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# Teachers' Participation in School Decision-Making Processes and Practices: the Case of an Indian Government Secondary School

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# Teachers' Participation in School Decision-Making Processes and Practices: the Case of an Indian Government Secondary School

*Priti Chopra*

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*Abstract:* Located in an Indian government secondary school in Gurgaon district, Haryana, northern India, this pilot case-study with teachers explores their perceptions and shared insights on their participation in school decision-making processes and practices. Drawing on two semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion, the findings of this research suggest that a process of equitable education without critical thinking, critical pedagogy and distributed leadership, based on democratic values, may not achieve equality and equity in opportunity and facilitate socio-economic mobility through education.

*Keywords:* distributed leadership, equity, secondary education, India

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## **Introduction**

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), signed by 189 countries in 2000, claimed a commitment to achieving eight goals by 2015 of which one is achieving universal primary education (Waage et al., 2010). The Lancet Commission (2010) review of the MDG for universal primary education problematised the issues that post-primary education is being ignored and enrolment, on its own, is not an effective measure of learning (Waage et al., 2010). The Lancet Commission (2010) offered the following five principles as essential for practice, informing ways forward: holism, equity, sustainability, ownership and global obligation. Issues of equity and ownership consistently emerge as significant challenges in international and national analysis of educational leadership in schools (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2005). Exploring implications of equity and ownership for imperative aspects such as pedagogy, curriculum, resources, and creating and sustaining a positive learning experience and environment for all in twenty-first century secondary education, is marked by three significant issues for critical debate: 1) the enhancement of quality inclusive and holistic processes that contribute to achievement, retention and progression; 2) the successful implementation of reform agendas and; 3) the improvement of local capacity to transform and perform, under conditions of globalisation, as part of a global society. However, current research signals limitations and challenges in contextualised policy-informed practice (Woods et al., 2004). These limitations are contributed to by gaps in research-informed analysis, rooted in the context-specific perceptions, experiences, understandings and motivations of teachers and students, that impact on the actual achievement of equity and ownership in practice. Circumstances informing and created by practice, in turn, impacts on democratic engagement to improve students' learning experience in secondary schools (Unterhalter, 2009).

This case study of an Indian government secondary school, through two semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion, aims to explore teachers' perceptions of their participation in the school's decision-making processes and practices. The objectives of this research study are to develop an insight into the perceptions of teachers on: their roles and responsibilities; the ways in which relationships with students may impact on their learning experiences; and the influence of institutional characteristics on students' level of motivation to learn.

In the next section a brief overview of Indian government secondary education provides a description of policy and practice that takes account of the three mentioned issues for critical debate in more detail. I situate this discussion in a theoretical framework for examining the findings of this study in an Indian government secondary school. Following this I position myself

in terms of methodology. I then provide a succinct synopsis of the context for the Indian government secondary school before moving onto an analysis of findings that emerge, from two semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion with teachers in the school. I conclude with suggestions for further research that emerge from this pilot study.

### **An overview of Indian government secondary education**

Global policy initiatives have, sporadically, emphasized that inclusivity, access for all, good quality education, successful progression to higher education should be some of the key components in the development of secondary education provision (Mukhopadhyay & Narula, 2001). The contribution of secondary education to enhanced national development has been made visible on several global platforms (World Bank, 2009). However, historically in India, as in many other countries, secondary education is one of the least prioritized areas for national investment in terms of school education (Biswal, 2011). When India became an independent country in 1947, according to Nair (1979), its education system remained largely influenced by its colonial legacy. The vision of the colonial secondary education system was to provide predominantly upper caste Indians, from affluent socio-economic backgrounds, with secondary education and progression to British higher education in English. The aim was to develop cost effective employable Indians for serving the British administration in India (Viswanathan, 1990). Moving on from 1947, which was marked by the existence of approximately 5,000 secondary schools with an enrolment of 900,000 children (Nair, 1979, p. 180), despite an increase in the number of secondary schools a gross secondary education enrolment rate of 47% indicated that challenges in the provision of secondary education persisted (World Bank, 2009). As Kingdon (2007, p. 6) states: "According to Seventh All India Education Survey (NCERT, 2006), in 2002, there were only one-fifth as many secondary schools (those with grade 10) as the number of primary schools. Thus, it seems likely that secondary school enrolment rates are low partly because of the lack of supply of nearby secondary schools. However, despite supply constraints, demand for secondary education has risen and is likely to rise (partly via increase in private schooling) because it is lucrative level of education to acquire."

Furthermore, access, retention and progression in Indian secondary education are marked by inequalities reflected through socio-economic, regional and gender disparity (Kingdon, 2007).

Over the past 60 years there have been several policy initiatives that have strived for secondary education reform and access to secondary education for all. In 1952, the Mudaliar Commission (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 1952) was the first policy initiative after independence. This

aimed to identify and prioritise areas for improvement and restructuring in secondary education, for example, secondary school levels were extended to provide for the education of youth till 17 years of age (grade 11). Improvements were recommended for school infrastructure, resources, pedagogical approaches, curriculum, summative assessment and the variety of subjects (Kabir, 1955).

From 1964 to 1966, the Kothari Commission report was a second policy venture to introduce reforms in secondary education (National Council for Education, Research and Training, 1964). This policy placed an emphasis on linking education to economic and national development objectives. Responsibility was located at both state and national level for the implementation and monitoring of secondary education developments. Secondary school provision was extended up to 12th standard (Bagulia, 2004). In 1986 and then again in 1992, the National Policy on Education (NPE, 1986 modified in 1992) developed the Kothari Commission recommendations further and included a focus on issues of equitable access to and increased opportunities for vocational development in secondary education. Particular emphasis was placed on: addressing gender and caste disparities in access to secondary education; decentralisation to enhance state-level control; and increasing autonomy of Boards of Secondary Education to have more freedom to make improvements in the quality of education (Dhawan, 2005). For example, ICT and vocational education linked to national development priorities featured more strongly in the curriculum (Ibid). Though policy emphasis shifted to primary education between 2002-2007, the Working Group on Secondary Education for the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2002-07) (Planning Commission Government for India, 2001) and the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) Committee on the Universalisation of Secondary Education, in 2005, made recommendations for the provision of stronger resource support from national to state level government to facilitate secondary education planning and the implementation of strategies for: equitable access, good quality education, and ICT and vocational education provision in secondary schools (Pathak, 2007). The Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2007-2012) (Planning Commission Government for India, 2008) for secondary education was informed by the CABE recommendations and had the following six goals:

1. achieve universal access (to secondary schooling provision within 5 kilometres, and higher secondary schooling provisions within a distance of 5-8 kilometres of every habitation);
2. raise GER at secondary stage to 75% by 2011/12;
3. reduce substantially gender, social and regional disparities in enrolment, dropout and retention rates;
4. improve Teacher-Pupil Ratio (TPR) at the secondary stage to about 25;
5. ensure availability of trained subject and other teachers by 2011/12;

6. introduce ICT in secondary and higher secondary schools (Biswal, 2011, p. 19).

However, regional variation is significant in the provision of good quality secondary education and in the realisation of these goals (Kingdon, 2007). As Biswal (2011, p. 1) claims: "there is a large deficit in policy planning for secondary education development, which not only goes against the principle of inclusive development and the service-led growth strategy but also affects India's capacity to connect effectively to globalisation. The broad development approach pursued by the country needs a clearer framework for change with more focus on decentralisation and governance issues and quality improvement." Therefore, as he succinctly captures: "India needs to step up investment in pre-reform activities for creating a sustainable environment for initiating change; improving political will; introducing strategic management models ensuring continuity in change at the school level; and increasing budgetary allocation to make more inclusive quality secondary education a reality." (Biswal 2011, p. 28).

Framed within this context of secondary education in India, I outline a few key theoretical standpoints that shape an interpretation of the experiences and insights shared by the teachers in a pilot research study.

### **A theoretical perspective**

According to Greenfield (1993, p. 213) the "school is a crux of values and for values....schools are a reflection of the culture they exist within, but they are also the prime instrument for shaping and developing that culture." Values in a school underpin the processes for democratic participation in decision-making practices and the level of autonomy and control teachers have within the school. Woods et al (2004, p. 443) assert that with regards to leadership: "[d]istribution is framed within a culture of ideas and values which attaches to different people different measures of value and recognition, and indicates where the limits are to what is open to discussion and change."

India's secondary education system depends on leadership capacity development to help shape its future and there is now a recognition and emphasis on leadership capacity building in the national Twelfth Five-Year Plan 2012-2017 (University Grants Commission, 2011). In order to interpret perceptions of teachers' participation in a secondary school's decision-making processes and practices, it is useful to apply a framework based on: 1) an understanding of leadership that contributes to collaboration and democratic participation and connected with this; 2) ideas of education that shape its purpose, perceptions of aspirations, pedagogical relationship and institutional characteristics to facilitate equity and democratic ownership.

The concept of distributed leadership deepens an understanding of leadership that contributes to values, practices and processes, for democratic decision-making and ownership, working towards the implementation of improvement and change in secondary education. With reference to distributed leadership Spillane and Sherer (2004, p. 38) explain that: "leadership activity at the level of the school, rather than at the level of an individual leader, is the appropriate unit for thinking about leadership and its improvement. Specifically...those key leadership practices in our school examining what functions these activities are designed to address and who takes responsibility for which activities. We can then begin to analyze the ways in which leadership practice for these activities is stretched over leaders, followers, and their situation- collaborated, collective, and coordinated. At another level, we can begin to examine how aspects of the situation- tools, material artifacts, organizational structures and routines- defined leadership practice identifying how different aspects of the situation enable or constrain leadership practice."

Drawing on Spillane and Sherer's (2004) understanding of distributed leadership the participation of teachers in decision-making processes and practices in the school will be examined.

Secondary education in India education aspires to remain informed by the demands of national and global labour market (Biswal, 2006). However as Biswal (2011, p. 2) states: "one of the major challenges for education is to discover new ways of 'knowing' so as to make nations effectively participate in the globalisation process, while ensuring equitable economic and socio-cultural diversity... the need for changing the role of the school from an institution of knowledge generation and transmission to an institution, which can respond effectively to the skill requirements of the future world, i.e. making pupils communicate effectively in terms of culture, technology and language."

Critical thinking and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) are useful conceptual tools for exploring how educational processes and practices in secondary school may contribute to equity, democratic ownership and participation in decision-making processes and practices that impact on change and improvement and are responsive to the challenges mentioned by Biswal (2011, p. 2). Through critical thinking and critical pedagogy, education then "becomes the 'practice of freedom', the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world." (Shaul, 1970, p. 34) The concepts of critical thinking and critical pedagogy are applied to facilitate an analytical understanding of the impact of pedagogical relationships and institutional characteristics on students' levels of motivation and learning experiences in this research study.

## **Methodology**

Located in an interpretive research paradigm (Silverman, 2001) this pilot study draws on semi-structured interviews with two teachers and one focus group discussion with six teachers to develop a case study of teachers' participation in school decision-making processes and practice. The research location for this study is, as mentioned previously, an Indian government school in the state of Haryana in northern India. Taking into consideration issues of research ethics pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of the school and research participants. To address the aims of the research this case study engages with the following three research questions:

1. How do the teachers understand the roles and responsibilities available for them to be involved in decision-making in the school?
2. How does the relationship between teachers and students influence the students' learning experiences?
3. To what extent do institutional characteristics influence students' levels of motivation to learn?

No interviews were initiated with students. This was due to barriers in permission to conduct research with students in the school. The school principal believed that it was not necessary to involve students, as research participants in the pilot project, because they were not formally consulted or included in the school's decision-making processes and practices. Informal processes of feedback and consultation were engaged with by some members of staff, within the classroom context, and further research could explore such practices in more detail to ensure that the research is inclusive of the voices and shared insights of students.

### **The research context: School GS**

School GS is located, between an agricultural and an industry based area in the outskirts of Gurgaon district in Haryana, northern India. This government school was established in the 1980s. There are 850 students and 35 teachers in the school. Seventy per cent of the student population belongs to families who are employed as migrant labourers. Thirty percent of the students come from families who work as agricultural labourers. Sixty percent of the student population is male and forty percent is female. Almost all students have low income socio-economic backgrounds and belong to Dalit communities (a group of people historically discriminated against through the Indian caste system).

### **The research participants: teachers from School GS**

Six teachers from School GS participated in the focus group discussion for this pilot study. All the research participants are women between thirty to sixty years of age. All the participants are postgraduate qualified teach-

ers who have between five to thirty-five years of teaching experience. Their positions in the school ranged from Vice-Principal to curriculum teacher. Their subject areas are: mathematics, Hindi, economics, physics, history and biology. Two teachers, who participated in the focus group discussion, were interviewed. One interviewed teacher participant, referred to as Teacher B, had 5 years of teaching experience and worked as a science teacher in the school. The second interviewed teacher participant, referred to as Teacher A, had 13 years of teaching experience and worked in a senior position with management responsibilities in the school.

The areas for consideration that come forward from this pilot study, in the findings below, will contribute to informing a more extensive mixed-method research study at a larger scale.

## **Findings**

Reflecting on their roles and responsibilities in the school, all teacher participants shared that the level of responsibilities in administration and management that they have beyond their teaching requirements impacts on their involvement in decision-making in the school. As these management and administration responsibilities increase, with career progression, they are able to become more extensively involved in school wide decision-making processes. The relationship between roles, responsibilities and involvement in decision-making processes is a formal one –established within the school system and applied to all government secondary schools. As shared, in the focus group discussion with teachers, the participation in decision-making takes place in: “Parent-teacher day meetings; different committee meetings; wider community meetings where designated teachers participate; government required meetings to discuss implementation strategies and report issues regarding policies, infrastructure, renovation and curriculum.”

In terms of their influence on decision-making processes, teachers, working at all levels, commented that irrespective of participation in the mentioned spaces/meetings there are limitations in and constraints on their influence in government decisions that impact on their practice. Teacher A, in a senior position with 13 years of teaching practice, succinctly describes this experience:

In theory we are supposed to report back to the government with our issues/concerns- we do this every time and nothing happens. The government has a very specific agenda and funds are allocated for a specific purpose. Then we feedback on how those funds were used. Funds are mainly allocated for the school infrastructure with specifications such as renovating classrooms, improving the library –we can't decide how to spend it – which means we can't invest in the priorities

that we identify as necessary for the school. For example, computers have arrived for students' use but we have no computer teacher- we have wifi but no students learning to use the internet. We also need to have more independence to decide our holidays and teaching times. We need to take into consideration that many of our students also work with their family as labourers and there are seasonal demands on them which means that they miss a lot of school. We cannot be flexible and adapt to this by planning holidays and teaching times that are responsive to their needs so that they can be supported to attend more regularly. We want to organize extracurricular activities in the school that the students we know would benefit from. We have limited resources, no resource persons and cannot invest funds allocated by the government in these areas. At least the principal should have some freedom to take decisions for the interest of the school.

Teacher B, who has five years of teaching experience and whose main responsibility is classroom based teaching, commented;

Our decision- making is restricted to some day to day operations and any challenges that we need to deal with in the implementation of day to day activities. We can decide things such as the weekly timetable for teaching content, and how to organise students for their live tele-cast lesson that they are now obliged to see...it is more about how we manage and implement these day to day things...

Clearly teachers understand their roles and responsibilities and participate in all the formal spaces that claim to involve their contribution to decision-making processes. However, the top-down approach to decision-making that has been applied to the school's processes and practices creates a disenchanting awareness about how little impact they can have in leading on context-specific grassroots level change. This impacts on the equitable rights of students to good quality education, where they are placed at the heart of the learning process in the school, especially for those students who belong to the socio-economic groups where nation-wide and regional disparities in equity exist (Biswal, 2011). As is evident from the shared insights of teachers, equity in education cannot be achieved without distributed leadership based on democratic values. As Smyth (1985, p. 186) states; "[l]eadership becomes a way of empowering teachers to develop in autonomous ways through articulating what it is they are about and changing it as a consequence of dialoguing, intellectualizing and theorizing about their work." In the focus group discussion, as outlined below, teachers identified that the main areas regarding the influence of relationships with students on their learning experiences were related to pedagogical approaches in the school and the provision of counselling and pastoral care.

They have to learn what is in the textbooks for the government set curriculum and we follow a general method of making them read a specific topic in the textbook. We do a lecture on the topic and then do a question and answer session on the topic to test them. We find that only ten percent of the students are interested in learning. We don't give any one to one support; the government has no policy on this and does not fund this. We give less homework as many students work and have limited time to study and we get them to learn things in the lessons. We do try to liaise with local non-government organisations to give them free extra support but this is dependent on the organisation's goodwill and can't be structured properly. We do try to take student feedback but there is no formal process or requirement for this. We don't involve students in the decision-making and, as we have a limited role in the decision-making, they have no scope to be involved in this for changing or improving things in the school.

During an interview Teacher A explained that:

Students are more interested in classes that they can relate to their day to day life experience- for example, when we teach demand theory in economics we relate it to their day to day life experience and they really learn that lesson well. But for hard science like chemistry and physics we cannot relate it to their everyday life experience and students really struggle with these subjects.

Teacher B, who was interviewed, also shared that:

We have no career or personal counsellor in the school so we try to do counselling and general discussion with students in some of the classes and that really helps them as they ask for and expect guidance. For example, in their moral education class we have discussed some of the issues some of them face such as having an alcoholic father and parental pressure for the early marriage of girls. We try to counsel the parents on the positive aspects of education and request them to delay their daughter's marriage until she finishes school. We also phone the parents to ask them about students who are regularly absent from school.

These extracts, from the research interviews and focus group discussion with the teachers, forefronts the importance of making visible tensions between government secondary education provision assumptions about learning as the transmission of knowledge and the students' conceptualisations of learning and their "identity, authority, and visions of the self and the future" (Goody & Watt, 1963 as cited in Collins & Blot, 2003, p. 8) that can be explored through consultation which is inclusive of their voice. Furthermore, as Archer (1998, p. 34) states: "a structured participatory learning process... facilitates people's critical analysis of their envi-

ronment, placing empowerment at the heart of sustainable and equitable development. Through the creation of democratic spaces and the construction and interpretation of locally generated texts, people build their own multi-dimensional analysis of local and global reality, challenging dominant development paradigms and re-defining power relationships (in both public and private spheres)."

This may create democratic and inclusive spaces that enhance possibility for the actual achievement of equitable secondary education for all. Unless 'a structured participatory learning process' (Archer, 1988) is realised, the opposite, an oppressive banking concept of education (Freire, 1970), can take precedence. As Freire (1970, pp. 72-73) suggests: "In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry...banking education maintains and even stimulates the contradiction through the... attitudes and practices, which mirror oppressive society as a whole."

The key aspects that emerged from the focus group discussion, about the extent to which institutional characteristics influence students' levels of motivation to learn, placed an emphasis on: lack of autonomy to take decisions, the impact of socio-cultural and economic factors and issues regarding parental support.

During the focus group discussion research participants also discussed the following realities in their school and wider society that impacted on students' motivation levels:

- Being forced by government decisions to be absent from class in order to do government work in the community such as contributing to door to door census surveys and the polio campaigns. This interferes with efforts to maintain students' interest in learning and disrupts the teaching.
- Only five to six percent of the students will show an interest in progressing into further education. They mostly opt for vocational colleges and are interested in qualifications such as a BTech or BBA degrees. Ninety-four to ninety-five percent of the students will continue to work in agriculture or other areas as labourers.
- Lack of formal schooling for parents and the gendered bias of parents towards the education of girls also impacts on how the student's academic achievement and performance is seen in the home context.

In accordance with Lumby (2012, pp. 582-583) the issues raised by teachers in the focus group discussion speaks to the concern that: "[l]eaders' engagement with the culture of local families and communities remains arguably...superficial...There are no easy prescriptions for how to relate internal

and external cultures...developing staff's competency to question the socialised assumptions of the teaching profession and to develop trustful dialogue with external community members may be productive."

Without having the autonomy to search for the possibility of finding realistic and meaningful ways forward through questioning 'socialised assumptions' and building 'trustful dialogue' how can secondary education become truly equitable, not just in access, but in opportunities for socio-economic mobility and equality? The visibility of complexities, in the interface between the control over students and the control over teachers, may help to bring to the surface, through further research, the constraints and challenges experienced in the implementation process and practice of secondary education. According to Long and Villareal (1999, p. 129): "interface analysis grapples with 'multiple realities' made up of potentially conflicting social and normative interests, and diverse and contested bodies of knowledge. It becomes imperative ... to look closely at the question of whose interpretations or models ... prevail in given scenarios and how and why they do so. Intervention processes are embedded in, and generate, social processes that imply aspects of power, authority and legitimation."

Applying Long and Villareal's (1999) definition of interface analysis to secondary education provision, may facilitate exploration of discursive practices as the interests of diverse stakeholders, who may hold conflicting value systems and rationalities, acted out in interface situations. The interplay of these conflicting values and interests may impact on the strategies through which local secondary school education programmes become understood, performed and evaluated and sustainable and suitable interventions get developed (Chopra, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

As mentioned previously, the following research questions have informed the focus of this case study:

1. How do teachers understand the roles and responsibilities available for them to be involved in decision-making in the school?
2. How does the relationship between teachers and students influence the students' learning experiences?
3. To what extent do institutional characteristics influence students' levels of motivation to learn?

In response to these research questions, as the findings suggest, teachers understand and are engaged with their roles and responsibilities that may impact on decision-making in the school.

Nonetheless, a disillusioned awareness of the constraints they encounter in top-down decision-making process and practices impacts on their ability

to lead change and improvements that are responsive to students' requirements and specific to the context in which they work. A top-down approach to decision making, that is not distributed and rooted in democratic values, also influences their relationship with students and affects students' learning experiences. For example, teachers shared that there was a lack of consultation with students. Student voice was not formally and strategically included in the decision-making processes and practices that affected their learning experiences. They recounted their experiences of taking initiative to provide students with counselling and pastoral care that they believed may contribute to preventing school absence and school dropout. They also explained that consultation with students was limited and they mainly practiced didactic, curriculum-content heavy pedagogical approaches which focused on the transmission of established knowledge to students. The research findings indicate that enhanced access to democratic and inclusive spaces facilitating critical thinking, involving both teachers and students for enabling their participation in decision-making processes and practices, may contribute to addressing existing challenges that create barriers for the provision of equitable secondary education for all. With regards to the influence of institutional characteristics on students' levels of motivation to learn, in addition to emphasising their lack of autonomy in decision-making practices and processes, teachers highlighted effects of students' socio-economic and cultural environment and their parents' attitudes and beliefs about the value of education, especially, in terms of gender bias towards the importance of education for girls. They outlined how norms in the students' wider socio-economic and cultural context, combined with a top-down approach to decision-making practices and processes in the school, contributed to obstacles in the equitable socio-economic mobility of the majority of students, through career progression and further education, after they accessed secondary education.

In conclusion, this small scale pilot study signals the contribution a larger mixed method research study could make to further research in the areas identified in the research findings. Further research, in the areas that have emerged for consideration through this case study, may contribute to the development of intervention strategies that are embedded in democratic leadership processes and practices which aspire to transform, empower and, thus, enable equity in access to opportunity for socio-economic mobility and equality through education. As this study shows, the democratic participation of students and teachers in decision-making processes and practices is a crucial component of equitable secondary education, especially in socio-economic and cultural contexts where disparities in education equity and equality are evident (Biswal, 2011).

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