

# Bringing the education administration back in to the classroom

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In the last year, Accountability Initiative's crew of researchers has interviewed over 60 local education administrators in Bihar (district, block, cluster and school officials in charge of actual implementation) to capture their perspectives on the constraints to children's learning in elementary schools. Administrators viewed the challenge of learning primarily as a consequence of circumstances outside their control. These included *poor policy* – the Right to Education's no detention policy was frequently cited; *poor administration* from above – dual pay scales for teachers, poor allocation of tasks that took time away from teaching and the mid day meal were common reasons that took away attention from quality teaching in schools; *parents* who had little interest in what their children did in school; and *students* who rarely attended schools.<sup>2</sup>

And expectedly, the solutions to this challenge too lay outside of the administrator's domain of influence. "*Agar sarkar chahe to bahut kuch ho sakta hai*" sums up how most administrators viewed the learning problem.<sup>3</sup> As we pressed on with our interviews, we discovered that most local level administrators viewed themselves as mere cogs in a wheel over which they had no control. In fact when pushed, most interviewees referred to themselves as "post officers" and "reporting machines" with little role to play in decision-making. As one block official said, "*Humari awaaz kaun sunta hai*". No surprise then that education administrators consider the solution to the greatest challenge that they face every day when they get to work as something they can do precious little about. And, this is not a problem unique to Bihar. As we discovered when conducting similar interviews in other states, education administrators across the country have a similar perspective.

How does such an atmosphere prevail? In a recently completed paper with my co-author Shrayana Bhattacharya, I explore this question through what we have described as the "post office phenomenon" among block education officers (BEO).<sup>4</sup> Our analysis is based on a time-use study and a series of interviews that we conducted between December 2012 and May 2013 with block education officers in one block each in Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra and Bihar.

By design, the BEO is expected to manage multiple tasks from monitoring compliance, to managing human resources, providing academic support to schools and engaging the community in school related functions. Unsurprisingly therefore, given the range of activities expected, the block is a place of frenzied activity. BEOs spend much of their day in routine tasks - visiting schools, attending meetings, completing paper work and dealing with visitors.

Seems reasonable? Except that these daily tasks are rarely planned. BEOs usually start their day with phone calls from their district bosses informing them of new "government orders" received and the tasks they have to perform. As a result each day is spent executing unplanned tasks rather than fulfilling the tasks they were hired for. During our study, Bihar's BEOs were busy implementing orders to organize camps for uniform and scholarship distribution. In Himachal Pradesh, BEOs were busy managing exams while Andhra Pradesh's BEOs were implementing teacher recruitment orders. During this time, none of the officers found any time to respond to reports received or needs expressed by those who visited the blocks. In fact, it was common for HMs and village elders who visited the block officers to raise concerns about their schools to be asked to wait while BEOs completed their district specified tasks.

In responding to these orders, the entire block office appeared to be geared toward implementing schemes rather than responding to the needs of the school. In fact "learning" related activities found almost no place in the daily activities of the block office for the time period of this study. And BEOs appear to have shaped their roles as being mere rule followers and data gatherers rather than active agents of administration. In other words, they are no more than "post officers". In 2014, Accountability Initiative's researcher started a similar exercise

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<sup>2</sup> These interviews were conducted as part of a wider research study by Accountability Initiative researchers (Ambrish Dongre, Vincy Davis, Ashish Ranjan, Dinesh Kumar and Seema Muskan) to understand the implementation of an experimental program called "Mission Gunnvata" aimed at improving learning in elementary schools that was rolled out in 2013 in the state. The study findings will be ready in the summer of 2015.

<sup>3</sup> My colleague Vincy Davis was quick to point out the irony of those within the "sarkar" referring to the "sarkar" in third person!

<sup>4</sup> Aiyar, Yamini and Bhattacharya, Shrayana (2015) "The Post Office Paradox: A Case Study of the Education Block Level Bureaucracy", Accountability Initiative Working Paper Series, [www.accountabilityindia.in](http://www.accountabilityindia.in)

with cluster resource officers and headmasters in Bihar. Preliminary results suggest a very similar pattern in their time use. No surprise, then, that local administrators consider the learning challenge as something that can be resolved only *if* someone other than themselves takes action.

In our analysis, Bhattacharya and I trace the persistence of this “post officer” syndrome to the organizational design of the education administration, which has served to entrench a culture where hierarchy dominates understandings of performance. This in turn further entrenches a sense of powerlessness and apathy within the local administration.

To explain, as the PAISA surveys have repeatedly highlighted, decision-making systems within the education system are concentrated within the higher levels of the administration leaving local level administrators little by way of actual authority. This creates a sense of powerlessness amongst officers. As one interviewee said, “*The Prabhari or HM comes here and I have no answer on what has happened to their request or problem. I have to send them to the district office or ask them to wait till I hear anything. I feel bad. I have no power to give them anything, but I don’t know what happened to their case either*”. The hierarchical culture that this top-down decision-making system creates also ensures that higher levels of authority rarely provide block officers with information on progress over decisions and feedback on information provided by them. Nor do they consult lower authorities when allocating tasks. Thus local officers rarely fully comprehend the reasons why they are expected to perform tasks and inevitably reduce even the most complex of tasks to rules and orders received. For instance, when block officials were asked to describe their role vis-a-vis school committees, most described their role as that of communicating new rules and guidelines to HMs. Ensuring that committees function in a manner that enables effective parental engagement with the school is simply not on their agenda.

In this hierarchical, order driven work culture, officials understand “performance” entirely on the basis of responsiveness to orders rather than responding to school level needs. As one respondent in Bihar said “*As long as you keep sending data and as many forms as possible, you are a good worker here*”. Mandal level staff in Andhra Pradesh agreed. “*Our job is focused on filing perform well, we honestly don’t know what happens after we collect this information*”.

Consequently, the entire local bureaucracy waits for orders to be received and as for the rest, they view their jobs, in the words of a cluster resource center coordinator, as “*complete rest in comfortable conditions*”. After all, why work when the system doesn’t demand it! And in this world, focusing on school needs and identifying solutions to the learning problem is simply not something that local administrators can do.

Those skeptical of an average administrator’s intent to do their job would suggest that such claims of apathy and powerlessness are an excuse - yet another strategy to shirk effort and responsibility. Those sympathetic to the burdens of last mile work conditions would suggest that we are witnessing how hierarchical organizations predicated on rule-following norms stimulate and sustain an atmosphere of administrative apathy, thereby legitimizing unresponsiveness on the part of the administration. Irrespective, as Bhattacharya and I argue, it is our contention that effective governance is incumbent on the extent to which training and management of local state administration tackles how administrative line agents understand their roles and make meaning of their own identity as block “officers”. And any effort at implementing policy aimed at improving learning must necessarily confront this everyday reality of India’s local education administration.

As the policy debate on improving learning outcomes in India gathers pace, the issue of the how the local administration is organized, motivated and incentivized to do its job is going to matter significantly. Back in 2005, when ASER first made headlines, the challenge was to push India’s education policy toward acknowledging the problem of outcome failures. This has changed. The 12th Five Year Plan adopted in December 2012 and recent policy documents of the Ministry of Human Resource Development recognize the outcomes problem and explicitly articulate learning improvements as the stated goal for education policy. Between 2013 and 2014 many state governments introduced experimental programs aimed at improving learning in schools. The government of India too launched the nationwide quality focused *Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat* in 2014 along with a number of state level learning assessment programs. But for all of these efforts to be sustained and scaled up, they need to be embedded in the day-to-day functioning of the local administration - after all, it is these administrators who ultimately implement reforms. India’s learning challenge is as much a challenge of governance as it is of pedagogy. We need to bring governance back into the debate and ensure that every education administrator is incentivized to place her gaze firmly within the four walls of the classroom.