Educational Practices in High-Performing Secondary Schools Across Different Boards in India: A Case Study

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Abstract

There are numerous boards that govern the secondary education system in India, with the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), the Council of the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE), State Boards and the International Baccalaureate (IB) and the Cambridge International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) being among them. Although there may be a disparity in curriculum design and assessment practices, there are always schools that perform better than the rest, and one of the questions arises of what is the educational practices that have been at the base of the success. This paper will look at the successful secondary schools in India that are managed by various boards and their practices in instruction, assessment systems, teacher development, systems of governance and inclusion. Based on the evidence obtained through case studies, ten schools, this study takes a qualitative design, which will utilize interviews, document analysis, and classroom observations. The results indicate that convergent practices, which include systematic use of formative assessment, collaborative teacher professional development, use of technology, and distributed leadership, are the foundation of high performance in all boards. Nonetheless, the differences in the primary emphases in the board specific assessment cultures become apparent: CBSE and CISCE emphasize the readiness to exams and grasp of concepts, IB and Cambridge focus on inquiry and global skills, and schools with successful State Boards use supplemental pedagogy, bilingual interventions, and community involvement to address the systemic gaps. The paper puts these findings in the context of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the research in the field of effective schooling around the world. Policy implications include expansion of the scale of professional learning communities, balancing assessment standards, and promoting equity in access to high-quality education.

Keywords: Secondary education in India; CBSE; CISCE; State Boards; IB curriculum; Cambridge curriculum; NEP 2020; Teacher professional development; Formative assessment; Teacher collaboration; Inclusive practices; Distributed leadership; Educational technology; Inquiry-based learning; Exam orientation; Extended writing; Bilingual instruction; Mark rubric literacy; Resource inequity; Teacher workload; Policy implications in education

1. Introduction

The Indian education system of secondary education is diverse in terms of governance, curriculum

and national boards like CBSE, CISCE co-exist with State Boards and international systems like IB, Cambridge IGCSE are finding more and more supporters in the urban centres. Board plurality is a source of choice that presents inequity to families, because results frequently vary depending on the resource access, teacher quality, and teaching model. In spite of this disintegration, schools in all boards have continued to record great academic performance with a holistic development of students. The practices of these performing schools would be of importance to the direction of equity and excellence as outlined in the NEP 2020 (Government of India, 2020). The policy anticipates competency-based education, incorporation of formative assessment, teacher development, and inclusive education as forces of systemic change. This paper examines how the schools operated by various boards interpolate and implement these principles, and which ones can be transferred across institutional and regional lines.

This study has its rationale based on the policy and practice imperative. On policy front, studies that shed light on good practice can guide the state and national efforts to expand reforms. Facilitators on the practice side can learn to improve the quality of instruction and its interest to students. Although the individual dimensions have been previously researched (e.g., effects of assessment reforms (NCERT, 2019) or teacher professional development programmes (Bhattacharya, 2021)) there has been scarce comparative work between boards. This paper fills this gap with a multiple-case study to explore the high-achieving schools in CBSE, CISCE, State Boards, IB, and Cambridge. The analysis is aimed at providing answers to three major research questions: (1) Which practices are regularly linked to high performance across boards? (2) What is the role of board-specific policies in influencing the school-level practices? (3) What are the policy and practice implications that can be learned in the Indian educational ecosystem of diversity?

2. Literature Review

The world literature on successful schooling has found some common denominators of success. Black and Wiliam (1998) state that formative assessment is one of the most effective learning drivers, whereas Hattie (2009) summarised more than 800 meta-analyses to demonstrate the effect of teacher clarity, feedback, and high expectations, which have a significant effect on achievement. Instructional leadership and distributed governance are emphasized by Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins (2020) as the key to sustained improvement, whereas Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) show that embedded and continuous professional development is a significant factor in improving teaching.

In the Indian setting, there are a number of relevant strands of research. CBSE reforms studies show that competency-based models, as practiced in a faithful way, enhance conceptual knowledge (NCERT, 2019). Studies about CISCE schools indicate that they focus on the aspects of long writing, oral communication, and critical thinking to achieve holistic results (Sharma, 2021). State Boards are still heterogeneous, yet we can observe case studies (Mehta, 2019) that schools which have high performance with State Boards tend to go further than required syllabi, adding competency-based pedagogy, English-based instruction, and special remediation. In India, IB and Cambridge schools

work with elite populations but offer examples of inquiry based learning and criterion referenced assessment which meet world standards (Jain, 2020). The frameworks show flexibility and international preparedness, yet the issue of affordability and inclusion still exists (Tilak, 2021).

The NEP 2020 aims to integrate these varied practices by focusing on the competency based curricula, holistic learning, teacher development as well as equity in access (Government of India, 2020). Researchers like Kumar (2021) suggest that scaling of professional learning communities and formative assessment is a strategy that will help to achieve NEP objectives. Some warn that innovations will continue to widen the gaps without handling systemic inequalities (Batra, 2020). This paper places itself in these discussions by evaluating how successful schools in boards operationalise successful practices, as well as what can be learnt about the wider system of reform.

3. Methodology

The qualitative multiple-case study design was chosen with 10 schools (two schools each) that belonged to CBSE, CISCE, State Boards, IB, and Cambridge. Schools were chosen regarding three aspects, namely: (1) a history of above-average scores in board exams over a period of three years, (2) school value-added performance, including bridging learning gaps or robust holistic development, and (3) inclusiveness, as evidenced by scholarships or first-generation learner support.

The data were collected using semi-structured interviews with principals, coordinators and heads of departments (n=30); focus group discussions with teachers (n=10) and students (n=10); document analysis (schemes of work, assessment calendars, PLC logs, moderation records); and classroom observations (n=40). Thematic analysis was used as an iterative process and categories of the codes were based on literature on good schooling: curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, teacher learning, leadership, and inclusion. Triangulation, member checks and keeping an audit trail were a means of ensuring trustworthiness.

4. Findings

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

4.1 Dataset, Cases, and Evidence Sources

It is a qualitative multiple case study that consists of ten schools with good performance in secondary level, including two CBSE, two CISCE, two State Boards, two IB and two Cambridge schools. Three performance-based measures (sustained board results, value-added outcomes and inclusion commitments) were used as case selection criteria. Semi-structured interviews (leaders, teachers, students), focus groups, analysis of documents (schemes of work, assessment calendars, moderation logs) and classroom observations were used as sources of evidence. This gave a triangulated dataset that facilitated within case and cross case evaluation of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, teacher development, leadership and inclusion practice.

4.2 Analytic Strategy

Thematic analysis was done repeatedly. An interim codebook, based on the scholarly knowledge of

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effective schooling, systematised the evidence according to six a priori domains (curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, teacher learning, leadership, inclusion). Within each domain, open coding was used to embrace school-specific practices and adoptions. The practices were then clustered using axial coding into convergent (cross-board) themes and board-specific emphases. Credibility and dependability were enhanced through triangulation through sources, member checks and an audit trail of documenting coding decisions.

4.3 Within-Case Patterns (Summary)

In both cases, backward-designed curriculum maps, formative assessment cycles, and professional learning communities (PLCs) could always be found. The recordings in the classroom demonstrated regular active-learning sequences (e.g., think-pair-share, structured discussions) and intended reteach/enrichment actions, basing on assessment information. Distributed middle leader roles and holistic goal oriented pastoral/career guidance processes were exhibited by leadership artefacts (reviews, moderation records). These facets furnished the local school instructional spine on which were superimposed school-specific demands.

4.4 Cross-Case Thematic Synthesis: The Seven Convergent Practices

In all boards, seven convergent practices emerged which together describe the high performance:

1. Curriculum transparency by backward design Unit outcomes clearly and explicitly connected to assessments and lesson plans.

2. Formative assessment built into instructional cycles Frequent checks (quizzes, exit tickets, oral questioning) provided in time reteach and feedback.

3. Structured engagement routines: Foreseeable engagement routines increased opportunity-to learn and discourse quality.

4. Integrated teacher professional development: Weekly PLCs, peer observations, and micro-credentialing linked to classroom practice.

5. Evidence-based differentiation: Implementation of assessment dashboards to remediate and enrich.

6. Pastoral and career guidance systems: Wholesome wellbeing and post-secondary preparing supports.

7. Accountable distributed leadership: Moderated and frequent review and moderation of middle leadership.

These themes are repeated in interview accounts, observation records, and school reports which implies that organizational routines are not a one-time program, but a sustained result. That is, the high performers institutionalise clarity, feedback and coaching in a board-agnostic but locally adaptive manner.

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4.5 Board-Specific Emphases (Comparative Interpretation)

As convergent practices form the basis of success, the board cultures influence unique emphases:

CBSE: The competency-based reforms were converted by schools into performance tasks, blueprint-based retrieval practice, and explicit exam literacy, which strengthened concept mastery and examination preparedness.

CISCE: There was foregrounded instruction of extended writing and oratory, examiner-style feedback and iterative drafting as part of departmental practice.

State Boards: High performers offset syllabus-intensive demands with competence-based pedagogy, bi-lingual supports and involvement, cushioning systemic resources limitations.

IB: Pedagogy had been based on inquiry cycles, criterion-referenced rubrics, and Approaches to Learning (ATL) integration, which aligns classroom evidence with global competencies.

Cambridge (IGCSE): There was a tendency to focus on command-word fluency, mark-scheme alignment, and practical use (especially in sciences) related assessment literacy to real-life instruction.

These differences depict the way assessment frameworks and tradition of the curriculum shape local practice: schools internalise board requirements and still have a common architecture of improvement (clarity–feedback–coaching).

4.6 Alignment with NEP 2020: Policy-Practice Link

As understood in relation to NEP 2020, the convergent practices offer the tangible provisions of competency-based learning, formative assessment, teacher capacity building, and inclusive education. An example of this is the operationalisation of the NEP call of continuous professional development by PLCs and the data-informed differentiation and pastoral systems that promote equity and holistic development. This analysis indicates that policy principles are effective when routinised in a school level cycles of planning, instruction, feedback and support.

4.7 Trustworthiness Checks

Interview, observation and artefact triangulation has reinforced the stability of themes; member checks with school teams have ensured interpretive accuracy and an audit trail has been taken on how evidence underpins code merge/splits. The overlapping of streams of evidence minimised the bias to the single source and enhances the analytic generalisation of cases to theoretical propositions on effective schooling.

4.8 Practical Implications (Interpretation)

1. Institutionalise formative cycles: Turn short-cycle assessment into a routine: re-assess, re-teach, make a standing routine, rather than something added.
2. Guard time to PLCs and coaching: Weekly teacher cooperation with live student work maintains improvement.

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3. Ensure moderation and exam literacy: Calibrate expectations and feedback Use annotated exemplars/mark-schemes (across all boards) to calibrate.

4. Invest in infrastructure of inclusion: Bilingual aids, specific remediation, and pastoral care aid to turn performance into equity.

5. Spread leadership: As instructional coaches multiply impact and follow through leverage their distributed leadership.

These are implications based on the routines that are identified in high performers and can be made across boards when contextured.

4.9 Summary

The analysis reveals that high performance is a practice system and not a program: clarity of outcomes, formative feedback loops, coached teaching, data-responsive differentiation, care systems and accountable distributed leadership. This common core is informed by board-specific emphases (exam literacy, inquiry, bilingual scaffolds), though not substituted. Consistency with NEP 2020 suggests a consistent route to scaling: internalize these routines, help teachers learn, and assess equity moderately.

There are seven convergent practices that were exhibited in high-performing schools across all the boards. To begin with, curriculum planning was based on the principles of backward design where the results of the unit were in line with the assessment. Second, there were regular assessments such as quizzes, exit tickets, oral questioning, which were incorporated systematically, and the outcomes were incorporated into reteach cycles. Third, the teaching practices like think-pair-share and guided discussions were used to facilitate active participation. Fourth, professional development of teachers was integrated into their practice in terms of weekly professional learning communities, peer observations, and micro-credentialing. Fifth, schools involved data to differentiate instruction, provide enrichment as well as remedial options. Sixth, good pastoral care and career counselling systems took care of students in a comprehensive manner. Lastly, middle managers were empowered by distributed leadership and held accountable by reviewing them on a regular basis.

The emphases of boards were also noticed. CBSE schools have applied competency-based reforms to classroom practice by using performance tasks and retrieval practice using blueprints. CISCE schools focused on lengthy writing, oral presentation, and feedback in form of examiners. State Board District schools that were doing well regularly added competency-based pedagogy, bilingual support and community involvement to prescribed syllabi. The IB schools focused on inquiry cycles, criterion-referenced rubrics, and Approaches to Learning (ATL) skills. Cambridge schools emphasized harshly on exam literacy, command word familiarity and practical uses especially in sciences.

5. Discussion

Their results are in line with the results of the international research where effective schooling is conditional on the formative assessment, teacher professional development, and effective leadership (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Hattie, 2009). The converging practices have been identified as curriculum

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clarity, assessment cycles, instructional routines, PLCs, data use, pastoral support, and distributed leadership, which are reflective of the instructional core explained by City et al. (2009) and the learning-oriented leadership offered by Robinson (2011).

The differences at the board level, however, highlight the influence of curriculum and assessment systems on the school level practice. The inquiry orientation of IB and Cambridge is aligned with the competency requirements of the world and the CBSE and CISCE schools have examination orientation but are innovative in it. Examples of resilience in high-performing State Board schools are that systemic constraints are compensated in the leadership, supplemental pedagogy, and community connections. These discoveries resonate with the warning of Batra (2020) that, unless equity measures in the system are applied systemically, reforms can widen divides. However, they too support the optimism of Kumar (2021) who asserts that improvements can be achieved through teacher learning and formative assessment.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The research finding is that although board policies do affect emphases, the well-performing schools practices outweigh against seven levers, which include clarity, feedback, challenge, coaching, care, choice, and consistency. When placed institutionally, these levers make the conditions of long term success and holistic development. Suggestions to schools incorporate the institutionalisation of the assessment-teaching cycles, the protection of the time to the professional development of the teachers, the enhancement of moderation, and the application of the data dashboards to early interventions. The policymakers are supposed to enable the networks of resource sharing among schools, and offer annotated examples of effective practices, and enhance capacity to perform formative assessment at scale. Longitudinal studies should be incorporated into the future research to scrutinize the sustainability and equity effects of such practices.

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