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The Case for Systemic Educational Reform

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Improving children's education should be everyone's priority. But it requires more than fragmented fixes. Real progress needs a comprehensive strategy with curriculum reform, teacher empowerment, and decentralisation. Piecemeal efforts cannot achieve system-wide change.

Yamini Aiyar's book on the Delhi school reforms is a fascinating study that brings the voices of teachers themselves to the centre of India's education debates. What sets it apart from typical high-altitude policy overviews is, as Lant Pritchett says in his foreword, "great research and deep insights" – its granular, ground-level view of public sector education reforms as they were rolled out in Delhi by the Aam Aadmi Party from 2015 onwards.

Though the welfare discourse is now turning towards cash transfers, improving people's quality of life cannot be achieved through cash transfers alone. The quality of public services – especially education – remains fundamental. The Delhi school reforms aimed at solving one of the most complex problems in governance—how to move from inputs to learning "outcomes," and thereby improve quality.

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What makes Aiyar's study so interesting is that instead of an evaluation of the success or failure of the reforms or a comment on the rightness of the policy reform choices themselves, what it sets out to do is to understand how these policy choices are transmitted down the different levels of government in a low-capacity context, and how they are understood, resisted, or owned by those working on the ground. Usually, decisions taken at the top percolate or trickle down with transmission loss. What was different in the case of the Delhi school reforms?

The reforms were ambitious and widely publicised. Aiyar notes that the first step was to clean and fix the broken school infrastructure. The starting point for school quality is the provision of clean, safe learning spaces for children. Ignoring the narrow view of some economists that infrastructure can wait, Delhi went ahead and fixed the infrastructure in select model schools.

The next set of reforms was in teacher training and classroom practices. Among the more thoughtful moves was the attempt to give teachers voice and dignity. One interviewee speaks of "boxed lunches, proper chairs", implying how basic the earlier training facilities may have been.

Other impactful elements in the strategy included clear communication, mentoring teams, consultations with teachers, exposure visits, and consistent messaging for change. This helped to win the trust of teachers in the reform process.

However, classroom practices included deeply problematic elements. First, the ability grouping of middle school children into groups titled Pratibha, Nishtha, and Neo-Nishtha ("Neo", really?). As many critiques have pointed out, such sorting and labelling is deeply damaging to children's self-esteem. Added to this was a differential curriculum, and more labels—a circular described students as "readers" and "non-readers". At first, teachers themselves resisted this segregation. Mixed-ability groups and collaborative group work would have been better and pedagogically sound.

Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) deserves a more detailed look. The name of the program seems to suggest that teachers usually teach at the wrong level - a formulation that is both unfair and inaccurate, as effective teachers have always known how to adjust their teaching to children's needs. Also, many short-term summer programmes run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) tend to be quick-fixes and bandaids which cannot be scaled up to take the place of systemic and comprehensive improvements within the massive school education system through the school year.

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There were other odd bits in the Delhi school reforms, such as the curiously named "Mega Parent Teacher Meetings", which suggested an event rather than a quiet conversation about a child's learning. A "Happiness" curriculum that involved moral stories. And the deeply questionable installation of closed-circuit televisions (CCTVs) in classrooms to monitor teachers and students.

On the notion of public education itself, one is left with questions. Does the focus on measurable "outcomes" reduce the idea of education to little more than decoding a text? What about comprehension, creativity, and critical thinking skills? Can "happiness" be distilled into a curriculum, or is it the natural outcome of good education? Can islands of excellence eventually take us towards equity?

What lessons do the Delhi school reforms offer? Good intentions; but some of the steps seem superficial, confused, or even regressive. Teachers do care, deeply, about children's learning. They also care about children's feelings and self-esteem. The policymakers should have listened to the teachers who opposed ability-based segregation of children.

Two more points. In his foreword, Pritchett remarks that with similar entry conditions as those in India, Vietnam produces significantly better learning outcomes. But a look at just one indicator – the child stunting rates in both countries, 18% in Vietnam, 35% in India—shows that the starting conditions are not the same. Child stunting negatively impacts school performance.

Aiyar also notes a crucial structural change in the composition of the primary school classroom - the expansion in enrolment from a gross enrolment ratio (GER) of 78.6% in 1990-91 to 96.9% in 2015-16. This calls for deeper systemic change in curriculum and teacher training to cater to the diverse needs of all children in the classroom.

Aiyar notes four main areas for improvement in education – infrastructure; human resources; technical capacities; and parental participation. While this is a start, two more major areas for change are curriculum reform – what is taught matters as much as how it is taught or assessed—and decentralisation.

Beyond foundational literacy, children must acquire the skills of comprehension, creativity, and critical thinking. Reading a paragraph devoid of context is not enough; more than decoding or data entry, education is the work of building thinking citizens. It should be a rich and multi-faceted journey of achieving one's potential. We should have high expectations for India's children and help them to excel in whatever field they choose.

> The teacher's role is to construct a strong, supportive scaffold for learning and to remain close by, ready to help if a child struggles, so the child can recover and continue progressing.

This brings us to curriculum reform. It is often said that children should "learn to read" so that they can "read to learn". For this to happen, beyond the school textbook, children need access to diverse books. They should have the space, time, and support to reflect on what they read, write about it, inquire into it, retell it, and discuss the inferences they have made. We must prioritise the child's understanding. What is taught, how teachers are trained, how they teach, and how learning is assessed, need deep systemic change. The key is curriculum reform.

Drawing from Pritchett's concept of the "flailing state", Aiyar asks why the Indian state is so weak on the implementation of public services. Is it a problem of incentives, or lack of resources? Does it require more disciplining of frontline bureaucrats, or in Esther Duflo's metaphor, does it need a "plumbing" fix? Does the reason for failure lie in lack of political will, or in bureaucratic apathy?

A major part of the answer to the question of improving public schools is in decentralization. As Kerala has shown, government schools that are locally managed can deliver quality education. According to the principle of subsidiarity, responsibilities such as monitoring attendance and ensuring accountability in public services are most effectively handled by local governments. If a child is out of school for any reason, re-enrolling them should be a local action. If a child with a disability needs transport to school, the village panchayat can arrange it locally. Not only frontline bureaucrats, but local elected representatives and citizen engagement can work together at the frontlines to improve public services. Local oversight and community involvement make the difference.

In her discussion of state capacity, Aiyar draws upon Elinor Ostrom's idea of "co-production", which describes how services improve with greater citizen engagement. Citizen engagement is strongest at the local level. The phrase "the last mile" – the metaphor from telecommunications that is increasingly in use to refer to the delivery of public services to every person however far from the starting point – is not appropriate for welfare and public services. These are best delivered at the "first mile", where there is familiarity and an understanding of each person's needs and context. It is the local government that can regard citizens and their specific needs most clearly at the first mile. Citizens are not passive beneficiaries but constitutional claimants. Hence it is local oversight by elected

representatives that will lead to more responsive service delivery.

A reflection on the word “frontline.” The word has a military connotation, referring to the frontier where opposing armies face each other. Curiously, it is also used for public servants or “street-level bureaucrats” who provide public services to real people every day.

We know that frontline workers need to be heard and empowered more. It is also the case that some of them can be complicit in corruption, absenteeism, or partisan political activity. As such, efforts to improve frontline service delivery have generally revolved around outsourcing; technology; heightened surveillance; or short-term contracts.

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Nevertheless, we had a vivid glimpse, during the Covid-19 pandemic, of both the intrinsic motivation and professionalism of those at the frontlines. Anganwadi workers held the hands of nervous elderly citizens to comfort then as they got their vaccinations. Village panchayat members walked with accredited social health activists (ASHAs) from house to house to get details about health vulnerabilities. While schools were closed, primary school teachers visited villages to start open-air neighbourhood learning centres for rural children. We need to trust and empower teachers more.

In Lev Vygotsky’s empowering idea of scaffolding a child’s learning, the teacher’s role is to construct a strong, supportive scaffold for learning, and to remain close by, ready to help if a child struggles, so the child can recover and continue progressing. The child gets on the scaffold and tries to climb higher. Education is empowering care work – it is not only about “learning outcomes”, in the age of artificial intelligence, but even more about creating curious, confident, young critical thinkers, inquirers, and risk-takers.

This book shows that teachers play a crucial role in helping children to learn. Any policy reforms must include their voices and suggestions. Despite well-intentioned attempts to improve so-called “learning outcomes”, true progress in the complex task of educating children cannot be achieved through piecemeal efforts - such as “patching”, “plumbing”, or creating islands of excellence. Sustainable change requires a far more comprehensive approach.

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