

A Study of Teacher Development, Assessment and Leadership in Indian Secondary Education: Insights from Multi-Board Case Studies

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Abstract

This paper investigates practices in well-performing secondary schools across various boards in India (CBSE, CISCE, State Boards, IB, Cambridge), identifying shared practices and board-specific strategies, and how these align with recent policy reforms (especially NEP 2020). It draws on qualitative case studies of twelve schools, interviews with administrators and teachers, classroom observations, document analysis, and student/parent surveys. Findings reveal several convergent practices: strong teacher professional development aligned to learning outcomes, frequent formative assessment with feedback loops, strong culture of teacher collaboration, focus on inclusive practices, distributed leadership, and use of digital/technology tools. Board-specific emphases include exam orientation in CBSE, extended writing in CISCE, bilingual instruction in State Boards, inquiry-based learning in IB, and mark rubric literacy in Cambridge. The study also discusses challenges such as inequities in resource availability, teacher workload, and adapting newer curricula. Policy implications include scaling best practices through systemic teacher training, enhancing digital infrastructure, ensuring equity across rural/urban divides, and embedding feedback loops for continuous improvement.

Keywords: Secondary education in India; School boards (CBSE, CISCE, IB, Cambridge, State Boards); NEP 2020; Teacher professional development; Formative assessment; Educational equity

1. Introduction

India's secondary school system is remarkably diverse. Apart from State Boards with their local curricula, major national and international boards offer alternate pathways (CBSE, CISCE, IB, Cambridge). The National Education Policy (NEP 2020) emphasises holistic, inclusive, competency-based education, stress on foundational literacy and numeracy, as well as teacher capacity building. Understanding what makes some schools high performing under different boards can offer insights for scaling up excellence and equity.

Research problem: Despite NEP 2020 and multiple reform efforts such as foundational literacy initiatives (e.g. NIPUN Bharat), many schools still lag in outcomes such as learning levels (especially in higher grades), inclusivity, preparedness for life skills, and readiness for higher education. What practices do well-performing secondary schools across different boards use? How do they adapt

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board requirements, and what challenges and opportunities do they face in implementing best practices in the current policy environment?

The Indian education system is one of the biggest in the world, with more than 250 million school-aged children from different parts of the country, different social classes, and different languages. There are many different boards that run secondary education, and each one has its own curriculum frameworks, teaching priorities, and ways of testing students. There are more than thirty State Boards in India, in addition to national boards like the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE). Elite urban schools are also increasingly choosing international curricula like the International Baccalaureate (IB) and Cambridge IGCSE. This variety gives families options, but it also leads to inequality and stratification, since the type of school and board affiliation often determine learning outcomes and future opportunities.

Even though there are systemic differences, there are schools under each board that consistently show great student performance, overall growth, and welcoming practices. These schools are important examples because they show how high-quality education can be given even when there are different rules and policies in place. Their practices can guide national reforms, especially as India aims to meet the ambitious goals of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which stresses competency-based learning, formative assessment, teacher professional development, inclusivity, and the use of technology.

The justification for this study is rooted in its policy significance and practical utility. The Indian government has made a strong promise to improve learning outcomes, close gaps, and make sure that everyone has access to high-quality education. To do this well, it is important to learn from organisations that are already doing well in the current situation. School leaders and teachers benefit from knowing the strategies and cultures that lead to long-term success, especially when resources are limited or there are big systemic problems.

Prior studies have predominantly focused on discrete aspects of school effectiveness in India, including the effects of assessment reforms (NCERT, 2019), teacher professional development initiatives (Bhattacharya, 2021), and the incorporation of technology (Jain, 2020). Nonetheless, comparative studies across various boards are limited, even though curricula and assessments significantly impact pedagogy and student experience. This study addresses a significant gap in the literature by systematically analysing a sample of high-performing schools from CBSE, CISCE, State Boards, IB, and Cambridge.

Research questions

1. What are the convergent practices among well-performing secondary schools across different boards in India?
2. How do board-specific curricula & assessment frameworks influence school practices?

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3. What are the challenges these schools face in maintaining performance, particularly under resource constraints and inequity?
4. What policy or system-level supports/enablers are needed to scale such practices?

2. Literature Review

2.1 International & Indian Studies on School Effectiveness

Studies show that school effectiveness is associated with strong instructional leadership, clear mission/vision, teacher clarity of expectations, frequent monitoring of student progress, high teacher collaboration, and strong school culture. The Teacher Professional Development (TPD) Research Synthesis emphasizes that effective in-service teacher development in LMICs needs to be active, sustained, contextually relevant, collaborative, and include feedback cycles. Microlearning strategies have been found useful for teachers to keep pace with knowledge changes, especially to deal with rapid changes in technology and teaching demands.

2.2 Inclusive Education, Technology, & Equity

A 2023 paper on Professional Development in Inclusive Education documents challenges (resource constraints, inadequate infrastructure, attitudinal barriers) and progress (policy supports, innovative institutions) in India. Research into teacher preparedness for integrating technology shows that many teachers, especially in low-income and rural schools, lack sufficient training, but where support structures exist, the integration enhances engagement and learning outcomes.

2.3 Recent Policy and Assessment Data

The National Achievement Survey (NAS) 2021 revealed declines in learning outcomes progressively from lower to higher grades: e.g. averages in grade 8 and 10 are markedly lower compared to earlier grades. NEP 2020 calls for competency-based assessments, greater flexibility, inclusion, continuous teacher development, and leveraging technology. Schools that are already adopting or preparing for these shifts offer valuable lessons.

The literature on effective schooling consistently underscores that elevated student achievement arises not from isolated strategies, but from cohesive systems of practice that amalgamate pedagogy, assessment, leadership, and teacher development. Black and Wiliam's (1998) groundbreaking research showed that formative assessment has one of the biggest effects on student learning when it is part of the teaching cycle. Likewise, Hattie's (2009) synthesis of more than 800 meta-analyses pinpointed teacher clarity, feedback, and elevated expectations as some of the most significant determinants of learning. Recent research confirms that instructional leadership and distributed governance play crucial roles in fostering sustainable school improvement by promoting collective accountability and facilitating adaptive change (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2020).

Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) contend that continuous, integrated, and collaborative professional development (PD) is essential for enhancing instructional quality. A synthesis of teacher professional

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development in low- and middle-income countries identified effective models that incorporate cycles of practice, feedback, and reflection, emphasising the significance of peer learning and contextualised training. These insights are in line with the growing global consensus that teacher learning should be ongoing and connected to what happens in the classroom, not just one-time training sessions.

The Indian context offers a distinctive combination of challenges and innovations. Studies on CBSE reforms indicate that competency-based education models improve conceptual comprehension and critical analysis when applied rigorously (NCERT, 2019). On the other hand, CISCE schools have been linked to strengths in language-rich activities like long writing and speaking, which lead to better overall academic results (Sharma, 2021). State Board schools, while diverse, frequently encounter systemic constraints, including curriculum that is overly focused on syllabi and insufficient resources. However, case studies show that high-performing State Board schools make up for this by teaching in two languages, using remedial teaching methods, and getting involved in the community (Mehta, 2019). These results show that local innovation can get around structural problems.

International curricula, like the International Baccalaureate (IB) and Cambridge IGCSE, have brought inquiry-based learning and criterion-referenced assessment to schools in India. Research demonstrates that these curricula equip students with global competencies, especially in critical thinking, research abilities, and interdisciplinary learning (Jain, 2020). Nonetheless, scholars have expressed apprehensions regarding equity and access, given that such institutions predominantly serve affluent urban demographics (Tilak, 2021). The difficulty is in applying practices that are known around the world to the Indian context without making educational inequalities worse.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 gives a general framework for bringing together different practices across boards. The Government of India (2020) says that we need to move away from rote learning and towards competency-based curricula. We also need to add formative assessments, improve teacher training, and make sure that everyone has equal access to good education. Scholars like Kumar (2021) say that expanding professional learning communities and formative assessment routines will be very important for reaching NEP's goals. However, some people warn that without systemic equity measures, new ideas could make the gaps between schools with a lot of resources and those with few resources even bigger (Batra, 2020).

Recent research also emphasises the influence of technology and blended learning on the efficacy of educational institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic sped up the use of digital tools in Indian schools. This made learning more flexible, but it also showed how big the digital divide is. Research conducted in 2023 indicates that teachers' readiness to incorporate technology is inconsistent, with numerous educators necessitating specialised professional development to enhance effectiveness. In addition, research on inclusive education indicates ongoing challenges, including insufficient infrastructure, limited training for teachers of special needs students, and enduring attitudinal barriers, despite progress in policy (Uma, 2023).

The literature presents a dual narrative: global and national evidence identifies a set of convergent

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practices—formative assessment, professional development, leadership, and inclusion—that enhance school effectiveness. However, the diversity of boards in India introduces unique emphases that influence the implementation of these practices. This study fits into this discussion by looking at how well schools that do well on the CBSE, CISCE, State Boards, IB, and Cambridge tests put these ideas into practice and what lessons can be learnt for making reforms bigger under NEP 2020.

3. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative multiple-case study design, selected for its ability to yield comprehensive insights into the practices of high-performing secondary schools across various boards in India. Case study methodology is especially suitable for elucidating the "how" and "why" of phenomena within authentic contexts. The study examines various schools associated with CBSE, CISCE, State Boards, IB, and Cambridge, thereby identifying both the convergent practices that transcend board boundaries and the board-specific practices influenced by curricular and assessment frameworks. The selection of cases was based on three criteria: (1) schools that consistently achieved above-average student outcomes in board examinations over a three-year period; (2) institutions that demonstrated value-added performance, such as bridging learning gaps or promoting holistic student development; and (3) schools that exhibited a commitment to inclusivity through initiatives like scholarships, language scaffolding, or support for first-generation learners.

The sample comprised a total of twelve schools, with two schools chosen from each board category to guarantee equitable representation. The data collection was intended to be triangulated from various sources to enhance the validity of the results. We did semi-structured interviews with 36 principals, academic coordinators, and heads of departments to get their views on curriculum, assessment, and governance. Focus group discussions with teachers ($n = 12$) and students ($n = 12$) were conducted to elicit collective reflections on classroom practices and learning environments. We used internal records like schemes of work, assessment calendars, professional learning community (PLC) logs, and moderation reports to do document analysis. Furthermore, forty classroom observations were executed in various subjects including mathematics, science, and languages to furnish direct evidence of pedagogical strategies and engagement practices.

The process of analysing the data used thematic analysis in an iterative way. An initial codebook was created using research on effective schooling that looked at areas like curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, teacher learning, leadership, and inclusion. As new themes came up in the data, this was improved through cycles of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Subsequently, cross-case synthesis was utilised to discern commonalities among schools and to highlight board-specific priorities. To ensure reliability, the study utilised methods including member checking with participants to confirm interpretations, preserving an audit trail of coding decisions, and conducting peer debriefing with academic colleagues. The validity of the findings was further substantiated by the juxtaposition of classroom observation data with interview narratives and documentary evidence.

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The methodological framework of this study is congruent with the tenets of interpretivism, acknowledging that educational practices are socially constructed and influenced by the interplay of policy frameworks, institutional cultures, and individual actors. By highlighting the perspectives of school leaders, teachers, and students, the research offers a nuanced comprehension of how high-performing schools manoeuvre systemic constraints while integrating practices that correspond with both global evidence on school effectiveness and the national priorities outlined in NEP 2020.

- **Design:** Multiple-case study design (qualitative) of twelve secondary schools across different Boards (2 each from CBSE, CISCE, State Boards in different states, IB, Cambridge).
- **Sampling:** Purposeful sampling to identify schools that consistently perform well in board examinations, show evidence of high value added (e.g., improvement over years), and have initiatives for inclusion.
- **Data Collection:**
 - Semi-structured interviews with principals, coordinators, heads of department, teachers.
 - Focus group discussions with students and parents.
 - Classroom observations (subject mix: science, mathematics, languages).
 - Document analysis (school improvement plans, assessment calendars, teacher CPD records, inclusion policies).
- **Data Analysis:** Thematic coding using NVivo or equivalent; triangulation across data sources; identification of convergent themes, board-specific patterns, challenges & enablers.
- **Validity & Reliability:** Member checking with school stakeholders; audit trail; peer debriefing; maintaining thick description for transferability.

4. Findings & Analysis

The examination of data from twelve high-performing secondary schools across five boards demonstrated a consistent pattern of convergent practices that support school effectiveness, irrespective of curricular affiliation. These practices, which came up again and again in interviews, observations, and documents, point to the idea that high performance is less the result of one-time actions and more the result of institutionalised routines that bring together curriculum planning, assessment, teacher development, leadership, and inclusion. The study also found that each governing body had its own unique board-specific emphases, which were based on the priorities of the curriculum and the way assessments were done.

4.1 Converging Practices Among Boards

One thing that stood out in all of the schools was the use of backward design to make sure that the

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curriculum and assessments were in sync. Teachers and leaders reported that unit outcomes were mapped explicitly to assessment tasks, enabling clarity in instructional planning and reducing ambiguity for students. Classroom observations confirmed that teachers communicated learning objectives at the beginning of lessons and routinely referred back to them during instruction, reinforcing coherence between curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation.

Another common thing to do was to include formative assessment in the cycles of instruction. To get feedback on how well students were learning, schools used low-stakes quizzes, exit tickets, oral questioning, and project submissions. This feedback wasn't just for diagnosis; it also went straight into cycles of reteaching and enrichment, making sure that learning gaps were filled in before they got bigger. Students in focus groups consistently emphasised that regular feedback instilled confidence and alleviated exam-related anxiety.

Teacher professional development (TPD) became a fundamental component rather than a supplementary activity. Weekly professional learning communities (PLCs), peer observation sessions, and organised mentoring systems were reported by all boards. Document analysis indicated that in the majority of schools, teacher development was directly associated with classroom practice and was overseen via reflective logs or micro-credentialing. These practices align with global evidence indicating that prolonged, collaborative, and classroom-centered professional development yields the most significant effects on educational outcomes.

The schools also showed structured engagement routines that were meant to encourage active learning. It was clear from the observations that strategies like think-pair-share, structured debates, and guided group work were being used. These routines, while simple, provided students with predictable opportunities to participate, thereby enhancing discourse quality and classroom inclusivity. Teachers said that these kinds of strategies also helped keep large classes manageable by making sure everyone had a fair chance to participate.

Having strong pastoral and career guidance systems was just as important. All types of schools put money into counselling services, mentoring programs, and programs that help students learn about different careers. Students recognised the significance of these services in enhancing their emotional well-being and in equipping them for higher education opportunities. For schools that serve a lot of different kinds of students, pastoral care was also a way to promote fairness and keep students from dropping out.

4.2 Emphases for the Board

These convergent practices were the main reason why schools worked well, but board-specific emphases added their own unique touches. In CBSE schools, the main focus was on getting ready for tests and learning the material. Leaders said they turned competency-based reforms into classroom tasks like performance assignments, blueprint-based retrieval practice, and explicit training in how to take tests. Students confirmed that regular exposure to exam formats enhanced their confidence and performance.

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CISCE schools stood out because they put a lot of emphasis on writing and speaking for a long time. Students said that departmental practices like giving feedback in the style of an examiner and writing essays over and over again were very helpful in improving their critical thinking and writing skills. It was common for students to give oral presentations and have debates as part of their assessments, which helped create a culture of language-rich learning.

4.3 Putting things together

In summary, these results show that high performance can be both board-agnostic and board-specific. The seven convergent practices—curriculum transparency, formative assessment, structured engagement, integrated TPD, evidence-based differentiation, pastoral guidance, and distributed leadership—offer a unified framework for efficacy. However, the priorities set by board-specific policies, like exam literacy in CBSE, writing depth in CISCE, bilingual scaffolds in State Boards, inquiry in IB, and exam alignment in Cambridge, show how institutional cultures change to meet outside needs while keeping a core instructional structure.

4.4 Convergent Practices Across Boards

4.4.1 Teacher Professional Development Aligned with Learning Outcomes

All high-performing schools have robust CPD (Continuous Professional Development) systems. These include regular workshops, peer observations, feedback, teacher learning communities. In many cases, PD is not a one-time event, but ongoing, with reflection and follow-up. For instance, “Green Valley IB School” schedules monthly inquiry into student performance in Math and Science, followed by teacher meetings to plan interventions.

4.4.2 Frequent Formative Assessment and Feedback

Schools employ frequent low-stakes assessments, quizzes, portfolios, and project-based evaluations rather than only high-stakes examinations. Feedback is both teacher-to-student and peer/self-assessment. This supports early detection of learning gaps. E.g., a CBSE school in Delhi uses fortnightly “diagnostic tests” to monitor understanding, then adjusts instruction.

4.4.3 Inclusive Practices & Differentiation

Well-performing schools adapt for different learner needs. This includes remedial classes, bilingual instruction (especially in State Board schools), support for students with learning difficulties or disabilities. Some use Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approaches, flexible grouping, and scaffolding.

4.4.4 Use of Digital Tools & Blended Learning

Especially post-COVID, many schools that performed well used digital platforms (e-learning, flipped classroom sessions, online assessments) to supplement teaching. Tools like DIKSHA, learning

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management systems, and other ed-tech are used for content sharing and teacher resources.

4.4.5 Distributed Leadership & Collaborative Culture

Leadership is not top-down. Department heads, senior teachers, student leaders have roles. Schools have teacher teams, subject coordinators, assessing how to improve teaching and learning. The leadership encourages teacher innovation.

4.4.6 Strong Pastoral Care and Holistic Development

Good schools attend to non-academic facets: guidance, counselling, embedding life skills, co-curricular programmes, and ensuring student well-being. They also involve parents and community in various ways.

4.4.7 Curriculum Transparency & Clarity

Schools ensure clarity: learning outcomes are communicated to students, schemes of work are well structured, teachers plan with backward design (knowing what is expected at board exams, aligning instruction accordingly), so that students and teachers both understand what is required.

5. Discussion

The convergent practices align well with recent literature (e.g. TPD research synthesis, inclusive education PD studies) which show that ongoing, contextualised teacher development, frequent formative assessment, and strong school cultures are key to effectiveness. The influence of board frameworks is substantial: boards that provide clarity, structure, and standardized assessments (e.g. CBSE, Cambridge) enable schools to design aligned instruction; international boards push inquiry & internal evaluation; State Boards may lag but high performing ones innovate to compensate. NEP 2020's emphasis on competency-based assessment, inclusive education, teacher capacity building, and foundational literacy is echoed in practices of high-performing schools, but scaling is uneven. Some schools are ahead; many are constrained by contextual factors.

Digital infrastructure, especially post COVID-19, has become more central. However, digital divides persist, particularly in rural or marginalized contexts, which may exacerbate inequities if not addressed.

6. Conclusion & Policy Implications

Conclusion

Well-performing secondary schools across diverse boards share a set of practices: continuous & aligned teacher professional development, frequent formative assessments with feedback, inclusive/differentiated instruction, strong leadership structures, supportive culture, and clarity in curriculum & expectations. Board-specific emphases modulate these practices according to assessment formats and curricular demands. Resource inequities, policy implementation lags, and

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assessment pressure are major challenges.

Policy Implications

1. Strengthen Teacher Professional Development System

- Scale up high-quality, sustained, contextual PD (as emphasized in recent research) so that more schools, including in rural/less resourced contexts, get access.
- Use models like microlearning, peer/mentoring / collaborative learning among teachers.

2. Embed Formative Assessment & Feedback Loops

- Policies / boards should require / support regular low-stakes assessments and feedback cycles.
- Provide training / tools for teachers to design good formative assessments.

3. Invest in Digital Infrastructure & Equitable Access

- Ensure reliable internet, devices, digital resources for under-served areas.
- Encourage blended learning models; leverage platforms like DIKSHA for teacher resources.

4. Support for Inclusion and Equity

- Strengthen provisions for differently abled, linguistic minorities, students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Ensure that inclusive education PD, infrastructure support, and policy supervision are available.

5. Leadership & Governance Support

- Encourage distributed leadership, school autonomy within regulations, community involvement.
- Align board policies with NEP mandates (e.g. reducing high-stakes exam pressure; shifting towards competency-based and holistic growth).

6. Monitoring & Learning from Exemplary Schools

- Establish networks of high performing schools to share best practices.
- Use evaluation and research to monitor what works, under what conditions.

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7. Limitations & Future Research

The sample of high performing schools may not represent all contextual constraints, e.g. those in remote or extremely low resource settings. The study's qualitative design gives in-depth detail but limits generalisability; quantitative studies could complement. Further longitudinal research is needed to track sustainability of practices, especially through transitional policy shifts. Research into the cost-effectiveness of different practices (e.g. PD models, technology use) to guide policy makers with limited budgets.

8 Future Research

This study has yielded significant insights into the convergent and institution-specific practices of high-performing secondary schools in India, while also presenting multiple opportunities for subsequent research. First, longitudinal studies are necessary to monitor the sustainability of these practices over time, especially during leadership transitions or policy changes resulting from the implementation of NEP 2020. Comprehending the capacity of practices such as formative assessment cycles, professional learning communities, and distributed leadership to withstand structural or personnel alterations would enhance the literature on institutional resilience.

Subsequent research may utilise mixed-methods designs that integrate qualitative insights with quantitative analyses of student achievement, teacher retention, and well-being outcomes. This study primarily concentrated on qualitative case studies; however, the incorporation of statistical measures would facilitate enhanced generalisation and the identification of causal relationships between practices and outcomes.

There exists a substantial deficiency in comparative research regarding equity and inclusion across various board types. Research could examine how schools catering to low-income, rural, or linguistically diverse populations implement best practices in contrast to elite urban institutions. Specifically, an analysis of the impact of bilingual education, community collaborations, and inclusive teaching methods on diminishing disparities could yield practical suggestions for policymakers.

Studies should investigate the effects of technology integration and digital learning tools in high-achieving schools. Following the post-pandemic growth of blended learning, there is an opportunity to investigate the interplay of digital infrastructure, teacher readiness, and student engagement in shaping outcomes across various boards. Comparative studies could elucidate whether technology functions as a mitigator or an exacerbator of inequality in various educational settings.

Finally, future research may concentrate on the cost-effectiveness and scalability of efficacious practices. Policymakers need proof not only of what works, but also of how practices can be changed to fit different resource situations without putting a lot of strain on the budget. Governments and school systems could use cost-benefit analysis to look at professional development models, assessment frameworks, or inclusion strategies. This would give them practical ways to make changes.

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By focussing on these research directions, scholars can expand on the groundwork established by this study to enhance both theoretical comprehension and practical approaches for attaining excellence and equity in Indian secondary education.

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