

TEACHER ABSENTEEISM STUDY

Research Group | Azim Premji Foundation



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Azim Premji
University

These papers present findings from Azim Premji Foundation's field engagements in trying to improve the quality and equity of school education in India. Our aim is to disseminate our studies to practitioners, academics and policy makers who wish to understand some of the key issues facing school education as observed by educators in the field. The findings of the paper are those of the Research Group and may not reflect the view of the Azim Premji Foundation including Azim Premji University.

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Executive Summary

In the recent years, high rates of teacher absenteeism in government elementary schools have occupied both researchers and policymakers as an issue of deep concern. Understandably, policy efforts have been oriented towards addressing this issue but primarily with solutions that invoke greater control over teachers. In the very recent past, for example, in its economic survey, the government has suggested biometric systems as a means of curbing teacher absenteeism (Government of India 2017).

While there are indeed reasons that keep government school teachers away from class, these have less to do with any delinquency on the part of teachers and more to do with systemic issues that often require them to undertake other activities. Studies actually note this, and rank delinquency, which can be defined as absence without reason, is often seen to be much lower, in the range of 4–5% (cf. Muralidharan et al. 2016).

In this study, we examine a sample of 619 schools and 2861 teachers across six states to analyse more closely the issue of teacher absenteeism. These schools are in the catchment area of the regions in which the Azim Premji Foundation works. We undertook to study these schools to obtain both a numerical sense of the issue but also to spend time with the teachers and to assess how and why teachers actually maintain attendance and teaching standards in circumstances where absenteeism and delinquency may be expected.

The findings of the study show that teacher absenteeism, defined as ‘absence without reason’, is 2.5%. Although our sample is not statistically representative of the whole of the country, this number is roughly in the same order of magnitude as in other studies. We also examine some potential correlates of overall absence from classroom and find that there are few obvious systematic differences attributable to the standard arguments.

We then turn to some ethnographic case studies. We provide vignettes of teachers who, despite circumstances that might be trying, stand counter to the widely received stereotype of disengaged and frequently absent teachers. We conclude by noting that targeting and blaming teachers for matters that are beyond their control or a manifestation of systemic design issues is likely to be counterproductive and to adversely affect the government school system.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

Teacher absenteeism has generated a lot of attention as a matter of serious concern in the Indian government elementary school system in the previous 10 years or so. The existing narrative suggests that there are high rates of teacher absenteeism in government schools and that this is one of the key elements in the infirmities of the government school system.

Since about 2005, a number of studies have focused on the issue of teacher absenteeism in India (Kremer et al. 2005; Government of India 2009; Bhattacharjea et al. 2011; Muralidharan et al. 2016). A number of these studies have highlighted the high rates of teacher absenteeism and have focused on the point that around one out of four teachers are absent on any given day in the government school system. This statistic has become a focal point in policy discussions on teacher accountability in the government school system.

The Azim Premji Foundation's work with the school education system over nearly two decades has suggested that teacher absenteeism is *not as central* a concern as the dominant narrative suggests.

In order to better understand teacher absenteeism, we undertook a field-level study covering some areas in which the Foundation has an active field presence. The purpose was to identify the *extent to which* and *the reasons why* teachers are 'not present' in schools. In both our study and other studies, teacher absenteeism, which is understood as absence without reason is much lower than overall teacher absence. Typically, teacher absenteeism is in the range of 2–5%, whereas the overall teacher absence is in the range of 20%. Many studies do not pay adequate attention to the different reasons that comprise teachers' absence in schools; reasons, given the realities of the government school system, range from official duties (academic and administrative) and official other departmental work to legitimate leaves that teachers are entitled to under their service conditions. Instead, teacher absence, at least in the popular narrative, is equated with teacher absenteeism. Equally, teacher absenteeism is often seen as the single most critical issue, a stance that ignores many of the other urgent areas of concern in school reform. For example, the need for systemic efforts to recruit and depute an adequate number of trained teachers in government schools, the need to avoid burdening teachers with non-academic work, and the need to view multi-grade multilevel (MGML) pedagogies as sub-optimal solutions are seldom factored into the 'teacher accountability' discourse. Rather, the teachers, both as individuals and as a group, are seen to bear the responsibility of all the shortcomings of the larger government school system.

In addition, we undertook a set of detailed studies of selected schools and their teachers in different locations. Despite the fact that these were at different locations, what was evident was the fact that the teachers in these schools maintain a high level of professionalism and commitment—a finding that is quite at odds with the dominant narrative. In spite of exhibiting characteristics such as difficulty of access, poor school infrastructure, or sometimes even high pupil–teacher ratio (PTR), these schools were found to have an engaged teacher cadre, with no visible concerns around teacher absenteeism expressed by either lower-level officials or the community. These detailed case studies attempt to convey the realities of teachers' work in the government school system, and the current study draws upon these to further argue the inadequate nature of the existing teacher absenteeism discourse. In particular, we argue that focusing on a single-point agenda and one that vilifies teachers while ignoring the larger institutional landscape is unlikely to yield an appropriate and nuanced policy response.

2. Teacher Absenteeism: field-level study

2.1 Research Objective

The broad research objective was to measure the rate of teacher absenteeism in selected sites with the presence and engagement of the Azim Premji Foundation. The specific research questions for the study were as follows:

1. What is the rate of teacher absenteeism in government schools?
2. What are the different reasons why teachers are absent in government schools and the rate of teacher absence for these different reasons?
3. How do the rates of teacher absence vary with different correlates of teacher absence?

2.2 Sampling

The districts and blocks in which the study was carried out is a subset of the sites in which Azim Premji Foundation is present, which include some of the more disadvantaged regions of the country. The sampling of schools for the study was non-random and extended to schools familiar to the team in terms of field-level engagement. While these schools were familiar to the team, they were not ones with which the Foundation has any direct school-level engagement. The sample included a fair representation of rural government lower primary schools (LPS) and higher primary schools (HPS). Urban schools were not a priority and they were part of the sample only in blocks with high urban density. Similarly, efforts were made to build in some spread in terms of the convenience sample within the block. Also, even though separate District Information System for Education (DISE) Codes were used as the identifying marker for selection of different schools, efforts were made to avoid including different types of schools (e.g. LPS and HPS) from schools located within the same compound.

Table 1: Schools and teachers covered: state-wise

States	No. of Schools	No. of Teachers
Chhattisgarh	129	660
Rajasthan	199	1040
Uttarakhand	189	557
Others*	102	604
Total	619	2861

* Across Bihar, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh

The study covered six states and visits were made to 619 schools with a total of 2861 teachers appointed in these schools.

2.3 Data-collection and analysis

A set of three tools were used for data collection: (1) a School Schedule, for basic background information about the school; (2) a Teacher Absence Schedule, to record data on teacher absence in the school during the unannounced school visit; and (3) a Teacher Schedule, for basic background information on each of the teachers in the school. The three tools were based upon previous studies on 'teacher absenteeism' and were finalised after a process of internal review and feedback. Orientation workshops were carried out with the teams administering the schedules at multiple levels, in a cascade mode, regarding the design of the study, the tools, and the plan and process of data collection.

2.4 Findings

Table 2: Absence rates (in %)—total and by key teacher-level characteristics

	Present	Absent
Total teachers	81.1	18.9
By position		
Headteachers	83.5	16.5
Other teachers (not headteachers)	80.4	19.6
By gender		
Female teachers	83.8	16.2
Male teachers	78.4	21.6
By academic qualifications		
High school or below	77.9	22.1
Higher secondary	83.6	16.4
Graduate	78.9	21.1
Post graduate	82.0	18.0
By professional qualifications		
Untrained	66.1	33.9
Diploma or certificate in basic teachers' training of a duration not less than two years (including D. Ed)	81.3	18.7
B.Ed (or B. El. Ed)	82.1	17.9
Any other	73.5	26.5
By office-bearing position in teacher unions		
With position	76.9	23.1
Without position	81.4	18.6

Data collection for the study was done over the period August–September 2016. This is a relatively stable period in the academic year, relatively uninterrupted by festivals, vacations, and so on. The team members making the school visits planned the visit so that they could spend around 2–3 hours (minimum) in each school, preferably around the middle of the working hours of the school. The decided day of visit to the school with the intent of data collection was **unannounced** and was the day on which ‘teacher absence’ was recorded. For the study, *teacher absence* was defined as a teacher being not present physically in the school for the duration of the **visit only** and for **that day only**. While the teacher absence schedule was completed on the planned day of visit, in some cases, data related to the other schedules was collected over subsequent visits.

This section provides a summary of some of the key findings from the overall data across six states. The overall absence rate was found to be 18.9%, with 462 teachers being absent out of the 2442 teacher observations for which absence data was recorded.¹ This is slightly less than the rates reported by Muralidharan et al. (2016) and closer to the observations in the Annual Status of

¹Note: all calculations are based only on the bases/counts of properly recorded responses for the relevant variables.

Education Reports (ASER), which have, across the years, reported that teacher absence in government schools is less than 20% in most states (cf. Pratham 2017). Differences in absence rates by various individual teacher-level characteristics were observed and these are discussed with reference to Table 2. The absence rate of headteachers (16.5%) was less than that of other teachers (19.6%) and absence rates of female teachers (16.2%) was less than that of male teachers (21.6%) by almost 5 percentage points. There were some noticeable variations in teacher absence by both academic qualifications and professional qualifications. The absence rate was highest for teachers with an academic qualification of high school or below (22.1%) and for teachers who were untrained (33.9%) in terms of their professional qualifications. The absence rate was found to be greater for teachers with some official position in teacher unions (23.1%) as compared to those without such positions (18.6%). Some of these findings seem to differ from existing studies while some others resonate with the observations from these studies. For example, Kremer et al. find the absence rate of headteachers and male teachers to be more than that of both other teachers and female teachers and offer the following possible reason: ‘Power differentials may explain the higher absence rates of older, more educated, and more experienced teachers, as well as the finding that males are significantly more absent than females’ (2005: 662). The finding that more qualified and trained regular teachers are likely to be more absent than less qualified and untrained teachers (who are more likely contract teachers), reported by Muralidharan and Sundararaman (2013), is not borne out in our study. However, the higher rates of absence of teachers with official positions in teacher unions is along the lines of studies that have shown that political linkages of teachers, in terms of teacher union connections, help them bypass official accountability mechanisms (cf. Kingdon and Muzammil 2003; Beteille 2009).

Table 3: Stated reasons for absence

	Official duty			Authorised leave	Absence without reason
	Official academic duties	Official school administrative duties	Official other departmental work		
Total teachers – absence rates measured as percentages of total teacher observations.*	3.8	2.1	0.9	9.1	2.5
By position – absence rates measured as percentages of total absence.					
Headteachers	24.4	18.9	4.4	35.6	16.7
Other teachers (not headteachers)	19.7	9.4	5.3	52.6	13.1
By gender – absence rates measured as percentages of total absence.					
Female teachers	15.2	6.5	4.1	61.8	12.4
Male teachers	25.6	15.8	6.0	37.6	15.0

*As ‘overall absence’ and ‘reasons for absence’ are calculated based on the bases/counts of properly recorded responses for the relevant variables, there are small differences in the respective totals.

For teachers who were not present during the visit, the reasons for absence were noted under the following five categories: (I) ‘Official academic duties’ such as temporary deputation for teaching in other schools, trainings, cluster meetings, and trainings called by non-government organisations (NGOs); (ii) ‘Official school administrative duties’ such as data collection, submission of reports/data related to mid-day meal (MDM), children with special needs (CWSN), and other

incentive schemes; (iii) 'Official other departmental work' such as that related to elections, health, other department schemes, and *panchayat meetings*; (iv) 'Authorised leave' such as casual leave and medical leave; and (v) 'Absence without reason'. Table 3 shows that among the reasons for absence recorded for those not present during the visits, measured as percentages of total absence, highest was for 'authorised leave' at 9.1%, followed by 'official academic duties' at 3.8% and 'absence without reason' at 2.5%. Therefore, in effect, teacher absenteeism, that is, teachers being absent without any reason, was found to be only 2.5%, with absence measured as percentage of total teacher observations. Rates of rank delinquency, which can be defined as absence without reason, are noted to be much lower in other studies also, as in the range of 4–5% reported by Muralidharan et al. (2016), although this is an aspect that seems to be underemphasised in the larger teacher accountability discourse.

In our study, teachers were also asked the specific reasons for absences under the various categories. Understandably, different types of trainings—in-service teacher trainings at the District Institute of Education and Training (DIET), block and cluster level, School Management Committee (SMC) training, those called by NGOs, and sport-related—seemed to be the most frequently cited reasons for absence due to 'official academic work'. Data collection and submission to various senior offices and MDM-related work were the main reasons for absence due to 'official administrative duties'. Election duty, different census surveys, and *panchayat* meetings were cited as the main reasons for absence on 'official other departmental work'. Teachers present were also asked how their work and schedule were affected if their colleagues were absent. Most of the responses indicated that in such instances, 'teachers combined classes', 'classes were taken by a substitute teacher', or 'teachers gave some class work to occupy the students'.

Further, Table 3 shows the differences in reasons for absence between headteachers and other teachers, and between female and male teachers, as percentages of total absence. Differences between headteachers and other teachers were found to be quite pronounced for both official school administrative duties and official academic duties, with the absence rates of headteachers being 9 and 5 percentage points greater, respectively, than that of other teachers. However, for authorised leave, the absence rate of headteachers (35.6%) is noticeably less than that of other teachers (52.6%). Pronounced differences by gender are seen for official academic duties, with the absence rate of male teachers (25.6%) around 10 percentage points greater than that of female teachers (15.2%), and also for official school administrative duties, for which the absence rate of male teachers (15.8%) is almost 10 percentage points greater than that of female teachers (6.5%). However, for authorised leave, the absence rate of female teachers (61.8%) is greater by almost 25 percentage points than that of male teachers (37.6%).

Table 4: Average teacher absence by correlates at the teacher and school-level

	Average teacher absence
Correlates	
Teacher's age (years)	
age <= 30	21.9
30 < age <= 40	19.0
40 < age <= 50	17.4
age > 50	19.5

	Average teacher absence
Correlates	
Commute time (hours)	
t ≤ 1	18.6
1 < t ≤ 2	16.9
t > 2	31.8
School location	
Rural	18.7
Urban	19.7
Categories of school	
Primary only (1-5)	18.8
Primary with Upper Primary (1-8)	17.9
Upper Primary only (6-8)	20.9
Top-down administrative monitoring	
Not visited	18.1
Visited	18.6
Bottom-up monitoring	
SMC meeting before Aug-2016	18.7
SMC meeting in Aug or after Aug-2016	18.2
Practice of MGML	
MGML not practiced	18.5
MGML practiced	18.4
School facilities	
Toilets	
Not available or Available but not used	16.1
Available and used	18.2
Drinking Water	
Not available or Available but not used	18.7
Available and used	17.9
Electricity	
Not available or Available but not used	18.5
Available and used	17.8
Tables and Chairs	
Not available or Available but not used	25.1
Available and used	17.4

The study also analysed average teacher absence against a number of correlates at the teacher level and school level (Table 4). At the teacher level, average teacher absence rates were not found to be very different in terms of age of teachers with average absence ranging from 17.4% for those who were aged between 40 and 50 years to 21.9% for those aged 30 years and below. The data also showed that for most of the teachers, commute time to school was around 1 hour or less, with only a few teachers with a commute time of over 2 hours. Average absence for the latter category was found to be noticeably higher (31.8%) than that of the teachers with lesser commute time.

For school-level correlates, the average teacher absence rate was not found to be very different in rural and urban schools, with 18.7% in rural schools as compared to 19.7% in urban schools. Likewise, comparisons across categories of schools did not show noticeable differences across the school categories 'primary only' (18.8%), 'primary with upper primary' (17.9%), and 'upper primary only' (20.9%).

Association of teacher absence rates was checked with both top-down monitoring and bottom-up monitoring.² Not much difference in terms of average teacher absence was found between schools visited by officials (18.6%) and those not visited by officials (18.1%) in the past three months. Similarly, no noticeable difference in average teacher absence was found between schools in which an SMC meeting had taken place before August 2016 (18.7%) and those in which an SMC meeting had taken place in August 2016 or after (18.2%).

There was not much difference in terms of average teacher absence between schools in which MGML is practiced (18.4%) and in which it is not (18.5%).³

Average teacher absence was also analysed with reference to different school facilities such as availability and functionality of toilets, drinking water, electricity, and classroom furniture. Except for classroom furniture (tables and chairs), there were no noticeable differences in average teacher absence between schools *having such facilities* and those schools *not having such facilities or where such facilities, though existing, were dysfunctional*.

Overall, analyses of teacher absence against potential correlates of absence at both the teacher level and school level show that there are few obvious systematic differences.

2.5 Caveats

While our study is fairly extensive, some caveats need to be outlined in interpreting our findings.

1. The survey was based on a relatively small convenience sample of schools (per block) in selected blocks/districts that the Azim Premji Foundation works in. Therefore, the study does not aspire to generalisable conclusions.
2. The definition of 'absence' was based on a teacher not being present physically in the school for the duration of the visit only and for that day only. This was due to both the limited resources (field personnel time) to cover each school for an entire day and the intention of not unduly disturbing the regular working of the school. However, most schools were visited around the middle of the working hours of the school with at least half of the school day being spent in each school for data collection.
3. This was a one-time study. So, repeated visits to see the reliability of intra-school observations on teacher absence and to account for seasonal variation were not part of the design.

²Top-down monitoring was operationalised as visits of district and block-level officials to the school in the past three months and bottom-up monitoring was defined in terms of recentness of the last SMC meeting.

³Practice of MGML was recorded as 'yes' in the case of both official practice and unofficial practice of MGML in the school.

3. Qualitative Case Studies

This section of the study comprises seven qualitative case studies. The case studies consist of purposively selected schools from across districts and states in which the Azim Premji Foundation has a presence. These schools, selected based on criteria identified with high risk of teacher absence in existing studies (e.g. remoteness and difficulty of access; poor school infrastructure; and high PTR) in consultation with education department functionaries, are schools that are reported to not exhibit any visible concerns around the issue of teacher absenteeism.⁴ In a way, these case studies are meant to supplement, at one level, the findings from the quantitative study, which shows that unauthorised teacher absence in the system—actual teacher absenteeism—is not of alarming proportions as underlined in current educational policy discourse. At another level, they are meant to provide an insight into the challenges, systemic and individual, that teachers have to deal with on a regular basis within the government school system and, how in spite of such challenges, they exhibit exemplary fortitude and dedication to their work. The latter insight is linked to the larger normative argument that this study seeks to make on the issue of teacher absenteeism.

As is visible from these case studies, despite multiple problems and difficult circumstances such as remoteness of location, difficulty of access, shortage of teachers, lack of adequate infrastructure, multi-grade classrooms, and marginalised communities who are not able to provide adequate home support for their children, to name a few, across all seven schools, we see teachers who are fully present in school and ensure that they come to school regularly and punctually and conscientiously engage with their task as teachers. These teachers seem to engage with their work in a manner that defies the popular narrative or perception of attitudes and behaviours of teachers in government schools. Here, we see teachers who are committed and motivated, working under sometimes very adverse circumstances but deeply invested in the outcomes of their endeavours. This begs the question, ‘What drives these teachers and motivates them to come to school every day and engage with their work the way they do, despite the many odds?’

Many of the teachers interviewed stated very explicitly that they were driven not by idealistic motives, such as a passion for teaching or a love for children or a burning desire for social reform, to choose teaching as a profession. Instead, their choice was dictated by convenience, availability of opportunities, economic considerations, and so on. But, as the teachers also shared, over time, they have learnt to appreciate the significance and import of their work and they now clearly demonstrate commitment and motivation. For some, this may have been because of a particular defining experience with children or inspiring colleagues; but perhaps, it may just be the nature of the teaching profession. In other words, given a certain kind of enabling and positive work environment that facilitates collegiality and trust, teachers tend to be committed and motivated and hold themselves accountable without external supervision and monitoring. Those very norms that drive their behaviour also make them accountable. Though each of the seven cases is unique in terms of its context and its own set of challenges, some common threads emerge across the seven narratives.

First, despite difficulty of access and challenges of commuting, teachers were seen to be fully present even at the risk of personal inconvenience and a significant expenditure. For example, in the case of the Kuphargere School (Case Study 3), teachers made a choice to stay in the village so that they were better able to understand the community and engage with the learning activities of the children beyond school hours. In the Basarpur School (Case Study 4), teachers had to use multiple modes of transport and considerable time in transit to reach the school. In all the three Uttarakhand schools, as in many other schools in the state, teachers had to hire a shared taxi, involving a

⁴Pseudonyms have been used for all participants and actors (teachers, students, officials and parents) as well as for schools, villages and other such easily identifiable places to retain confidentiality.

significant personal expense, for their daily commute to school. Yet, these teachers were both observed and reported to be punctual and regular. This perseverance of the teachers was not limited to making efforts to be in school. This was also visible in their efforts to involve the community in school processes, often made difficult in terms of the structural problems of poverty, illiteracy, and disempowerment that distance socially and economically disadvantaged parental communities from being involved in either the day-to-day schooling issues of their children or the school as a public institution.

Second, as individuals, these teachers and their practices reflected empathy to the needs and context (mostly deprived and excluded) of the children and the community, a sensitivity to issues of gender and equity, and an affirmation of equality in their facilitation of peer processes among the children and in their own interactions with the children. For example, in the Mandehalli School (Case Study 7), teachers were seen contributing towards children's needs and for school improvement from their own pockets, a fact reaffirmed by members of the School Development and Management Committee (SDMC). In the Ruarapur School (Case Study 6), teachers were observed to both actively encourage a socially equitable environment in school processes such as the MDM and maintain a non-hierarchical relationship in their interactions with each other and the children. A keen sensitivity towards children was observed in the classroom processes in most schools, with scaffolding of weaker children in a variety of ways, even in the context of the typical multi-grade character of some of these schools.

Third, the school environment in almost all the schools was characterised by a culture of trust and easy camaraderie, often initiated and supported through the efforts of the headteacher but sustained in terms of everyday work by all the teachers. A collective sense of ownership of school processes seemed to emerge from this culture and it extended beyond the immediate mandate of designated work to the school as an institution, including interactions with other stakeholders such as the community and education functionaries. For example, teachers across the schools were seen to autonomously take decisions in the absence of the headteacher, share by rotation the responsibility of different school processes, and ensure that teaching-learning was not affected by the absence of their colleagues due to official work or other reasons. They were also observed to have worked out among themselves processes of reviewing their own work—in terms of either formal end-of-month review meetings or quick meetings built into their daily routine. Mutual trust and respect among professional colleagues were evident in instances where a teacher could readily share half the teaching load in the long absence of a third teacher (Case Study 2), and where teachers felt no hesitation or embarrassment in admitting ignorance and asking the headteacher for help to understand certain content (Case Study 6).

Finally, all the schools had headteachers, whether regular or in-charge, who were observed to articulate a well-defined sense of what they wished to see in and for their schools. For many of them, this had been acquired through a combination of lived experience, exposure to challenging circumstances in the government school system, and individual application towards self-development. More importantly, the headteachers could be seen to effectively translate for the other teachers in the school a similar vision through their exemplary practices and the professional value systems that they endorsed and worked towards institutionalising within their schools.

Case study 1: Government Girls High School – Uparpur, Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand

Government Girls High School Uparpur is located in Uparpur village, Uparpur *Gram Panchayat* of Dunda Block in Uttarkashi district. The total population of the village is 660 with 118 households. The sex ratio is 1025 females per 1000 males. The overall literacy rate is 77%, with male literacy being 94% and female literacy being 67%.

The school was founded in the year 2006 within the premises of a temple and transferred to its own building only in 2013. The school is yet to have a pucca building and electricity, and the playground is small. Currently, there are 44 children enrolled in the school across Classes 6–8.

It is 35 kilometres from the block resource centre, 33 kilometres from the block education office, and 18 kilometres from the cluster resource centre. Connecting roads and public transport are almost non-existent. The only way to commute is by personal vehicle or hired transport. Teachers of the school, therefore, take a shared taxi every day, at a personal individual expense of Rs. 100 per day. On rainy days, when the taxi is unable to navigate the roads, they stay over in the village.

Most of the community is engaged in agriculture and dairy work. For much of the year, they live in ‘chaanis’ (a hut on high altitude regions in the mountains), keep their cattle with them, and return to their homes in the village only for two to three months of the year. Due to this, parents are not there for much of the school year. The teachers expressed how they considered themselves more responsible for the children of these ‘absentee parents’: ‘If the parent does not care for their ward, then the teacher must play the role of parent for them and treat them as their own children’.

Table 1.1 Profile of teachers

Name of the Teacher	Shalini (headteacher)	Archana	Preet
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Age (years)	46	45	40
Social Category	OBC	OBC	OBC
Academic Qualification	M.A	M.A	M.A
Professional Qualification	B.T.C	B.T.C	B.T.C
Year of posting in school	2006	2006	2014
Total Experience (years)	26	26	17
Subjects Taught Now	Social Science	Language	Science & Mathematics

The school has three teachers—the headteacher (in-charge) Shalini, and two assistant teachers, Archana and Preet (Table 1.1). The headteacher has been in this school for ten years; overall, she has 26 years of experience in school education. She has played an active and constructive role in the establishment of this school. Because of her long association with the school, she is very familiar with many in the parent community and knows the children well. The other two teachers also have several years of experience as can be seen from the above table.

Concern for students was observed in a number of ways in which the teachers arranged for those students who needed extra support. They were found to assign peers to help these students on a daily basis. They also arranged remedial classes for the first three months for those students who came from primary school and needed support to be able to cope with the syllabus of Class 6.

Archana said that she tried to ‘pay attention to all the children’, including those with special needs; she tried to use different strategies for this. As a language teacher, she frequently made them work in groups—sometimes mixed and sometimes grouped according to their local language. According to her, ‘We should give some time to children to do guided talk among themselves, so I design my lesson with these ideas also’. She expressed how she believed that her work spoke for itself: ‘My children are a real reflection or live evidence of my work’. She also shared how she believed that children respond to affection: ‘Children will learn; only you will have to take care about them. If you love them, they will also love you’.

The teachers decided among themselves the subjects they wished to take responsibility for, according to their comfort levels with each subject. There seemed to be a ‘culture of trust’ among the teachers. The headteacher’s cupboard was kept unlocked and all teachers had access to records and documents. In the headteacher’s words, ‘It is not my personal property as we all are members of the school family; so, we all have equal right to access it’.

The school has an SMC constituted as per the norms of the Right to Education Act. The teachers were seen to be making efforts to build bridges with the community but the parents, possibly because of time constraints and the demands of their livelihood, were unable to engage deeply with the education of their children. The headteacher continuously sent letters to parents regarding the meetings, functions, *Aam-Sabha* (common meeting), and celebration of special days in the school, but the rate of attendance of parents for these events was not very satisfactory. The teachers made an effort to periodically share their children’s progress with the parents for feedback; yet, parents did not seem to be responsive enough. The teachers expressed how they felt a sense of frustration at this perceived lack of engagement. As one teacher said, ‘During last month’s meeting, I have shared the results of children with their parents but no one was interested to talk on those issues. They came, saw the results, and moved to their work without saying a single word about their children or effort of teachers’.

The SMC head Sanjay, an influential member of the village, opined that lack of education and awareness in the community led to this attitude. According to him, parents believed that the school would take full responsibility for the education of their children. However, appreciating the efforts of the teachers, he noted, ‘We all are obliged to such teachers who have such a strong professional commitment towards our children. Only due to such commitment, students of our village are able to do well in the nearby Government Inter College KWH for the last many years’. He further elaborated how the SMC was making some efforts to improve the school: ‘This is our beloved school and we all are trying to improve resources in terms of levelling the playground and making concrete veranda for our children’.

Case Study 2: Government Primary School – Dunsagar, Dehradun, Uttarakhand

The Government Primary School, Dunsagar was established in 1932. It is one among the 14 government schools of Rajpur Block in Dehradun district. The school is located in a hilly area, 25 kilometres from Dehradun town. The school is rarely visited by district-level officials; however, the cluster coordinator often visits the school. The current strength of the school is 69 children with 38 boys and 31 girls. Contrary to recent trends of a decline in enrolment in government schools, due to the mushrooming of private schools, this school has seen an increase in enrolment from 49 children in 2007–08 to 69 children in 2016–17 (Table 2.1). The school has adequate facilities in terms of infrastructure.

Table 2.1: Enrolment in school

Academic Year	Enrolment
2007–2008	49
2008–2009	56
2009–2010	54
2010–2011	60
2011–2012	61
2012–2013	61
2013–2014	64
2014–2015	73
2015–2016	78
2016–2017	69

The catchment area of the school is quite wide, covering nine hamlets that have no government school in their vicinity. Children have to sometimes walk a distance of 4–5 kilometres to reach school. Even if other schooling options are available, as in the case of one village, parents choose to send their children to the Dunsagar school because of its reputation and because their older siblings have gone there. The popular local perception is that this is one of the best government schools.

A significant percentage of the population in the catchment area belongs to the ‘general category’; however, there are a few scheduled caste families in the villages whose children also attend this school. The parent community was found to be moderately supportive and engaged with school processes.

There are three teachers in the school—Lakshmi, Jyoti, and Sunita. Lakshmi has been in-charge since the transfer of the previous headteacher to another school. Table 2.2 provides a brief background of each of the teachers.

Table 2.2: Profile of teachers

Name of the Teacher	Lakshmi (In-charge Headteacher)	Jyoti (Assistant Teacher)	Sunita (Assistant Teacher)
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Age (years)	48	36	36
Academic Qualification	B.A	B.Sc	M.Sc, M.A
Professional Qualification	BTC	B.Ed	B.Ed
Date of Joining in Dept.	30.11.1988	16.10.2014	17.10.2014
Date of Joining in PS Dunsagar	26.09.2013	16.10.2014	17.10.2014

The school is both remote and difficult to access. There are no basic facilities such as emergency medical help, bank, or market near the school, and the closest post office is 10 kilometres away. Though well connected in terms of a macadamized road that provides easy access, public transport is available only for the first 15 kilometres of the 25-kilometre journey that the teachers have to

make from Dehradun. The remaining distance of 10 kilometres can only be covered by either using a personal vehicle or requesting other commuters for a lift. The road is relatively deserted, so much so that sometimes, it is hard to spot even a single person traveling on it. All three teachers use a shared taxi for their commute. It is hired by a group of 8–10 teachers working in neighbouring schools in the area. The taxi owner picks up the teachers from a few centralised locations. To ensure that all teachers reach their schools on time, they have to start at least one hour before school begins. The taxi is booked for the entire year, except summer vacations, by this group of teachers; the taxi owner charges each teacher Rs. 2500 per month. This is a common practice across Uttarakhand where teachers reside in the closest town but use share cabs to commute to school.

Of the three teachers, one was away on maternity leave since July 2016 and was expected to return only by end-December. In her absence, the headteacher and the other teacher distributed the work load equally between themselves. The latter expressed that she felt free to raise and discuss any issue with the headteacher and the relationship between them was observed to be communicative and non-hierarchical. Records are not kept locked-up in a cupboard and both teachers have access to them. It was also observed that if the headteacher was away from school for a meeting at the cluster resource centre or the block resource centre, the other teacher took responsibility for all children and ensured that teaching–learning processes were not affected by the headteacher’s absence.

Jyoti, for whom this was the first posting and who has now been working for the past two years in this school, shared how she initially chose to become a teacher because of the perceived convenience of the working hours. She felt that with a teaching job, she would be able to balance her personal and professional life. However, she continued that an encounter with a particular child, Asha, and the experience of working with her over a period of time transformed her attitude towards teaching and her vision of the profession and its significance.

The story of Asha (Box 2.1) was narrated by both Jyoti and the MDM cook in the school. Speaking about Asha, Jyoti said, ‘Today, Asha is able to do a lot and I experience a great sense of satisfaction when I see her. She has changed the way I see and understand education’.

Box 2.1: Inspiring experience for teacher

Asha is a girl child currently studying in Class 2; her older sister is in Class 4 in the same school. When Asha was first enrolled, she was observed to be very silent and withdrawn. For the first six months, she always kept her school bag in her lap, close to her, neither opening it herself nor allowing teachers to open it or take it away from her. Once, when the headteacher, Lakshmi, forcefully tried to pick up her bag, she started to hit and kick the teacher and cried very loudly. She was not considered ‘normal’ by her peers. Jyoti worked with Asha patiently and gently, gradually winning her trust. Over the months, her efforts paid off. Now, there is a remarkable change in Asha. She participates in class and she has been performing well. The mother is also happy to see the change in her child.

Indeed, observations from Jyoti’s classroom reflected how her engagement was sensitive and non-discriminatory. Further, the observations showed the efforts she put in to simultaneously facilitate a rich learning experience in a difficult multi-grade classroom situation and maintain a fear-free environment, allowing children to interact with her without hesitation (Box 2.2).

Box 2.2: A glimpse of classroom processes

Classes 1, 2, and 4 were housed together in one classroom. Every child from every class was present. Therefore, there were 40 children in class. The teacher had given individual assignments to each class. Class 1 children were engaged in completing their language workbook, Class 2 was given two-digit addition, and Class 4 children were asked to read a given chapter from their textbook.

The primary focus during the observed period was Class 2. While the others worked by themselves, the teacher explained addition of two-digit numbers using the black board to Class 2 and then, they were given problems to solve. Within Class 2, for the second exercise, the teacher further divided the children into two groups, each consisting of 6–7 children. One group consisted of those children who were able to solve the problems and the second consisted of those who needed support. The teacher directed the first group to help the second. In this manner, the lesson proceeded smoothly with all children looking happy.

She appreciated children whenever she could. A child, Rajeev, from Class 2, completed his mathematics problems so quickly the first time that the teacher asked all the children to clap for him. Rajeev was visibly pleased by this. At the same time, she was attentive towards the children who seemed to be struggling, helping them patiently and continuously. It was observed that the children did not hesitate to ask her questions.

After this, she asked the children of Class 1 to bring their work to her for evaluation and feedback. She then assessed and responded to their work individually, while Class 4 children continued to read quietly by themselves, without creating any disturbance even though they did not have the teacher's attention so far.

In other conversations, Jyoti lamented that despite having decent enrolments, there was an inadequacy of teachers in the school. She expressed frustration at having to simultaneously engage with children of different classes and ages in the same classroom. According to her, this was not the right way to deal with children and not the best way to help them to fulfil their potential: 'No matter how many children there may be in a classroom, if we put two or more classes together, then somewhere, we are compromising with the learning of these children, which is not the right solution. In every class, every children should get an adequate opportunity to learn. For this, it is important to have adequate number of teachers for every class and every subject'.

Case Study 3: Government Higher Primary School – Kuphargere, Yadgiri, Karnataka

Government Higher Primary School, Kuphargere is located in the heart of Kuphargere village in rural Karnataka, which has a total population of 2259, consisting of 447 households. The sex ratio is 954 females per 1000 males. The literacy rate of the village is 46.1%, with male literacy at 59.3% and female literacy at 32.2%. Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes together comprise 43.4% of the population. Other dominant social groups of the village are Lingayats and Vokkaligas. The major occupation of the village community is agriculture and agricultural labour. A section of the village population migrates seasonally to urban areas for construction and other coolie work.

The school is located at a distance of 28 kilometres from the Surpur Block headquarters. The access roads to the school are very poor. Public transport facility is also poor and people have to depend upon their own vehicles or private auto (*Tam-Tam*), which is rarely available.

The school is housed in two different buildings at some distance from each other. One building accommodates Classes 1–4 and the other building accommodates Classes 5–7. 321 children are currently enrolled in the school. On an average, around 260 students attend school every day.

In 2003, the school was running with 238 students for Classes 1–7 with five teachers. There were only four rooms, which were in a state of disrepair. Especially during the rains, the school grounds would be flooded and some rooms would become unusable. The teachers would either club children together and conduct multi-grade classes or perforce send the children home. The school is now very well equipped in terms of infrastructure. This has been possible largely due to the efforts of a few members of the community and some capable and committed headteachers who, over the years, were able to mobilise the community.

Despite this engagement of the community with school development, during the period 2003–2013, the school was not even able to form an SDMC due to political interruption and caste conflicts. The school grants sanctioned in that period were remitted to the Department due to non-formation of SDMC. The present SDMC was formed in the year 2014; however, it is not yet active and no SDMC meetings have been conducted so far. Only the SDMC President visits the school whenever invited; he seemed to have a very limited understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the SDMC.

Table 3.1: Profile of teachers

Name	Sex	Age (years)	Qualification	Subjects taught	Duration of service (years)	No. of posting in current school	Duration of current posting (years)
Gangadhar	Male	35	B. Ed	English	13	1	13
Mahendra	Male	32	B. Ed	Mathematics	8	1	8
Vajramuni	Male	29	D. Ed	Science, Mathematics, Hindi	6	1	6
Badri	Male	29	B. Ed	Kannada, Social Science	1	1	1

Currently, the school has four regular appointed assistant teachers who engage with the higher primary classes (Table 3.1) and three para teachers who take care of lower primary classes. With 11 sanctioned posts, there is a vacancy of seven teachers. Two of the regular teachers who come from distant places, namely Dharwad and Belgaum, have deliberately chosen to live in the village. They cited the distance and lack of availability of public transport as one of the reasons behind this decision; the second reason was so that they could engage with the community, understand them, and build a good relationship with them, as well as engage with children after school hours. The two other teachers travel a distance of 15 kilometres one-way daily.

As shared by a couple of the regular teachers, their primary school teachers had been an inspiration for them to become teachers. The in-charge headteacher recalled, ‘My primary school teacher Shankarappa had influenced me a lot. He stayed in the same village and spent much of his time in school with children. I spent time discussing with him in his house after school hours. I used to sleep at his house most of the time and he taught me yoga at 4 a.m., and to read books. This influenced me a lot and hence I opted for the teaching profession’.

The teachers shared how they felt that teaching was a worthwhile endeavour that makes a significant contribution to society, more than other professions. As one of them said, ‘Like water, air and light, education is also a fundamental need. Giving education is not just making the children to

read and write. It should include culture and values. A child can get 80% or 90% in his exams, but if he doesn't know how to gel in the society, that education doesn't have any meaning. He should respect the society and get respect from the society'.

The school day for the teachers started at 8 a.m., an hour before school began. While children cleaned the school premises and brought water from the nearby canal to water the garden, the teachers took extra classes for the higher-grade children from 8–9 a.m. The teachers also took an hour of extra class for Mathematics in the evening, from 4.30 to 5.30 p.m. They appeared to work as a team and the understanding and coordination amongst them was visible in the daily running of the school. All processes pertaining to the MDM were organised in detail and in turn managed smoothly by the MDM staff, with one assistant teacher being responsible for supervision. Observations showed that the teachers, besides having their lunch, spent the lunch hour discussing relevant academic and administrative issues such as class distribution and official documentation work.

Transparency was evident among the teachers with respect to information sharing; grants and expenditure statements were shared among all through a share it app. The teachers were also seen to make use of *WhatsApp* to share academic materials, readings, and rhymes among themselves. No visible sense of hierarchy based on age, experience, or seniority was evident in their interactions. This spirit of professional camaraderie is best captured in one of the teachers' response: 'The important thing is that we never try to take the credit individually; whatever we do, we do it in the name of team work. That might be our greatest strength, which helped us to be together and achieve all this'.

Even in the absence of the SMC until 2014 and its non-functional state after its formation in 2014, the teachers, by opting to live in the village, have been able to build a good relationship with the community. Despite a visibly fractured community with a multitude of factions and youth groups, the teachers have been able to mobilise funds for school development, including setting up of a library with books, charts, tables, and chairs.

The teachers were rarely absent, but if they were, they approached the school alumni from the community, who had completed their graduation and post-graduation, to take classes. The alumni were observed to do so willingly, without any financial compensation. On other occasions, when a teacher was absent, either two classes were merged together or higher-grade students were given the responsibility of engaging with the class.

The headteacher of the school seemed to have contributed a lot in building a positive work culture in the school and was aware that he had to lead by example. He expressed how, only if he managed to be transparent, dedicated, and honest, would those qualities be transferred to the other teachers. The complex and demanding nature of his role was evident when he said, 'Everyone has different opinions and beliefs, and bringing people to a common and shared understanding is a tough job. Considering everyone's views, generalising all opinions, and taking everyone's consent to make a final decision is a tough task'.

Case Study 4: Govt. Primary School – Basarpur, Tonk, Rajasthan

Government Primary School, Basarpur is located in Basarpur of Kahan *Panchayat Samiti*, 32 kilometres from Kairi Block and 47 kilometres from Tonk. The school was established in 2001 with one student, by the present headteacher, and currently has a student strength of 82, distributed across Classes 1–5. Of the 82 students, 61 are Kanjars from Basarpur and 21 are of other castes from another village located 2 kilometres away.

The headteacher, Hiralal, has been associated with the school since its inception. It has been largely through his efforts that the school was established and it has continued to function. Until a school building was sanctioned in 2007, he continued to pay rent for a school building out of his pocket.

He recalled his struggles of the initial years of the school ‘Neither did they give me a room on rent for the school, nor did they give a place to sit. I took a room on rent for Rs. 200 per month. Another para teacher was posted, after which we worked very hard to increase the enrolment. In 2007, our application got passed and in 2008, the building was constructed’.

He also described the community’s reluctance to access the school in the early years: ‘They would not send the children, because the school was far and right in front of the burial ground; then, we made them understand and slowly they started to send the children’. The school is located directly across the village burial ground, and even now, whenever there is a death in the village, children’s attendance gets badly affected due to fear of evil spirits. Once the building construction was completed in 2008, it is largely because of the headteacher’s regular interactions with the community that the enrolment has climbed steadily over the years (Table 4.1). Besides the headteacher, there are three other teachers in the school (Table 4.2).

Table 4.1: Enrolment in school

Academic Year	Enrolment
2008–2009	23
2010–2011	45
2011–2012	49
2012–2013	51
2013–2014	61
2014–2015	71
2015–2016	82

Table 4.2: Profile of the teachers

Name of the Teacher (Place of residence)	Hiralal (Headteacher) (Kahan)	Seema (Kairi)	Bhupesh (Kairi)	Gayatri (Deputed–In Kahan)
Gender	Male	Female	Female	Female
Age (years)	36	24	38	38
Social Category	OBC	SC	SC	SC
Academic Qualification	M.A Hindi	M.A History	M.A Hindi	B.A
Professional Qualification	B.Ed	STC	STC	STC
Number of years in School	Since inception	2013	2016	2013

The school building consists of two rooms but with no separate area for preparing the MDM and no separate room for the headteacher either. The school has adequate infrastructure, though no electrical connection. In the recent years, the headteacher, in his efforts towards school improvement, has consistently tried to mobilise funds for the construction and extension of classrooms, construction of a boundary wall and a place for making MDM, but without success. As shared by the headteacher, the *Panchayat Samiti* and the Department have each pointed to the other, saying that it was the other’s responsibility. The school is also not on the radar of the local functionaries. The last official visit was made on 26th August 2016, by a resource person; there

were no other visits over the current academic year. The response of the officials who had visited this school earlier was that they had provided whatever the government had sanctioned and as much support as they possibly could, emphasising that it had started as a single-teacher school and now it had three sanctioned posts and an additional deputed teacher. They were unable to give a suitable response to the question on why the request to add extra classrooms and a place for preparing the MDM had not moved forward.

The school primarily serves the Kanjar, a socially outcast local community found mainly in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Typically, they live on the periphery of residential settlements. The main occupation of the families settled in Basarpur, by their own admission and teachers' reports, includes production of country liquor, running brothel houses, and extortion. They also work as agricultural labourers. A few influential men control the entire community through community '*panchayats*'. The men are primarily responsible for the family livelihood, while the women are confined to the home and they manage the liquor production. Education is not a very high priority with the community. As a result, the attendance in the school is often poor. It was seen that whenever this happened, the headteacher went to the community and tried to find the reasons for the absence of the children and made efforts to talk to the parents. The headteacher lamented, 'The parents are not aware. We try to make them aware but it is not easy. That is why by the time children reach Class 8, they all drop out. Forget about getting a government job for these slum children, not a single child has even passed Class 10. They do not get help and support from parents'. Interestingly, only the headteacher visited the community to follow-up on the absent children, as the teachers did not venture into what they perceived to be a troubled area.

As observed by the headteacher, so far, no child from the community has been able to complete school (Class 10), with the exception of one boy currently enrolled in Class 11 in a nearby senior secondary school. This senior student appeared to be a symbol of hope for some of the other students. During a visit to the school, a Class 5 student Dhiraj explained that everyone was very interested in knowing how far this student would go because he was a role model for them and they were hopeful that he would guide them after completion of his own education and obtaining employment.

Yet, despite the lack of awareness about education in the community, the school has a functioning SMC, reconstituted each year. The members came to school whenever required, and parent-teacher meetings (PTMs) were seen to take place regularly. Both the forums, SMCs and PTMs, were used to take decisions and implement actions related to students' attendance, their learning levels, infrastructure related opinion collection, and information sharing about relevant government schemes.

The SMC members were observed to be active but played more of a policing and monitoring role overseeing teachers' actions in school as well as out of school. An SMC member was observed to rebuke a teacher for watching a video clip on her cell phone, during lunchtime, 'Wah Madam! Are you listening to songs during school time?' to which the teacher replied, 'Brother, I was watching an activity video to prepare for an activity which will be transacted with the children'. There were also cases where SMC members stopped and questioned teachers who were seen coming late to school.

The community, despite its attitude regarding education, had an understanding of and appreciated the headteacher's contribution to the school. During a conversation with one of the SMC members, mention was made of the headteacher's wish to obtain a transfer from this school. The member responded, 'This cannot happen; we will not let him go'.

Though the school is well connected by a road, there are no public transportation facilities that regularly ply on this. Two of the four teachers, namely the headteacher Hiralal and the deputed-in teacher Gayatri, reside in Kahan and are closer to the school. The other two teachers live in Kairi and have to travel a distance of 32 kilometres one way to school every day. Apart from the distance, the

journey is tedious and can be uncertain in terms of time taken, as it is undertaken in stages (Table 4.3). The wait time at the designated spots where they change from one mode to another can be more than the actual travel time. To complete the last phase of the journey from Kahan to Basarpur, the teacher needs to walk 30 minutes. The other option is to take a lift from community members passing by. Therefore, the commute time, including the wait time, can vary from a minimum of 1 hour to as much as 1 hour 45 min depending upon the teacher's luck with available transport. The return journey is similar.

Table 4.3: Commute to School

Point-to-point travel	Mode	Distance (kilometres)	Travel Time (minutes)
Residence to Kairi bus stand	Personal Vehicle	1-2	5-10
Kairi to Samel	Bus or Jeep	25	40-45
Samel to Kahan	Jeep or lift by local village members	5	10
Kahan to Basarpur	Lift by local village member/Walk	2.5	5-30

Yet, it was observed that despite these hurdles, the teachers, especially the two teachers from Kairi, came to school regularly and spent the entire day in school by applying themselves to the job of teaching. The deputed-in teacher who lived in Kahan was less regular and frequently away on duty leave. She reportedly had connections to local bureaucrats and was seeking a transfer. In case the teachers required leave, they applied for leave following due process that the headteacher insisted upon.

The teachers seemed to have an understanding of the difficult circumstances of the children coming to the school and displayed the need to put in extra efforts, given the inadequate nature of parental awareness and support. As one teacher shared, 'If they (the children) can be made a little aware, then only will they be able to move forward'. Students in turn were seen to share a comfortable, open and trusting relationship with the teachers discussing with them a range of problems including subject-related confusions, pending homework, and uniform-related issues. One such example was a lunchtime incident when, while playing cricket, the children were summoned in for class halfway through a match. According to the children, since there was a bet of Rs. 5 placed on the outcome of the match, it was necessary to complete it. They did not feel the need to hide this fact from their teachers. In response to the summons, a student shouted out, 'Sir we are playing on a bet and it will take 10 minutes more', and they continued playing for another 5 minutes without fear.

The school was observed to function under the leadership of the headteacher, supported by the combined efforts of the teachers. Each teacher had a specific responsibility; for example, one took care of MDM, another of the morning assembly, and the third was responsible for the coordination of overall activities. The headteacher was responsible for all internal and external management and communication, which included interface with the community and the block resource centre. On the last working day of every month, the teachers sat together to review the previous month's work and plan for the next. The teachers shared that the planning process was consultative and collaborative and it included discussions pertaining to lesson planning, classroom activities, and optimal use of scarce and available teaching learning materials.

In addition, the headteacher had put in place several school-level processes to enable the smooth functioning of the school. There were committees in place to work on different activities such as cleaning of classrooms and toilets and organisation of MDM. Almost every child was assigned the responsibility of a plant or tree. Whenever a child got time during the day, she would tend the tree by watering it. Should a student be absent, his/her tree had to be tended by the student whose tree was placed next to it. As a result, the campus was well tended.

Case Study 5: Government Middle School Maramtara – Dhamtari, Chhattisgarh

Government Middle School, Maramtara is located in Maramtara village, nearly 17 kilometres from the block headquarters at Dhamtari. It comes under the Lalpani *Panchayat*. The combined population of Maramtara and Lalpani villages is approximately 2000. The population of Maramtara village is 945, consisting of 204 households. Total literacy is around 68%, with male literacy at 78% and female literacy at 57%. The village is predominantly populated with OBC communities, mostly Sahu and Yadav, though ST population (mainly Gonds) is also significant at 36%. There is a physical separation of communities in the village, where houses of Sahu and Yadav families are situated on one side of the road that goes through the village, and that of Gonds on the other side. Most households are dependent on agriculture; many of them earn their livelihood by working as agricultural labourers in nearby villages. The land holding is concentrated in the hands of a few influential people.

The nearest primary health care centre is 4 kilometres away and the community health care centre is 7 kilometres away. The village is approximately 5 kilometres from the main road. Therefore, accessibility is a challenge, with public transport being non-existent, and easy access limited to the few who have personal vehicles; even rickshaws or auto-rickshaws are not available. Until 1975, there was no school in the village. Middle School Maramtara has been set up successfully due to the combined efforts of some dedicated teachers and select members of the community.

Sukesh, the current headteacher, joined the department in 1983 and has worked in three schools prior to joining Maramtara. As he shared in conversations, he had experience of working in challenging circumstances and in working with the community in his prior postings and even had to walk 12 kilometres every day to reach school because there was no public transport. Eventually, he decided to stay in the same village, which had no electricity. According to Sukesh, the community too was indifferent to the education of their children; they would frequently take their children to work in the fields or for fishing. In such circumstances, Sukesh worked closely with the children and the community to help establish the school.

In 2008, when Sukesh joined Middle School Maramtara, 65 students were enrolled in the school, but sometimes, attendance was as low as 20%. The community and parents were not seen to place much value on education; children were not very motivated either. This disinterest was particularly strong in the case of the ST community. Sukesh described the efforts that they had to make in the early years: 'We would go to the children's homes first and talk to the parents about why it was necessary to come to school. We would try to make them understand that if you want your children to be good human beings, you have to give them an education. For this, school has its own significance. We would also talk to the children and try to bring them to school with us. To talk to the children, we would have to become children. Only then did our efforts bear fruit'. Another teacher shared, 'The children did not come to school; we had to call them. Sir (headteacher) had done a lot of work but there were still many problems. Afterwards, we worked a lot with the parents, the children, the community, and the SMC—the results of which we are seeing today'.

At that time, it was also realised that the SMC could be a good link with the community and, within the SMC, the women might be better positioned to influence the children. The teachers shared how efforts were thus put into empowering and activating the SMC, through regular meetings and involving women in the SMC. As Sukesh said, 'In these meetings, we did a lot of work for the participation of women. We realised that if we can make women aware, then perhaps it can make a difference. We also said to them that this is your school, not ours. Slowly afterwards, the SMC became regularised'.

By 2010, things started to improve substantially in terms of community awareness about the school. Now, the community is actively involved in decision making and contributing towards the betterment of the school. The school has adequate infrastructure in terms of classrooms and playground but no usable toilets due to unavailability of water. SMC members, teachers, and community members are concerned about this and they have requested the *panchayat* to do something in this regard. Currently, the school has 41 children across Classes 1–7 and 4 teachers (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1: Profile of the teachers

Name of the Teacher	Sukesh	Ramesh	Jivan	Pradeep
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male
Age (years)	53	42	47	37
Social Category	OBC	General	OBC	General
Academic Qualification	M.A Social Studies	M.A Mathematics	M.A Social Studies	B.A English

The teachers were found to commute long distances to come to school. The headteacher travelled 11 kilometres one way, while the other three teachers travelled 16–18 kilometres one way. Currently, they all have their own two wheelers, but it was not always so. Earlier, they managed by coming half way by public transport and then taking lifts from their colleagues.

Today, the school is well thought of and the teachers are respected within the community as well as by the local officials. Vinod, the cluster academic coordinator who is a regular visitor to this school and neighbouring schools, shared that the teachers were very regular and the classroom processes ran smoothly. Parents and SMC members echoed similar sentiments. As an SMC member said, ‘Teaching is good. The teachers teach properly’. She explained that she knew what she was saying because two of her daughters had passed out of the same school and they were doing very well in high school.

The teachers were not only regular but also punctual. The headteacher explained, ‘We have jointly decided that we will all make sure that we are in school 10 minutes before the morning assembly begins’. They also were observed to work well together and communicate regularly with each other, especially when it came to student-related matters. In one such incident, the teachers noticed a particular child in Class 8 not focusing on his studies, though he had supposedly been a good student in Class 6 and 7. They discussed the matter between themselves first and only then talked to the parents and to the child, expressing their concern. Teacher concern was also visible in the case of a child with special needs who was struggling in school; the teachers tried to do what was best for her, including getting her a hearing aid and placing her case before the *panchayat* and the Department of School Education. Unfortunately, their efforts did not yield any immediate results.

There was no visible sense of hierarchy among the teachers and they were seen to take decisions in a participative manner. According to the headteacher, they all worked together as a team and had complete autonomy to decide which classes they wished to teach. He said, ‘I say that whichever classes you wish to teach, you must decide yourself. I myself take class, mostly Sanskrit and Social Science’. In his absence from the school, the teachers were expected to autonomously take decisions in the interest of the school. He further emphasised, ‘If a teacher is on leave, we try not to let the children’s work suffer’. Teachers also shared responsibility for other school processes. For example, teachers provided regular oversight of MDM and offered guidance whenever required to the self-help group (SHG) that managed the MDM. In the recent past, there were two occasions when the teachers and the community members had to coordinate to ensure that MDM was run properly in the absence of the regular cook.

It was seen that the headteacher had tried to create a variety of other platforms for children’s learning. For example, *Bal Sabha* was one such platform. It was held on Saturdays. Children got an opportunity to speak in both extempore and prepared fashion on a variety of topics such as festivals and environment. Children themselves planned for this event and community members were invited. The headteacher expressed his belief that, ‘To develop the ability to think and express fearlessly and independently, platforms like this are very necessary’.

Case Study 6: Upper Primary School Ruparpur – Bageshwar, Uttarakhand

Upper Primary School Ruparpur comes under Garud Block of Bageshwar district. It is located 18 kilometres from the block resource centre and 7 kilometres from the cluster resource centre. There is no public transport and the school can be reached only by personal vehicle or a hired taxi. The motorable road ends some distance before the school, and one has to walk the last stretch of nearly 1.5 kilometres on an uneven steep road to finally reach the school. During the rains, this becomes even more challenging for the teachers and the students. Local government officials also visit it very infrequently because of its remoteness and inaccessibility.

The school was established in 2010 with 1 teacher and 11 students. Over the years, enrolment has increased gradually and the current enrolment is 38 (Table 6.1). Most children are from an OBC community, Goswami, from the village Ruparpur and other nearby villages. The primary occupation of the village is agriculture, managed mostly by women. Discussions with the women revealed that the men in the village tend to shirk work and to indulge in excessive drinking; women, therefore, manage the household, livelihood, and the family economy. They assume responsibility for sending their children to school, which was also evident from the SMC meeting, attended mostly by mothers.

Table 6.1: Enrolment in school

Academic Year	Enrolment
2010–2011	11
2011–2012	12
2012–2013	16
2013–2014	15
2014–2015	22
2015–2016	28
2016–2017	38

Today, there are three teachers in the school, including the headteacher (Table 6.2). All three teachers live in Garud and travel a distance of 25 kilometres one way. Like many teachers in Uttarakhand, who work in remote inaccessible villages not connected by public transport, they hire a shared taxi to take them to school every day. Typically, the taxi picks them up from a central location and then drops them off at school. In the case of Ruparpur, the one-way travel time can vary from 1 hour to 1 hour 10 minutes. With wait time factored in, the total travel time in a day could add up to almost 3 hours. Table 6.3 details the steps a teacher has to follow to travel from his residence to the school. The cost of the taxi-ride is Rs. 80 per day for an individual teacher, an expenditure of almost Rs. 2000 per month.

Table 6.2: Profile of teachers

Name of the Teacher	Rajesh	Lokesh	Kedar
Gender	Male	Male	Male
Age (years)	39	39	38
Social Category	General	General	General
Academic Qualification	M.A Political Science	M. Sc Chemistry	M.A Hindi
Professional Qualification	B. Ed	B. Ed	B. Ed
Year of joining the school	2015	2016	2015

Table 6.3: Commute to school

Point-to-point travel	Mode	Distance (kilometres)	Travel Time (minutes)
Residence to pick-up point	Walk	0.3–0.5	10
Pick-up point to Ruparpur school dropping point	Cab	18–20	40–45
Dropping point to UPS Ruparpur	Walk	1.5	10–15

Teachers were found to share a good relationship with each other. As they indicated, the daily commute together gave them additional time with each other and helped to build a sense of camaraderie. Every morning after assembly, the teachers were observed to meet and discuss operational issues related to daily classroom activities such as allocation of classes, time required by each teacher in a particular class, and any other specific challenges. Through this routine of informal discussion, they also decided what was needed to be done in case a teacher was absent.

According to the teachers, they related to the headteacher as an ‘approachable friend’, rather than as a figure of authority. He was reported to be encouraging of new ideas proposed by the teachers and to facilitate the implementation of these ideas in the classrooms by the teachers. In school-based interactions, it was observed that the headteacher made efforts to create a non-threatening environment, which allowed the teachers to be honest with each other in articulating their differences or even expressing their ignorance regarding some content. As one of the teachers recalled, ‘Once, we were discussing a topic during which there was a reference to photosynthesis. I did not know much beyond “the process of food production of plants”. After the class, I shared this with Rajesh Sir and then we both discussed with Lokesh Sir (science teacher). He explained the process in detail and discussed the same topic in his next class also’. He further elaborated that the headteacher was a good manager who took care of all the administrative work and other demands that kept coming from the department. This left the teachers free to focus on teaching–learning and classroom-related matters.

The headteacher in question, Rajesh, was a former cluster resource coordinator. His belief, that children need a supportive environment to be able to learn, was visible in the encouragement he gave to children to participate actively in the classroom and the way he used their own context and relevant examples to discuss concepts. Students were seen to be actively participating in his classes and shared how they enjoyed his style of teaching. Narrating his experience, one student of Class 8 said, ‘When we were studying about the parliament, Rajesh Sir taught us very nicely and showed us Samvidhaan (Constitution) video. We enjoy his class very much’. Even the community members shared that he was one of the primary reasons why children had shown an increasing interest in coming to school. According to them, he also understood the context of the community and included them in every decision related to school, such as organising events and celebrations such as the Annual Day.

The character of the school was reflected in some of the school processes. The children were seen taking responsibility, by rotation, for distribution of food during the MDM, regardless of gender and caste. This involved taking the utensils and food from the *bhojanmata* and distributing them to all the children. The teachers helped the children to lay out the mat on the ground and sat along with the children on the same mat for MDM. After the children were seated, the headteacher reshuffled the students and made sure that every girl sat next to a boy. The reason for doing so, he responded, was that children needed to understand and be sensitive towards gender issues and not be afraid of tackling these issues upfront. The school did not follow the practice of ringing bells to indicate the end of a period of study. According to the headteacher, 'The children are not here for training, they are here for education, which should be without fear'. He explained that he drew many ideas from the reading around education that he did regularly. Even the school assembly was unique in its approach. It was conducted in three languages, with Hindi, English, and Sanskrit being used on alternate days. A day before, a group of two or three students were nominated by the class for the next day's assembly. All the proceedings, including instructions and introduction of students, were in the chosen language of the day (English, Sanskrit, or Hindi). Birthdays of children, if any, were celebrated by singing songs and presenting the child with a pen or other similar stationery.

Other school activities that were organised included educational tours, cleanliness campaign, *Bal Sabha*, summer camp, and gardening week. Some of these were at the behest of the department and some were initiatives proposed by the headteacher. For example, the school organised a two-day event after the exams every year. The first day was devoted to cleaning the school premises thoroughly and to taking care of the plants. The next day, the students and teachers participated in a cooking festival where all the students cooked local dishes in the open and relished it together. This event was an idea of the headteacher to acquaint the children with local cuisine and culture.

Case Study 7: Government Lower Primary School – Mandehalli, Mandya District, Karnataka

Government Lower Primary School (LPS), Mandehalli is located in Mandehalli cluster of Mandya North Block, about 12 kilometres from Mandya district headquarters. Though not very far from the district headquarters, the connectivity to the city in terms of transport is very poor. There is a single bus plying to this village from Mandya. From the bus stop at Mandehalli, to reach the school, one has to walk another 2.5 kilometres, crossing an uninhabited landscape of fields and canals, which is known not to be safe. Villagers with motor cycles offering a lift to children on this route is a common sight in Mandehalli village.

There are approximately 150 families in the village—a primarily migrant tribal population who have gradually settled here. Most of them are uneducated and poor and depend upon piece work in the fields and daily wages. Work in the fields is available only at the time of a seasonal crop; during the non-season period, the villagers have to look for other sources of livelihood. Because of broken homes, many children live with a single parent or only grandparents.

The school was established in 1981. Since then, it has had a steady enrolment of around 30 children every year. Currently, the school has 25 children. It has adequate infrastructure and large premises, which makes space for both a playground and a kitchen garden. The kitchen garden is maintained by children of Classes 4 and 5 and the teachers. There is a female cook for the MDM.

The school has two teachers, Rachaiah, the in-charge headteacher, and Prakash, an assistant teacher (Table 7.1). Rachaiah is a senior teacher with an experience of 23 years, of which 20 have been with this school. The two teachers travel to school together by motorbike, which frees them from depending upon local transport. The two teachers were observed to work closely together. Rachaiah takes care of Classes 1–3 and Prakash takes care of Classes 4 and 5.

Table 7.1: Profile of teachers

Name of the teacher	Gender	Age	Academic qualification	Professional qualification	Year of joining service	Year of service in this school
Rachaiiah	Male	46	PUC	TCH	1994	20
Prakash	Male	36	B.Sc	B.Ed	2014	2

The concern of the teachers for the children was manifest in the way they taught and the way they ran the school. The teachers knew each child well in terms of their family background. It was observed that each child was given attention in class and that the teachers also paid attention to aspects such as personal hygiene, especially for those children who did not seem to get proper care at home. When the school was found to be in need of something additional to those addressed by funds received from the department, either donations were sought from the Rotary or *Gram Panchayat* or the teachers contributed from their own pockets. Shortage of resources such as notebooks and pencils was seen to be replenished personally by the teachers.

The teachers' empathy with the difficult context of the community was seen in their responses. As the headteacher shared, 'The community is very innocent and humble and the parents want their children to study and do well in their life. They send their children to school despite the hardship they face. They hardly come to the school because they are at their work in the field during school hours and coming to school is nothing but a loss of income for that day. I cannot expect much from the parents when it comes to following-up on the studies of their children or providing them with uniforms and books. Often, a few children come to school without breakfast and have to wait until noon when lunch is provided in school. We do not expect any financial support from the parents. All that we want is their involvement and support for the child. We invite them for special events such as Independence Day and Children's day and provide them the opportunity to view the talents of their children through the cultural programs organised for the occasion. They are very happy with the progress of their children; they also encourage other parents to send their children to our school. For 19 years, there is no reduction in school strength. We always have an average of 25–30 children in our school'.

The easy camaraderie between the teachers and their sense of commitment to their work was also reflected in their responses. As Rachaiiah shared, 'Prakash and I have a very good understanding and mutual respect. After the morning assembly, both of us go to our classes and see each other again during lunch hour. Our next meeting is only in the evening, after school hours. We have maintained this principle so that our focus is not diverted from the classroom during class hours. When there is some important work such as administrative work, we both share it. Prakash is very cooperative as well as very concerned about the children and the school. It becomes very easy for me because of our like-mindedness. We discuss together about new things that we can do to improve the classroom, academic progress of children, and the kitchen garden, and we also share our personal matters. We are good friends more than colleagues'.

The headteacher was happy to be teaching the lower grades as he believed that Classes 1–3 were foundational for preparing children for future learning. He also spoke very proudly of the learning levels of the children in the school, saying that they were ahead of their class competencies and compared very well to other schools and even the private schools.

Both teachers were found to share the same MDM as the children and reported that they contributed a sum of Rs. 500 each per month to make up for the shortfall between the actual MDM expenses and the official allocated funding and ensure that each child was well fed. The two teachers personally served the children and ate only after the children had eaten. Milk was given to

the children three times a week. Additionally, the headteacher made sure that he had a supply of biscuits ready for those children who came to school without breakfast. Any visitor to the school, such as a parent, was also provided lunch. The assistant teacher Prakash contributed Rs. 2000 and provided a special meal for the children once a year.

As conversations with Prakash revealed, though he was not a primary teacher by choice, he now found the work enjoyable. He explained, 'I like teaching, hence I chose this profession. I was not sure if I wanted to teach small children or high school children when I was doing my course. I got this appointment as a primary school teacher. Initially, I was a bit sceptical but gradually, I started liking my work. Teaching little children gives me a lot of satisfaction, especially when I see rapid progress in them'. Prakash was observed to be a regular visitor to the neighbouring Teacher Learning Centre and shared that he frequently borrowed resources as well as engaged in discussions with resource persons. He has learnt to use a computer, following which he has bought a personal laptop that he used in the classroom for showing relevant videos and photographs while teaching.

The school had an active and cooperative SDMC that was seen to be supportive of Rachaiah's initiatives. The latter in turn was meticulous about sharing all information, especially related to funds and their deployment, to ensure transparency. All SDMC meetings were held only after 7.30 p.m. in the evening so that there was no disruption of work for the attending members. One of the SDMC members, Keshavaiah, affirmed the positive role of the teachers: 'We are lucky to get these teachers in our school. Both of them are like siblings, committed to the school and children, and we trust that our children are getting very good education in this school. They are transparent about the school development fund and incentives given by the department. We take collective decisions while initiating any school development work. When there is excess money required, our teachers manage the funds by either collecting donations or most often, spending their own money. We are poor and not in a position to contribute financially but all that they demand from us is to send children regularly to school. By holding parent-teacher meetings, they ensure that we know and understand the progress of our children. Almost all the parents of these children are labourers and very few of them are literates. So, the entire responsibility of our children's education lies on the teachers'.

Rachaiah expressed his frustration of being the in-charge headteacher with added responsibilities of school administration, since this implied that he had to often take time away from the children and the classroom. He lamented that if he had enough time in the classroom, he could have done better: 'I could have taught Mathematics by referring to different text books, apart from our textbooks, if I had to focus only on the classroom. Children could gain an enhanced perspective. Children at this age are capable of learning anything that you teach them'.

The cluster resource person, Sumathi, who visited the schools once a month, had the following to say about the two teachers: 'He (Rachaiah) comes (to cluster or block resource centres) either before school hours in the morning or after school hours in the evening. He does not like to do any of the office work during school hours. Rachaiah and Prakash apply for leave only when there is an emergency and not otherwise. Both are very honest in their work, transparent in money dealings, and committed to work. This is one of the best schools in our block, despite all constraints. The learning levels of the children here are excellent, all the registers and documents required by the department are up-to-date, there are no delays in giving incentives to children, the MDM is very nutritious, and there is a warm atmosphere in the school. Intimation or non-intimation of my visit does not make any difference, as there is no pretention'.

When questioned about his motivation, Rachaiah said, 'I earn my livelihood because of these children. I owe them a good education. This thought motivates me to teach them with dedication'.

4. Concluding Thoughts

The study finds that in effect, teacher absenteeism, that is, teachers being absent without any reason, is only of the order of 2.5%. This aligns with other studies on teacher absenteeism, which indicate that rank delinquency is lower than 5%. Other findings point to the systemic challenge of non-school duties that still comprise a significant portion of their work time that the teachers have to spend in activities not related to their primary work engagement—school teaching. At the teacher level, female teachers are found to be less absent than male teachers and commute time is seen to make a difference with relatively longer commute time associated with higher absence, both resonating with findings from other studies on teacher absenteeism. In terms of other teacher-level and school-level correlates of teacher absence, no remarkable systematic differences are evident.

In addition, the seven case studies attempt to present a more nuanced understanding of the existing realities of the government school system in general and teachers' work in specific—aspects that remain undervalued in current research studies and policy discourse. The case studies show that teachers in government schools do engage with their work as conscientious professionals, even in challenging contexts of systemic difficulties and personal inconveniences. This brings us to a broader observation on the nature of discourse that has been sought to be built around teacher absenteeism in government schools. The current discourse overly stresses the point of overall teacher absence, this being in the order of 20%, which feeds into popular perceptions of an 'unaccountable' government school system, with a specific focus on purportedly 'unaccountable' teachers. This has also become a rallying point for policy measures and initiatives, often explicitly or implicitly directed at government school teachers, which have serious implications for developing a professional cadre of regular, well-trained teachers in the government school system. The policy suggestions and initiatives range from replacement of a regular cadre by contractual teachers, mandated biometric attendance of teachers, and invitation to retired professionals from other domains to volunteer as teachers in the school system. Here, 'efficiency' becomes one of the most important parameters in the evaluation of the aims, processes, and outcomes of an educational system, often at the cost of other parameters that make for a strong government school system.

At one level, what this discourse of 'efficiency' and 'accountability' ignores is the systemic and everyday reality of government schools, with multiple factors contributing to teacher absences, not all of which are related to 'lack of accountability'. Indeed, as this study shows, absence without reason is quite insignificant when compared to the systemic reasons, for teacher absence in schools, such as other academic and administrative duties assigned to them. In such a scenario, the current teacher absenteeism discourse seems to endorse a position in which the teachers should be subject to an insecure work environment that potentially creates accountability.

At another level, this discourse does not pay sufficient attention to the very nature of the teaching profession in which autonomy often defines the engagement and endeavour of the teacher and acts as the main motivating factor guiding her work. The case studies indeed exemplify this aspect of teachers' work. Moreover, accountability as conceptualised in the current teacher absenteeism discourse overly emphasises 'individual' and 'outcomes' accountability at the cost of *process accountability*. For understanding accountability through the latter perspective, it would be necessary to consider systemic factors contributing to accountability issues (e.g. poorly developed systems of teacher preparation, recruitment, and deployment; inadequate institutional mechanisms for teacher mentoring and support; and inadequate working conditions for teachers in terms of alignment to key teaching–learning tasks). Other studies have also emphasised how absence of teachers' voices and agency in policy-making and implementation processes, inadequate appreciation from immediate stakeholders such as higher authorities and parents, and absence of meaningful peer-engagement forums for self-development have led to demotivation

among government school teachers (cf. Batra 2005; Ramachandran 2005; Mooij 2008). Aligned with these studies, this study also seeks to pave the path for a deeper and more engaged understanding of the above concerns and challenges surrounding teachers' work, which in turn can guide the nature of policies around this issue.

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