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# A case study on successes and failures of operation blackboard in Kashmir

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**Abstract**
This paper examines teachers' responses to the teaching-learning aid component of Operation Blackboard, a scheme to upgrade primary school facilities; and the implications for policy innovation aimed at improving the quality of primary schooling. Provision of teaching-learning aids posed a challenge to the long-established teacher-centred, textbook culture of schools which the National Policy on Education, 1986, sought to change. Adoption or rejection of this innovation emerge was conditioned by teachers' professional capacities, the nature of their pre-and in-service training, personal motivation, and the relationship with the communities among whom they work. On the basis of the case study, the paper argues that policy innovation can only be successful if teachers' capacities are accurately assessed, which may involve a reduction in policy aspirations and a slower, but more realistic, pace of change.

**Keywords:** operation blackboard, TLA, primary schools

## Introduction
In recent years, increasing efforts at the policy level are being made to combat the 'push-out' effect of primary schools, which in 1986 contributed to a drop-out rate of 52.4% by the end of the 5- year lower primary stage (5 AIES 1989). Although children are successfully 'pulled in' or enrolled in schools, they are gradually pushed out again by a number of factors, many of which are directly school-related: an unattractive classroom environment, teacher absenteeism, teacher-centred teaching, low skill attainment, and a stagnant daily routine. The improvement of school facilities, under Operation Blackboard; the establishment of District Institutes of Education and Training; and Minimum Levels of Learning were all measures introduced in the National Policy on Education, 1986 (NPE 1986) [9] to improve the quality of the school process. If quality improvements are to happen, much depends on the ability of the system to resuscitate teacher interest, improve their motivation and commitment, and enhance their professional competence, for 'the quality, competence and character of teachers' (Education Commission 1970: 84) are the most significant factors influencing the quality of education. Also, since primary teacher salaries account for nearly 95% of State-level allocations to education (Varghese and Tilak 1991) - a proportion that, in the strained economic circumstances, has almost completely edged out expenditure on other items - cost-effectiveness and the return to this investment is a crucial issue for policymakers (Ahmed *et al.* 1991; Avalos 1991) [3, 4]. The 1991 teacher training syllabus affirms that the 'status and quality of teacher education of our country especially at the elementary level is far from satisfactory' (NCERT 1991: 1). Much is being expected of teachers, while too little is known about their capacity to respond to change.

## Methodology
This paper examines this issue in the context of how primary teachers in Kashmir reacted to Operation Blackboard, under the NPE 1986 [9], and draws out the implications for policy innovation and implementation on a national scale. Data were collected by qualitative methods from teachers in thirty schools in three different socio-economic locations of District Pulwama, Srinagar and Shopian.

## Operation Blackboard
The NPE 1986 [9] aimed for qualitative improvement in elementary education, the increased retention of children in schools, and a move towards a child-centred approach to education. The major policy plank to improve school quality was Operation Blackboard, a centrally sponsored scheme which laid down, for the first time, the minimum criteria of a primary school: two rooms, two teachers (one of them preferably female), and a set of 'minimum essential' teaching learning aids (TLA) (NPE 1986) [9]. The TLA included a science kit, maths kit, tool kit, 45 charts, maps, children's books, balls - and a blackboard. All existing schools were to be upgraded to this level, and no schools should in future be sanctioned unless they fulfilled the new criteria (MHRD 1987) [8]. Teachers' receptivity to the TLA component of Operation Blackboard is important, since it signals whether broader attempts to improve the quality of the teaching-learning process are likely to be successful. For, behind the inclusion of TLA in the package of 'minimum essential' items for primary schools was the policy notion of more learner-oriented teaching, placing the individual child at the centre of classroom process. This notion ran counter to current practice in many schools, where teachers, steeped for years in the 'textbook culture' (Kumar 1990), and usually operating in a classroom bare of anything that would enhance teaching - including, in 40% of schools, even that most basic of aids, the blackboard (4 AIES 1978) - had become used to working in an environment that was highly unconducive to their enterprise. Adoption of TLA, with all they implied, would be a very major step indeed for many teachers, a radical departure from what had become the institutionalised form of both teaching and learning. The absence of TLA in schools hitherto can also be taken as an indicator of the low awareness by the administration of the process of schooling - the quality of the interaction between teacher and child.

**Teacher training and quality**

There is a positive correlation between length of training and quality of teachers (Avalos 1991; Lockheed and Verspoor 1991) [4]. Although entry requirements have been raised, the low general knowledge base of entrants means that much time during teacher training is devoted to re-learning the contents of the primary syllabus; correspondingly little time is left over for introducing pedagogical practices. A low general knowledge base of primary teachers may impact negatively in various ways on their performance: they are less likely to invite questions since they are not sure they will know the answers (Lockheed and Verspoor 1991) and not to know is not compatible with the image of the teacher (Kumar 1990); questions are a threat to completing the syllabus on time (Avalos 1991; Kumar 1990) [4]. Most teachers interviewed felt their PTC training was not suitable for the situations in which they worked, since training colleges have a strong urban bias: this despite five sixths of teaching posts being in rural areas (GoG 1990a). Pedagogical practices in training colleges, according to teacher interviews, indicated little change since 1970, when a national study reported that colleges in Kashmir used none of the 'demonstration method, assignment and activity method, supervised reading and model reading techniques' (NCERT 1970) nor audio-visual aids used in other States to varying degrees. Teachers felt that their trainers were not sufficiently aware of the realities of small schools with single rooms and no facilities, and hence did not offer strategies for working in such conditions. In the top-down system, where Kashmir implements the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) syllabus with minor local changes, this is a reflection of unrealistic national level thinking, for in the NCERT's 1991 revised teacher training syllabus, multiple class teaching is still treated as an 'additional specialisation', defined as an 'area of interest' although a 1986 national survey had established that two thirds of all primary schools were single or two teacher schools, where multi-Standard teaching is inevitable. Although the NPE 1986 [9] intended that 'as the first step, the system of teacher education will be overhauled' (NPE 1986: 26) [9],

**Socio-economic environment as an adoption variable**

The socio-economic environment in which a school is located is a very important factor in shaping the attitude of the teacher and the quality of the educational process. Each different school has its own 'culture', which is likely to affect its capacity for absorption of an innovation. At one end of the scale, where the relevance of the urbanised model of education and the impact of the 'modern' world are low, the level of a school may be below the minimum required to absorb the innovation, especially if the innovation requires large, rather than incremental, change. Such were the circumstances in Pulwama. In Srinagar, educational conditions had reached a level where schools did not have basic operating difficulties and teachers were better able to face the challenge an innovation would present. With their enterprise better understood, teachers had greater accountability to children and community, and increased motivation to attempt the difficult process of change. In Shopian, teachers again had low expectations of the children, and low tolerance for their inferior caste and class ranking: there was no sense of common purpose and accountability to children was as low as in the tribal area: the prognosis for adoption of an innovation was correspondingly lower than in Srinagar.

**Teacher preparation: the Mass Orientation Programmes**

The trends in teacher quality illustrated above are not uncommon all over India, and the extreme youth of teachers is an additional worry in Kashmir. How teachers of this calibre can be encouraged and trained to respond to innovation presents a particular challenge to those who wish to initiate educational change. Yet OB was formulated with very little attention to how the gap between teachers' current practice and the desired behaviour was to be narrowed: despite the centrality of the teacher in this programme and in realising the policy objective of enhanced educational quality, it included no teacher training component. Attempts were made to plug this lacuna through the Programme for Mass Orientation of School Teachers (PMOST), a series of 10-day camps with 50 teachers at each, using modular basic orientation material. A basic problem was that teachers had to be oriented to a scheme which in the first two years of PMOST existed as hardly more than a policy suggestion: in Kashmir for example TLA kits did not begin to arrive in schools until 1988, the programme working its way through the administrative machinery, unseen by teachers, until then. There was a significant time lag during which 'awareness was created but on implementation there was no significant progress' A separate, specific Operation Blackboard orientation programme in PMOST format was set up in 1989, to improve teachers' abilities to use the TLA supplied under Operation Blackboard. In Kashmir, the State, charged with ensuring full facilities were provided at all training centres, had failed to ensure TLA kits were available. As a result training was held without the full Operation Blackboard kit in some places. Some of the teachers interviewed had already had the 10-day PMOST, some had not, a haphazard situation that is explained by centrally set numerical targets which had to be filled but not exceeded; but others had no training at all.

Teachers in Pulwama had mostly had PMOST-OB training but in general had found that it difficult to follow. Its content did not seem relevant to their problems and often they could not remember how to manipulate the items. Only two of all the teachers in this group had understood why it was necessary to adopt a change in teaching approach, and how the TLA could assist in helping children to learn more quickly, and with greater interest. Since the 'trained' teachers had not understood the training well, they had not passed it on to the second teacher, as the PMOST format had intended. In Shopian, one teacher had received general PMOST training, but had not passed it on to other teachers as she could not see its relevance to their situations. For these teachers, there was a vast time gap between the policy orientation and the arrival of the TLA, since the kit did not arrive in the urban schools until at least three years after the policy orientation programme. Dorasami (1989: 65, 79), evaluating PMOST in Karnataka, found that it 'did not help teachers develop a clear perception of the salient features of the policy' and that it 'made no impact on curriculum transaction in terms of utilising varied techniques in teaching'. Other available studies, such as those by Ramadass (1990) in Pondicherry and Acharaya (1990) [1] in Gujarat, support these findings.

**Teaching Learning Aids: adoption and rejection**

Incremental rather than rapid change has been identified as a positive variable in connection with teacher adoption of an innovation (*cf.* Adams and Chen 1981; Havelock and Huberman 1977). To be adopted by teachers, Operation Blackboard would

need to build on some degree of teacher acceptance of a need for TLA. Prior to the scheme, some teachers had perceived a need for at least some type of simple TLA in the core subject areas and had tackled the lack of any teaching material by providing their own: sticks or stones for counting in both the rural and tribal area; and also home-made charts and other limited aids in the rural area only. In the urban location, nothing at all had been provided by teachers. For some teachers, therefore, Operation Blackboard was an incremental change, while for others, it was a much bigger step.

**Use of TLA**

Although administrators had adopted purchasing procedures, which left something to be desired in the quality of teaching aids (Dyer 1993), the TLA in tribal and rural locations were, in general, usable. Teachers' responses to the introduction of TLA varied very widely. Almost all teachers used Operation Blackboard charts and leaders' photos to decorate the walls of the school. The abacus was usually to be found on top of the cupboard used for storing registers, while other TLA were in boxes neatly piled on top of each other and kept at one side of the room. Teachers in the tribal area used virtually no TLA except the charts. The tool box was, justifiably, condemned as useless - of such low quality as to be unusable, in a badly deforested area. But most teachers ignored most of the other aids: when questioned more closely, it was apparent from what they said that some teachers had not even looked into the boxes to find out what they were. Rates of usage were on average higher in the rural area. Again, charts were universally adopted. The second most popular item was the abacus because 'students themselves can count' and the coloured plastic shapes because 'children can learn shapes and colours by playing'. But teachers had differing opinions about when aids should be used. Teachers who had not understood the policy message of a change in teaching methods felt that items were more useful in upper Standards only, as children should concentrate on learning reading, writing and numbers in their first two years. This seemed for them to preclude the use of TLA, for which children were 'too young'. Other teachers felt that using TLA had benefits which embraced both teacher and child by making teaching and learning more interesting and thus more effective. Some teachers spoke of the monotony of teaching prior to Operation Blackboard, and the difference they saw in the children's interest after introducing a visual element. Two rationales given by teachers were: 'children are bright and if you give them material they will grasp fast. Operation Blackboard can really broaden the range of activities'; and 'it takes less time to teach, it is practical and gives students life skills, things they can do at home. It used to be boring, now it isn't, the playway approach is possible and it's interesting. The economic problems haven't gone away but the intellectual problem is solved through playway teaching'. In the urban environment, implemented in 1991, the Municipal Corporation failed to deliver any charts and the Operation Blackboard items were of very poor quality. But teachers anyway consigned the kit to the cupboard without even opening it.

In all areas, teachers who did not participate in an organised programme were at a disadvantage since peer teaching had largely not taken place: this could not be easily rectified since negligence on the part of the State dept. of Education meant that the Operation Blackboard kit itself did not include an instruction manual.

**Teachers' understanding of the TLA and the policy message**

At policy level, Operation Blackboard was intended to improve teachers' working conditions, and to enable them to transact the curriculum more easily through a more visual style of teaching, Among teachers who did not really understand the policy intentions, the attempt in this direction was seen as an extra and not as a solution to any of teachers' difficulties: 'most of the time we have so much work for language and maths that we don't get time to use the Operation Blackboard kit'. Introduction of TLA was not successful in amending many teachers' belief that the only function of a school in the first two years is to teach a child how to read and write, using traditional rote and blackboard methods. Only one teacher felt that he had really changed his teaching methods as a result of the policy initiative.

**The implications of Operation Blackboard for policy implementation**

The centralised, top-down approach to educational innovation implicitly assumes that the elementary teaching force is a homogenous body; and that the same centrally-devised package of equipment will be suitable for all teachers and all schools in rural areas. The inherent concept of a school is a well-ordered environment in which teachers would like to make teaching interesting for children, set in a 'modern' world where there is a place for books, where people read and write. But the reality of many schools in Kashmir, a relatively advanced State, is that children attend irregularly and do not sit still; and teachers are not concerned about whether their teaching is interesting, or even whether children learn, but how to complete the textbook on time. The pedagogical problems of the teachers in Kashmir's rural schools are not primarily related to infrastructure, but to the absence of skills to cope with either teaching several classes simultaneously, or the needs of first generation learners, compounded by heavy and often irrelevant curriculum. The type of pre-service training they receive does not equip them with adequate classroom management strategies, or the confidence to adapt the curriculum, and is an important factor in low teacher motivation. Despite their limitations, PMOST and PMOST-OB had raised teacher interest; but for less motivated or able teachers, this was not sustained by the system once they returned to their schools. For tribal teachers in particular, the gap between what was projected in the training modules and the known 'reality' of schools was too wide to be bridged. Those who devised these modules pitched the level of their content too high for many teachers, who in consequence derived little gain from them. As a national policy innovation, Operation Blackboard lacked any element of motivating and supporting teachers. This reflects the centralised, bureaucratic administration of education, which maintains a large establishment but fails to attend to those central to its effective functioning (Dyer 1994). Everything that teachers have to do is laid down by a higher authority, which does not consult teachers on any issues however teachers might be affected, and makes no concessions to local circumstances. The lack of any consultation with teachers about the contents of the OB kit, and the failure even to inform them that the kits were going to arrive before they landed on their doorsteps, are cases in point. Although the TLA were designed to help teachers, it appeared to many of them that they would add to their workload. Most teachers had not become sufficiently clear about either the theoretical or the practical reality of the change expected to make any adjustment to the way they teach. The majority of teachers interviewed showed no

critical awareness of the relationship between their pedagogical practices, conditions in schools, and teaching problems. Some teachers understood teaching as imparting the content of the textbook, regardless of whether children learn. In some schools, where children who had attended for four years could still neither read nor write, teachers did not accept responsibility for this situation and blamed the local environment: they did not feel that their own pedagogical practices required attention. In just a small handful of schools, teachers and children seemed to be working together with some sense of common purpose. Such teachers were able to make use of more of the items provided and to vary their applications: they saw relevance for TLA at all ages and not just after children have learned to read and write by using traditional methods. As a result there was the least gap between the policy world and the 'reality' of school life. These schools are nearest to operating in the conditions where Operation Blackboard could make the difference policy-makers expected. But in these more favourable conditions, the composition of Operation Blackboard was such that it did not allow teachers to move far from a teacher-centred style of teaching towards the child centred approach recommended in the policy. The TLA kit contained only a single set of items, so only the teacher can use them and not give them to children individually. Although aids were used, they were embedded in a flow of teacher talk, and there was no evidence of any move towards children asking questions, experimenting or manipulating objects without very close teacher supervision. Adoption of an innovation is also conditioned by teachers' perceptions of policy. Ups and downs of government allow policy to be seen only as a political programme, rather than as a blueprint for the direction of change: 'Whatever government comes, we're concerned with education: if they change policy we'll work on, it has nothing to do with government'. Many teachers felt they were fighting a battle with a government that formulates policies that bear little relation to their situation: The government doesn't know what our needs are. The government makes policy for a city environment and in the villages the scene is very different. These city-oriented policies just aren't suitable for the village environment [personal communication, teacher C. Bhagvansinh, Karjan 1992

**Conclusion and Suggestions**

Teachers in this case study did not, in general, exercise any critical insight into the relationship between their teaching methods and the children's ability to learn: they are not reflexive practitioners. It is clear that many teachers do not view teaching and learning as a process: rather, teaching is a matter of imparting a set body of knowledge that students should learn to repeat without error. Some teachers do not feel responsible for what happens in the classroom: many of them are in the profession because it offers a secure income with short hours, it is available to those with low qualifications, and it allows a side business or family commitments to be facilitated. However, despite generally low levels of professional competence, many teachers are concerned to discharge their duties adequately, and are prepared to make efforts to improve their work, providing that both the reasons and the ways to do so are clear. At present, there is little incentive for them to improve their performance. Teachers are little more than powerless subordinates in a bureaucratic hierarchy (Kumar1990),

The case-study indicated that teachers are willing to use TLA when they understand how it will make teaching and learning easier - for instance the visual aids, which were a near universal success. Charts also worked because they represented an incremental change, since teachers are used to handling text with pictures in the format of a textbook: transition to a chart was straightforward. At the national policy level, when conceiving any innovation, the capacity of teachers to respond to the proposed change should be realistically assessed, in terms both of teachers' professional competence and educational levels of the communities in locations where they are likely to be posted. It must be faced that in many places, levels of both are low: both policy aspirations and teacher training inputs need to be adjusted accordingly. Building on the issues which PMOST has introduced, in-service training via the District Institutes of Education and Training should now seek to consolidate teachers' understanding of the theory of child-centred, activity-based teaching behind the policy innovation, and the practical uses of the TLA Such training will be most effective if it is a continuous process with repeated, clear inputs aimed at a level that is within reach of the trainee. It may take a number of such inputs to bring trainees up to the level of the overall policy input, but anything less is a compromise that will be evident in practice.

If teachers are to be motivated, and policy is to be brought into closer correspondence with their capacities and expectations, they need to be involved in decision-making about matters that affect them, not totally excluded as is customary. At present, teachers do not relate to policy as something designed for them; they see it as a political whim, and they are thus disposed, in general, to ignore it. Facilitating such dialogues, and thus bringing administrators, policy-makers and teachers into correspondence with each other, can become a regular activity of District Institutes of Education and Training, providing they seek to adopt a more holistic view of the whole process of education. It should be added, though, that the administration also needs to look to its own procedures to ensure that it too it doing everything within its capabilities to support teachers in what is, without doubt, a difficult job. Special emphasis needs to be given to the role of the inspectorate, so that teachers feel that someone both notices and cares about what they do, in contrast to the neglect they suffer at present

Thus, through an informed consideration of primary teachers' abilities and capacity to respond to the type of change proposed, and the circumstances in which change is to take place, policy-makers would be better able to set an appropriate pace and means in the search to fulfil the objective of universalising primary education. In this way, rather than vastly overestimating teachers' capacities and thus presenting them with ambitious change that they have little chance of being able to achieve, a fit between policy aspirations and practical realities can be achieved.

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