across the globe point to the limitations we discuss here. Consider the following example: Iqbal Dhaliwal and Rema Hanna conducted an experimental study (2017) on the effects of using a biometric attendance system (now a very popular tool deployed by India's policymakers) to incentivise public healthcare workers (doctors, nurses, lab technicians) in rural Karnataka to show up to work. The experiment

partially worked. Overall attendance of lower-level staff—nurses, lab technicians, pharmacists—increased, but doctor attendance remained unchanged. Curiously, however, women moved away from the health centres where attendance was being monitored and marginally improved, to seek treatment in larger, unmonitored public and private hospitals in the area. Several explanations are offered for this by Dhaliwal and Hanna, but one that stands out is the possibility that turning up at work more frequently gave staff new opportunities to make money by directing patients to doctors' private practices. Coming to work, in this instance, did not quite result in shifting the norms underlying unruly behaviour; it merely reinforced existing practices.

But, most importantly, Dhaliwal and Hanna's study found a deep reluctance among local bureaucrats to use the data collected through biometric attendance to enforce sanctions. The reason was that strict monitoring served to increase bureaucratic discontent in their jobs. After all, tighter monitoring broke the compact that legalistic bureaucracies strike with their frontline agents—a compact based on the principle of passivity, where performance expectations are limited to responding to orders with compliance. Low job satisfaction coupled with the difficulties of hiring and incentivising health workers to work in rural centres meant that local-level managers were quick to realise that absenteeism may be a necessary price for retaining government doctors. Rather than focusing on developing an organisational ethos that shifted the dynamics of the compact between frontline workers and the state, the focus on compliance, in this instance, became a distraction.

Closer to education, a recent study by Muralidharan and Singh (2020) presents evidence from an attempt at rehauling school management practices in an effort to improve learning outcomes in the state of Madhya Pradesh. The programme aimed to strengthen classroom practices by improving monitoring through assessments and providing guidance to schools through school improvement plans. In essence, the programme sought to improve learning through greater compliance with school improvement plans. In terms of compliance, the programme was a great success. School assessments, of high quality, were completed in 93 percent of the schools. School improvement plans were also developed. However, this had no impact on improvements in pedagogy or teaching effort. Expectedly, therefore, even after five years of iterating and improving the monitoring design, the programme had no real impact on learning outcomes.

The programme was reduced, Muralidharan and Singh conclude, to an exercise in compliance, where ensuring that paperwork was completed became the only metric of success. Both teachers and supervisors perceived the programme primarily as a data collection effort and, de facto, the reform was very far from the reflective exercise in self-evaluation and improvement envisaged in the programme design.

There are two important conclusions to draw from this study. First, it reiterates the argument that merely steadying the ship, full stop, will not lead to the outcomes reformers seek. After all, compliance was achieved nearly 100 percent, yet improved learning outcomes remained a distant dream. In fact, this particular experiment is the classic example of the buried pilots that the bureaucrats we quoted in our introduction to the study were puzzled about. The programme was first rolled out in 100 schools as a pilot and eventually to 6,00,000 schools, nationally. It succeeded by enabling compliance but, beyond this, business as usual took over, and the goal of improved learning was buried deep in the ground with the pilot.

Second, the programme by its own design sought to improve education within the limits of the existing grammar of the bureaucracy. The assessments and school improvement plans were expected to be an opportunity for self-reflection and change through guidance or mentorship. But these changes were to be achieved through a structure steeped in legalistic norms where actors simply lacked the vocabulary for mentorship, guidance, and self-reflection. Thus, the default was business as usual with some improved compliance. The reality is that programme objectives simply did not cohere with the logic of the bureaucracy as it exists and thus its failure was written into its design. In essence, you cannot expect organisations to behave differently merely by plugging holes and saving the sinking ship. If the ship continues in its path towards the storm, the holes will re-emerge. In a different place, perhaps, but they will re-emerge. Saving the ship often requires changing direction, and the two purposes are mutually reinforcing.

Consider Delhi. Reformers in Delhi faced the very challenges that Muralidharan and Singh's reformers in Madhya Pradesh encountered—a bureaucracy steeped in norms that run counter to the goals and purpose of the stated reform. These norms and the instruments deployed to perpetuate them (circulars, hierarchy-laden vocabulary, carrot and stick incentives) were often the only means through which reformers could communicate their messages, causing all kinds of distortions that we have documented. Much like Madhya Pradesh, the reforms did not radically revolutionise classrooms.

The distinction, however, lay in the fact that Delhi's reforms sought to induce a system-wide dialogue about the classroom. Despite the limits of bureaucratic grammar, or perhaps in recognition of it, reformers attempted to introduce a new vocabulary with a smattering on new rules and structures. Differential teaching, learning levels, mentoring, leadership—this new language forced teachers to debate the classroom in training sessions, in meetings, and eventually among themselves in the classroom. By planting change agents through Mentor Teachers, new disruptive principled agents were identified. Some of these, not all, harbour the possibility of change. By pushing "missions" for "reading", for "foundational learning", teachers, school leaders, and administrators were exposed to the possibilities of directional change. Embedded in these efforts was the vision of building a Kaufman's forest ranger–like shared sense of public purpose that could, in the long term, shift professional identities and introduce new norms and standards of performance.

What Delhi taught us is the simple, obvious truth we miss in reform debates. Reforms are not merely about technical knowledge (or policy design) transferred through trainings or about compliance requirements communicated through written rules and regulations. Reforms are about the interplay between knowledge, design, compliance, and the ground-level orientations, belief systems, practices embedded in the lived experiences of the very actors tasked with implementing change on the ground. Reforms are about engaging with these realities and experiences. Missions and pilots are short-lived because they fail to engage with these realities. This is why the reformist bureaucrats we referenced at the start of this book, who succeed in pilots, fail at scaling up.

Merely plugging the holes would have left Delhi in exactly the same place that the Madhya Pradesh example found itself. Steadying the ship is simply not enough. The challenge is made even greater by the fact that public systems across the globe today confront what Andrews et al. (2015) have aptly described as the "hard" part of development. The schools have been built, teachers and textbooks are in place (badly, perhaps, but in place nonetheless). The challenge now is to leverage these inputs and ensure that they produce actual learning. This is, as our account of Delhi's schools highlights, not a task that can be achieved through mere compliance. It needs

organisations to adopt new vocabularies. When describing our observations in Delhi to Lant Pritchett, he remarked that the tensions between reform ideas and the realities of reform implementation were akin to trying to fit the plug into the wrong socket! This is exactly the challenge that 21st-century public service delivery reform must confront. Steadying the ship, when done well, can enable compliance, as it did in Madhya Pradesh. But if the goal is to use the compliance route to fit the learning socket, chances of success are near impossible. Finding new frameworks for reform—this is the real challenge of state capability, in India and across the globe.

Reform debates necessarily have to engage with the difficult question of how to align organisational structures and processes, individual worker belief systems, professional expectations, and tasks to reform goals. These are the relational contracts that reformers have to strike with the bureaucracy and with frontline agents. It is not just a matter of technocratic fixes and better accounting. Reforms are about infusing a new vision and steering the ship (or ships) towards this new vision.

The truth is we know very little about how to construct new contracts and identify pathways for a new direction. We know even less about what it takes to steer dysfunctional systems towards a common purpose and vision, even if we recognise their centrality to change. Over the last two decades, several studies, many of which have been referenced in this book, have documented the key ingredients of what makes for successful public sector agencies even in dysfunctional settings like India. Autonomy, discretion, professional standards, a shared vision and purpose together create high-performance cultures. But we know far less about what it takes for reformers to infuse these shifts in dysfunctional settings. The primary preoccupation in research and policy debates has been with identifying the right technocratic fix and policy direction. In public debates we seek reform champions—in political leadership, visionary bureaucrats. These are, no doubt, crucial. However, seeking the right fix with the right politician or bureaucrat, rather than understanding the organisational setting within which change can be embedded, is the reason why missions and pilots fail to embed themselves in the everyday life of bureaucracy and why good ideas often fail. Research needs to focus far more on process and transitions than it has done so far. This study is a small contribution in precisely this direction.

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