

A. The Context: India's Rural Government Schools

From Yadgir in North East Karnataka to Banaskantha and Sabarkantha in Gujarat, Vidisha and Datia in Madhya Pradesh, Tonk and Sirohi in Rajasthan or Uttarkashi and Udhamasinghnagar in Uttarakhand, the story is the same. Less than 10% of our government elementary schools are able to ensure that all the three basic criteria of universal elementary education – universal enrolment, retention or regular attendance and achievement of learning outcomes - are being fulfilled. While universal enrolment is probably being met by over 90% of our schools, the average attendance of children in most schools would be around 70%. But the killer is that less than 10% of schools can demonstrate the achievement of adequate learning outcomes for a majority of the children, while the other 90% are clearly performing poorly.

Why are only a few schools successful in overcoming the constraints that confront all our schools in India? They are not "great" schools – with great vision, great goals, great classroom processes and children with great critical thinking and conceptual abilities. However, these schools are heroic simply because they are able to demonstrate that every child in their school is learning in a warm and enabling environment. They are far removed from greatness - but they have crossed the chasm. It is in the context of having been able to overcome constraints that we refer to them as "successful schools". It is within this context - and limited definition of success - that we examine the factors that make these schools "successful".

B. The Research Bed: Learning Guarantee Program

Learning Guarantee Program - a joint initiative of the state government and Azim Premji Foundation – was implemented in seven districts of North East Karnataka during 2002-2005 and in the subsequent years in 8 districts of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand. The program's overarching aim was to advocate and influence change in assessment and through that, to also influence change in classroom teaching-learning processes. The means to drive this was through an assessment of participating schools with a 'reward and recognition' component for schools that met (or exceeded) the assessment criteria. The criteria were kept to the basic requirements of universal elementary education: a) Schools had to ensure 100% enrolment; b)

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at least 90% of children had to have regular attendance and c) at least 60% of children had to demonstrate learning outcomes assessed through competency-based written and oral tests. Successful schools were those that met all these three criteria. The Learning Guarantee Program thus provided Azim Premji Foundation with a rich vein of data for research and analysis.

For consecutive years of the Learning Guarantee Program in Karnataka, a sample of "successful" schools and "the other schools" was studied, to obtain an understanding of the factors that differentiated the 'successful schools' from the 'other schools' and also to identify factors that did not have any bearing on their 'success'. The study covered 240 schools, of which 68 were 'successful' as identified in the Learning Guarantee Program. 900 teachers (including the Head Teachers) were interviewed, of whom 250 teachers belonged to the 'successful' schools. Schools were evaluated on the basis of quantitative measures such as school infrastructure, school management, the socio-economic

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background of enrolled children and community factors such as the functioning of the School Development & Monitoring Committee (SDMC) and the presence of active NGOs in the village.

In parallel, a detailed qualitative study to observe the class room and schools in a sample of 21 schools (comprising 11 'successful' and 10 'other' schools) was conducted. Trained investigators spent a few days in each school, interacting and discussing with parents, children and other community members and documenting all their observations. The qualitative measures included attitude and commitment of teachers, quality of teaching and classroom practices.

Findings from these studies underscore the critical role of

school leadership and show how good, committed school leadership can – within the constraints and without need for too much external support – ensure that their schools function efficiently and pleasingly. They are not doing something extraordinary. It is about how the school leaders get the basics right and do the simple things consistently well.

C. Factors That Do Not Make A Difference

To an extent, this is the section that blows away some myths and some romantic notions. Each of us, at some point or the other, gives a lot of credence to certain factors, but our study showed us - very clearly - the factors that do not seem to make any difference.

Factors that do not differentiate between 'Successful' and 'Other' schools

Infrastructure		Head Teacher, Teacher Profile	
Bus reaches within 0.5 km of school	X	Gender	X
Pucca building	X	Caste / category	X
Anganwadis on premises	X	Age	X
Compound wall	X	Average total experience	X
Electricity	X	Education level	X
Play ground	X	Live in the same village	X
Avg. number of class rooms	X	Married	X

X = No statistically significant difference between successful and other schools on this factor

1. Infrastructure Related Indicators:

There does not seem to be any statistically significant difference between 'successful' and 'other' schools on many of the infrastructure indicators such as: a) Pucca building; b) Anganwadis on premises; c) public transport close to school; d) play ground facilities; e) compound wall; f) number of class rooms.

2. Profile Of The Teacher And Head Teacher:

A typical teacher in a successful school is very much like his/her counterpart in other schools. Thus, the caste, gender, age, educational qualifications and working experience of the teachers do not seem to be significantly different across the two categories. Another fondly held notion - that if the teacher belongs to, or lives in, the same village, it will have a positive impact on the school - was belied. The study found 31% of teachers in 'successful' as well the 'other' schools live in the same village while 69% teachers in both categories travel some distance everyday to the school. Very clearly, the profile of the teacher does not seem to influence

the success of the school in any way. Thus, many of the infrastructure and teacher demography-related parameters did not have a major bearing on learning outcomes and were not significantly different between 'successful' and 'other' schools.

3. Multi- Grade Teaching:

80% of all our rural government primary schools are multi-grade schools and in our study, too, we found that both categories of schools – the 'successful' schools and 'other' schools - had equally high percentage of multi-grade schools (around 80%).

D Factors That Make A Difference

We clearly found that **effective school leadership** and a **team of committed and motivated teachers** are the **key differentiators**. These sterling qualities are a striking feature of 'successful' schools and, in stark contrast, are missing in the 'other' schools. What are the indicators that compel us to draw this conclusion?

Factors that differentiate between 'Successful' and 'Other' schools

School Characteristics		Extra Efforts of Teachers	
Good school appearance	✓	Extra classes for identified children	✓
Availability of Drinking water	✓	Activity based learning	✓
Usable toilets for children	✓	Additional reading material	✓
Head Teacher Present	✓	Practice and drill with question papers	✓
Up to date student and teacher registers	✓	Other teaching methods	✓
Punctuality of teacher & Head Teacher	✓	Parents, SDMC and Community support	
Teaching Learning Material in class rooms	✓	Focus on Enrolment and Attendance	✓
Length of experience of the Head Teacher in the school	✓	Donations to School	✓
		Active Involvement in school	✓

✓ Statistically significant difference between successful schools and other schools on this factor

1. Punctual And Ever Present Head Teacher And Teachers

This is the defining differentiator. All subsequent good practices and differentiators that are observed in the successful schools flow from this particular feature. In the successful schools, all the Head Teachers and over 90% of teachers are punctual. Further, over 92% of Head Teachers of 'successful' schools are found to be present in the school premises, during school hours. In contrast, only 73% of Head Teachers of the other schools are found within the school premises during school hours in the rest of the schools. The observation of over 90% punctuality and presence of teachers in the 'successful' schools is also significant, in the context of the findings of PROBE I and PROBE II reports as well as the "Teacher Absence in India" study by Michael Kremer and Karthik Muralidharan, which indicate that, on an average, 25% of teachers in Indian government schools are absent.

2. Organized, Well-Managed School Practices

There is the efficiency of a well-oiled unit about the successful schools. These schools are better in terms of cleanliness, neatness and orderliness. There is a daily morning assembly that is crisp and timely. All the record books – teacher attendance, student attendance, admissions register, the notice board, class timetables, etc – are up to date and well-maintained. Database of students is also available instantly. School uniforms, stationery and text books have been supplied to all students at the beginning of the academic year without delay. The mid day meal is organized and executed without fuss. There is a marked absence of serious fights

among children and markedly lesser prevalence of corporal punishment in these schools. There is a planned meeting of the teachers every day - before and after school - to discuss and review the day's plans.

3. Commitment Of Teachers – Going The Extra Mile

Our research showed that 'successful' schools visibly made extra efforts to provide additional inputs to children. These were carried out with great intensity and many of these schools reported taking extra classes on holidays and after school. Several schools identified the relatively "weaker" children and provided them with special inputs. They provided additional reading material. They created model question papers and used them in "drill and practice" with the children. All these measures might seem mechanical, but in the context of the existing situation, these were viewed as significant positive measures.

4. Support From Parents And School Development & Monitoring Committee (SDMC)

The cooperation from the SDMC members and president in the 'successful' schools was higher and the support was in the nature of increasing attendance, supplying learning material, providing infrastructure, improving admission, and giving financial help to schools. In these successful schools, 73% of parents paid regular visits to monitor the progress of children and hold discussions with teachers. The absence of 'education' among parents is higher in the 'other' schools category, where more than half are uneducated. While 54.7% of parents in other schools did not have any formal education, the corresponding figure in winning schools was 41.7%.

The qualitative study findings reinforce the quantitative data. A substantial majority of the 10 successful schools

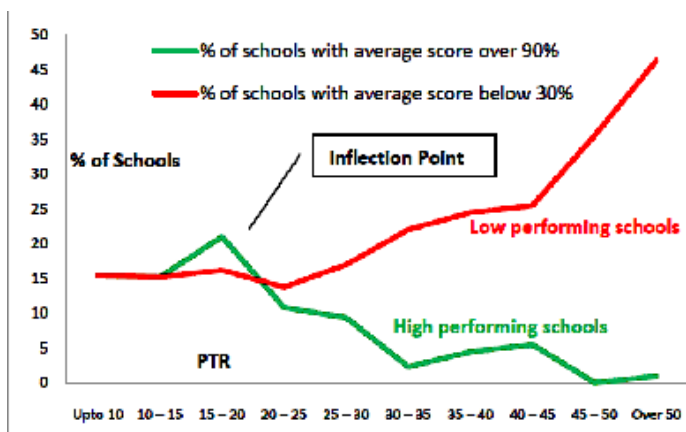
demonstrate an enabling and favourable environment as compared to the 11 other schools.

Findings From Qualitative Study

Qualitative study in 21 schools	Parameter	Successful Schools	Other schools
HEAD TEACHERS	Timely arrival of Head teacher	10/10	7/11
	Active supervision of school activities	8/10	5/11
	Spends extra time at school	5/10	2/11
	Books and required stationery supplied to all students	10/10	4/11
TEACHERS	Punctuality of teachers	9/10	1/11
	Interactive classroom sessions	10/10	6/11
	Work plan for all classes	5/10	3/11
	Usage of TLM in all the classes	5/10	0/11
	Activity based sessions in all Classes (with or without TLM)	7/10	3/11
	Regular checking of homework in all classes	8/10	3/11
	Special classes	8/10	4/11
	No corporal punishment	7/10	3/11
	All students arrive on time	5/10	1/11
	Absence of serious fights among students	8/10	4/11
Parents and community support (SDMC)	Once in 3 days visit to school by SDMC	10/10	4/11
	Positive opinion of the SDMC by head teacher / teachers	10/10	4/11

5. Criticality Of Pupil Teacher Ratio:

Empirical evidence from the Learning Guarantee Program establishes the criticality of Pupil Teacher Ratio. Schools with a PTR of less than 30 have a 25% chance of turning in good performances. On the other hand, schools with PTR of more than 40 have a less than 3% chance of delivering quality education. This is perhaps the only factor which is truly beyond the scope or control of the school leader. The graph below highlights this aspect.



D. School Leadership Is Pivotal To Quality

Almost all the factors that differentiate the 'successful' school can be created, influenced or driven by the school leader. In that sense, the Head Teacher plays the pivotal executive role in establishing the quality of his or her school. In a lower primary school, more often than not, one of the teachers takes up the additional role of Head Teacher. However, upper primary schools have a designated Head Teacher to provide leadership and mentorship to a minimum of seven teachers, assign roles, decide time tables, manage administration and team dynamics, review performance, identify issues and take decisions, and supervise the administration of a large campus.

It is absolutely ironical that for such a complex task, virtually none of the Head Teachers have been trained. They are nominated or selected for the task of leading the school and literally thrown into the deep end to learn on the job and cope with it. The 10% of schools who are currently 'successful' are so because their school leaders have been able to perform - despite the lack of appropriate preparation

and training. If our education system had a well thought out process of selection of Head Teachers and a strong leadership development program for them with coaching,

mentoring and sustained support there is good reason to hope that many of the "other schools" too could make the transition to becoming "successful schools".

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One early morning a mother went to her sleeping son and woke him up

MOM : Wake up, son. It's time to go to school.

SON : But why, Mama? I don't want to go to school.

MOM : Give me two reasons why you don't want to go to school.

SON : One, all the children hate me. Two, all the teachers hate me.

MOM : Oh! that's not a reason. Come on, you have to go to school.

SON : Give me two good reasons WHY I should go to school?

MOM : One, you are FIFTY-TWO years old and should understand your responsibilities.

Two, you are the PRINCIPAL of the school.