Teacher Absenteeism in India
A preliminary exploration of the role of social policy in addressing pro-social norms

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Executive Summary

According to a World Bank study, on any given day in India, one in four government primary school teachers are absent and only one in two is actually teaching. Considering that teachers account for the majority of spending on education, approximating nearly 90 per cent in developing and transition countries, the financial costs associated with teacher absenteeism are no doubt significant. This paper is a preliminary exploration of the role social policy can play in addressing norms and promoting pro-social behaviour within the context of the production of a public good, namely education. The paper focuses on teacher absenteeism in India as an illustrative case, viewing it as a “coordination game” to actively engage with the normative aspects of teachers’ actions and behaviour to inform a more reflexive policy and institutional response to teacher absenteeism. The analytical framework draws upon Bicchieri’s (2006) articulation of “social norms” and “scripts” and selective evidence from related gaming experimentation to build a case for “creating” a social norm for “teacher accountability” in order to address teacher absenteeism and performance. Based on existing evidence, the paper is an exercise in outlining a prospective course of action, albeit ideal, to address the issue.

Apart from incidence, the study also throws interesting light on the correlates of teacher absenteeism: being male, a head teacher, having a college degree, and being a union member is strongly associated with higher rates of absenteeism. There is no correlation with salary. On the flip side, it is the presence of good school infrastructure that come across as most significantly correlated with lowered teacher absenteeism. Variables that pertain to monitoring and accountability – namely inspections and proximity to education offices – also exhibit a negative correlation with absenteeism. Interestingly, teachers from the local community do not have lower absence rates than teachers from outside the community. The presence of a PTA is not correlated with lower absence, however an “active” PTA does lower the degree of absence and lends further credence to the argument that “demand for accountability” by community of educated parents etc. has a positive impact. The correlates indicate that it is the guarantee of a paycheck accompanied by weak sanctions actually creates an incentive to be absent – thus the private costs and benefits of individual teachers are clearly in variance to the social cost and benefits of education.

Yet, despite the opportunity and incentive to be absent, the fact that 3 out of every 4 teachers opts to be present indicates that there is clearly more to the issue than merely a “free-rider” problem. Given that education is a public good and teachers, as in other occupations in the non-profit sector, can be expected/assumed to be motivated by some combination of extrinsic factors like income and sanctions as well as intrinsic factors, namely the satisfaction of enabling young people to learn and by an interest in child development and in their subject. Hence it may be relevant to understand teacher absenteeism within the Indian context through the lens of a “coordination game” in which the personal short-term interests of some teachers may conflict with collective long-term interests of investing in children’s education and associated pay-offs at the individual and societal level, however are not inevitable. The policy challenge is to ensure that “attending” teachers do not become vulnerable to reduced motivation and whereby feel the need to defect to the ranks of the “absentee” teachers thus achieving the worse equilibrium (2, 2); and at the same time through increasing communication, mutual reciprocity, and sense of affiliation (group identity) increase the likelihood of cooperation of “absentee” teachers to ensure that the best equilibrium (4, 4) is achieved – which is enhanced teacher motivation leading to the educational well-being of all children.

Evidence from experimental gaming demonstrates that pro-social behavior is far more common and important than generally recognized. The paper actively explores the possibility of “creating” a social norm of teacher accountability based on a professional group identity, which demands engagement and pro-social reciprocity and cooperation among each other through the deepening of the moral obligation of teachers to children’s education and well-being. The strategies for creating the norm include:

- Re-categorization and activating appropriate scripts to support the emergent norm – Right to Education (teachers as duty-bearers and social guarantee on part of the state);
Harmonization of legal, social, and moral norms around the education of children through creation of social norms and deepening of moral norms;

- Strengthening of teacher identity, individual and collective, encompassing teachers’ role, responsibilities and status in society and involves both the subjective sense of individuals who engage in the occupation of teaching and how others view teachers’ (peers, children, parents, administrators etc.

- Internal motivation: the opportunity to educate children, and thereby improve their well-being, can serve as a powerful incentive to attract individuals into the teaching profession.

- Development of a recruitment strategy to attract high-quality entrants who are intrinsically motivated and can be trusted to perform well for society with little monitoring;

- Teacher professional development – building sense of mastery in one’s job; people who feel that they can be capable and effective as teachers are more likely to choose to become a teacher and also be effective teachers;

- Non-salary job characteristics, such as the availability of adequate facilities and materials with which to teach;

- Facilitate the creation and adherence to the social norm of mutual accountability among teachers through emergence of “active” PTAs to help create “reciprocal norms” between teachers/schools and parents/community (values deliberation) – for instance regular attendance by children in turn for regular attendance by teachers or vice versa;

- Recasting teacher unions as institutions for value deliberations and deliberative democratic practice - expected to produce more cognitively competent and well-informed members with an enhanced capacity for consensual action.

- Mapping and identifying of key networks; leaders among teachers and community;

- Engaging with the diffusion model of change;

This is no doubt easier said than done; however, given the relative silence on the dynamics of empirical and normative expectations in framing teacher absenteeism, there is merit in re-assessing our traditional ways of working and expanding the range of policy options from the predictable to the not so predictable to address it.
Teacher absenteeism in India: A preliminary exploration of the role of social policy in addressing pro-social norms

I. Introduction

Research evidence from across the globe indicates that, apart from family background, the single most important factor in determining variability in student attainment within any single country is teacher quality. According to a World Bank study, on any given day in India, one in four government primary school teachers are absent and only one in two is actually teaching. Considering that teachers account for the majority of spending on education, approximating nearly 90 per cent in developing and transition countries, the financial costs associated with teacher absenteeism are no doubt significant. However these costs do not even begin to reflect the possible costs of teacher absenteeism on student achievement, which is evident in the high drop-out and repetition rates as well as poor learning outcomes at the individual level within the Indian context, and those of reduced societal benefits, including improved economic growth and reduced poverty and social inequity associated with increased education. It would be fair to say that India is wasting a considerable share of its education budget, and more importantly missing an opportunity to educate its children and invest in its citizens; an opportunity which was recently transformed in 2009 into a “justiciable” fundamental right of all children between the ages of 6-14 to free and compulsory elementary education.

This paper is a preliminary exploration of the role social policy can play in addressing norms and promoting pro-social behaviour within the context of the production of a public good, namely education. The paper focuses on teacher absenteeism in India as an illustrative case, viewing it as a “coordination game” to actively engage with the normative aspects of teachers’ actions and behaviour to inform a more reflexive policy and institutional response to teacher absenteeism. The analytical framework draws upon Bicchieri’s (2006) articulation of “social norms” and “scripts” and selective evidence from related gaming experimentation to build a case for “creating” a social norm for “teacher accountability” in order to address teacher absenteeism and performance. Based on existing evidence, the paper is an exercise in outlining a prospective course of action, albeit ideal, to address the issue.

The paper begins with a selective review of evidence on teachers to frame the issue under discussion, especially to understand the correlates of teacher absenteeism within the Indian context. This is followed by Section III, which conceptualizes teacher absenteeism as a coordination game to better understand individual teacher’s preferences of being absent or present as a function of strategic and interdependent interactions among them. Section IV builds a case for “creating” a social norm for “teacher accountability”; Section V identifies some suggestive strategies to facilitate and support the emergence of the norm. Section VI concludes with a brief review and highlights the existing information gaps and programmatic challenges implicit if one were to embark on such an enterprise.

II. What does the evidence on teachers, teacher absenteeism and performance tell us?

The evidence on issues framing teachers in India and rest of the world is both vast and limited at the same time. Given the centrality of teachers to the education system, all education scholarship at one level is about teachers or has relevance for them; and yet critical research on what works and does not work in increasing teacher performance and accountability essential for informing policy choices and reforms remains comparatively limited. This section is a selective review of existing evidence with the primary purpose to highlight the different aspects that frame the discourse on teachers in India, with a special focus on the “teacher absenteeism” study.
Overall, there are nearly 3.67 million teachers for primary and middle school in India; and approximately 85 per cent of these teachers are in rural areas. According the teacher absenteeism study, the national average figure of 24.8 per cent for teacher absenteeism hides considerable regional variations between the Indian states: 14.6 per cent in Maharashtra and 41.9 percent in Jharkhand and higher teacher absenteeism is associated with lower income states. Among teachers who were present, only 45 per cent were involved actively in teaching and in some states this was as low as 20-25 per cent in some states and lower teaching rates were more evident in poorer states with higher absenteeism. Further, as to the reason for being absent, only 1 per cent of teachers were absent on account of official obligations relating to elections, immunization campaigns etc. while another 8-10 per cent were absent due to sanctioned annual or medical leave.

**Identifying the correlates of teacher absenteeism:** Apart from incidence, the study also throws interesting light on the correlates of teacher absenteeism: being male, a head teacher, having a college degree, and being a union member is strongly associated with higher rates of absenteeism. Basically, salaries increase with degree, experience, and rank and so does absenteeism rates. If this is true then intuitively one would assume that in contrast “contract” teachers – who have often just completed high school, are paid less, are often not unionized, and lack job security - would be inclined to be more regular. However this is not the case indicating that salary per se is not strongly correlated with teacher absenteeism in India.

On the flip side, it is the presence of good school infrastructure that come across as most significantly correlated with lowered teacher absenteeism. Apparently, the presence of library, electricity, toilets, covered classrooms, etc. result in a 5 to 7.5% reduction in absenteeism. In addition, there is an observed 4% reduction in absence rate for schools located near paved roads. Variables that pertain to monitoring and accountability – namely inspections and proximity to education offices – also exhibit a negative correlation with absenteeism. Schools with prior inspection have less absence rates.

Surprisingly efforts to promote professional development of teachers including teacher training and recognition have no significant impact on improving attendance: having attended a training program in the past six months is not associated with lower absence and nor is belonging to a district that has a recognition scheme for teachers.

Interestingly, teachers from the local community do not have lower absence rates than teachers from outside the community; nor does the duration of a teacher’s posting at the school have a significant relationship with absence. In fact absence rates in non-formal schools, which are staffed by teachers from the community, are higher than in regular government schools. What is also interesting to observe is that while the presence of a PTA is not correlated with lower absence, however an “active” PTA does lower the degree of absence and lends further credence to the argument that “demand for accountability” by community of educated parents etc. has a positive impact.

**Impact of monetary incentives on teacher performance:** Performance pay for teachers is frequently suggested as a way of improving education outcomes in schools, but the empirical evidence within the Indian context is limited and mixed. Vegas (2007)¹, in her discussion of teacher pay structures in Latin America, notes that the great bulk of compensation is unrelated to assessments of how well the teacher is performing, in terms of either effort or student outcomes. Even without pay incentives, the possibility of promotion could provide motivation to at least the better teachers, but in practice promotions are awarded not only on the basis of merit but also on the basis of connections and corruption. In short, teachers tend not to be held accountable.

The results from a randomized evaluation of a teacher incentive program implemented in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh indicates that in the first year group and individual incentive schools performed equally well in the first year of the program, but the individual incentive schools outperformed in the second year. Surprisingly, absence remained stagnant at 25 percent – even as the incentive payments improved teachers’ preparation and accelerated student learning x. Another experiment provided attendance-based bonuses for teachers at NGO schools in rural Rajasthan, India,
by using cameras to monitor attendance and then verifying the results with random spot checks. Compared with the teachers in the schools that had been randomly assigned as controls, teachers eligible for the bonuses had much lower absence rates – only 21 percent, compared with 42 percent for the control teachersxii.

**Undue influence of teacher unions:** Kingdon & Muzammilxiii analysis of teacher unions in Uttar Pradesh illustrates their disruptive power over the system. The Indian constitution enables one-twelfth of the members of State Legislative Councils to be elected by teachers in secondary schools and higher institutions. Teachers have used their political power to advance their self-interest, in particular to get legislation passed in the 1970s that centralized the management of teachers. In Uttar Pradesh, teacher unions have used strikes and demonstrations to raise salaries, which are about two-and-a-half times the salaries of teachers in unaided private schools. School principals are unable to enforce attendance by teachers or dismiss teachers for poor performance. Thus, salaries are totally divorced from performance, even of the most basic kind—attendance—and yet a teacher’s salary is a higher ratio of GDP per capita than in other comparable countries. Kingdon and Muzammil also present evidence on the very poor quality of student attainment in Uttar Pradesh.

**Increasing community oversight:** Increasing community oversight to impose teacher accountability makes intuitive sense and there is evidence to show that it has worked in small projects. However the same evidence also shows the fraught process and relationship, especially when the “social” distance between teachers and the parents whose children go to the government schools is immense. A recent evaluation of an information based education intervention to mobilize village education committees in Uttar Pradesh found that information campaigns had no visible impact on community involvement in public schools and no impact on learning outcomes in those schools. The study proposes several reasons for this failure including the challenges of coordinating and sustaining collective action in a large group, the expectations people had about the efficacy of the Village Education Committee (VEC) and the possibility that people do not care enough about educationxv. Another experience in Madhya Pradesh indicates the presence of a widespread perception amongst parents that monitoring the school and demanding accountability from teaching is simply not their responsibility and it is this which creates the first barrier to effective collective action. Parents seem to feel that sending their children to school is the extent of their responsibility and what happens inside the school is not something they are in a position to assess or influence owing largely to a sense of disempowerment and lack of confidence owing to their own illiteracy. In a related observation the same study also highlights the “socio-economic distance” between parents and teachers which the former often find it too wide to transcend; and coupled with the fact that the PTAs actually lack the “power” to hold teachers accountable, disengagement often ends up becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy xv.

**Teacher absenteeism as a “coordination” game:** Articulating the policy challenge

Overall, the evidence presents a very complex picture: on one hand it ends up standing certain propositions that have often been reduced to truisms in the education sector on their head, for instance the effect of income on motivation and the “virtuous” construction of local teachers; and on the other hand it reinforce the importance of quality school infrastructure and presence of regulatory scrutiny and sanctions including from communities, however weak, in promoting expected behaviour among teachers. The correlation matrix also provides us with multiple cues to make an initial attempt to understand the different and at times competing and related motivations as to why individual teachers “prefer” to be “present” or “absent” in school?

The correlation analysis highlights two striking facts: a) low or high salary of teachers/contract teachers has no direct bearing on attendance. However it is important to acknowledge that teacher salaries are considerably higher than the average per capita income and thus for the absentee teacher the rents are quite high when he is absent. Although nominal salaries are very similar across the states – relative salaries are higher in poorer states along with higher absence rates; and b) although there is
some evidence to indicate that monitoring is positively correlated with teacher attendance, there is also other evidence to indicate the power of teacher unions in ensuring weak sanctions and the minimal risk of teachers being fired. The study reports that only 1/3000 headmasters reported dismissing a teacher for being absent in government schools compared to 35/600 headmasters among private schools. It is the combination of these two factors which results in a situation where the guarantee of a paycheck accompanied by weak sanctions actually creates an incentive to be absent – thus the private costs and benefits of individual teachers are clearly in variance to the social cost and benefits of education.

According to the same study, despite the fact that few teachers are at risk of being fired, the costs and benefits of attending school on a given day could vary among teachers depending on working conditions, as well as on their vulnerability to sanctions such as receiving undesirable postings. The vulnerability of teachers to these sanctions presumably depends both on the monitoring regime and on the teacher’s level of power. 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 and factors other than working conditions could also affect teachers’ costs and benefits of attending school. The study is silent on other sources of power relating to caste and ethnicity, however they cannot be discounted and need to be further understood.

Given the high salaries and weak sanction structure, it is easy to think of the issue as a “social dilemma” with teacher absenteeism as the dominant strategy. Yet, despite the opportunity and incentive to be absent, the fact that 3 out of every 4 teachers opts to be present indicates that there is clearly more to the issue than merely a “free-rider” problem. The considerable variation across states in teacher absenteeism despite the presence of a fairly standardized teacher salary structure and minimal or non-existent system of incentives and sanctions further lends more support for the supposition. Given that education is a public good and teachers, as in other occupations in the non-profit sector, can be expected/assumed to be motivated by some combination of extrinsic factors like income and sanctions as well as intrinsic factors, namely the satisfaction of enabling young people to learn and by an interest in child development and in their subject. The possibility of other factors relating to stigma, work culture, affiliation with colleagues, norms and expectations, pride in quality of work and benefiting children may also influence the degree of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation of teachers. However, apart from some rudimentary acknowledgement, the policy discourse on teachers is silent on the normative aspects of teacher performance and behavior.

It may be more relevant to understand teacher absenteeism within the Indian context through the lens of a “coordination game” (alternatively called a “stag hunt” or an “assurance game” in the game theory literature), in which the personal short-term interests of some teachers may conflict with collective long-term interests of investing in children’s education and associated pay-offs at the individual and societal level, however are not inevitable. This “coordination game” conceptually builds on the classic Prisoner’s Dilemma model and through the process of “repetition” creates a context where actions of individual may become interdependent and effect the action of their partners on their other actions, and considerations of reputation or peer approval may assume an importance that they would not have if there was no repetition\textsuperscript{vi}. 
For instance, a solitary teacher contemplating on being absent may be troubled by how s/he will be perceived by her peers/authority; however if several teachers opt for being absent then the actual risk of how one is perceived is shared and will be reduced for each individual teacher. In the context when few teachers are absent, the “cost” is high and it is in the self-interest of the teacher not to be absent without a compelling reason; and consequently only a small number of teachers will be absent. Alternatively, if more teachers are absent, then the cost of being absent is small and that in turn will ensure that lot of teachers will prefer to be absent. The states of Maharashtra and Jharkhand with 15% and 45% rates of teacher absenteeism respectively could very well depict the two scenarios above.

In this coordination game, the two Nash Equilibriums evident are namely when both teachers “attend” or when both teachers are “absent” as represented by the shaded areas. However, for policymakers it is clear that the best equilibrium is when both teachers attend (4, 4); and the policy challenge is to ensure that “attending” teachers do not become vulnerable to reduced motivation and thereby feel the need to defect to the ranks of the “absentee” teachers thus achieving the worse equilibrium (2, 2); and at the same time through increasing communication, mutual reciprocity, and sense of affiliation (group identity) increase the likelihood of cooperation of “absentee” teachers to ensure that the best equilibrium (4, 4) is achieved – which is enhanced teacher motivation leading to the educational wellbeing of all children.

III. The case for “changing” or “creating” a social norm?

If the analysis that teacher absenteeism is influenced by non-economic factors and individual teachers’ behavior are interdependent within their reference group is correct, what possible role can social norms play in addressing the policy challenge and achieving the best equilibrium? Bicchieri and Xiao (2009) provide evidence from experimental gaming to demonstrate that pro-social behavior is far more common and important than generally recognized. Under the right conditions, majority of people act as if they have a conscience and look out for others’ interests. They argue that “for a policy to be effective, it is not enough to emphasize only the illegitimacy or the negative consequences of the undesirable behavior. It is even more important to stress that many people do follow the relevant norms. When monitoring and punishing transgressions is costly, it may pay to disseminate information about the (presumably large) number of norm-followers” (2009:202).

This is true: while we remember that 1 out of every 4 teacher is absent on any given day, we are quick to ignore the reverse, namely 3 out of 4 are present on those very days. At the most fundamental level social norms are about coordinating expectations while changing the rules of the game through transformed payoff structures. According to Bicchieri (2005) the condition for a social norm to exist is that “individuals have a conditional preference for following the norm, provided empirical and normative expectations are met”. In the case of teacher absenteeism, the empirical evidence of rates of absenteeism establishes it as a behavioral regularity and considering its high incidence in the absence of accompanying sanctions, individual teachers may reasonably form the empirical expectation that other teachers do remain absent without legitimate reasons. However, the “normative” expectation
that others expect you to be “absent” is just not there, hence it would be erroneous to understand teacher absenteeism as a social norm. Instead a more viable alternative, not necessarily easy, may be to actively explore the possibility of “creating” a social norm of teacher accountability based on a professional group identity, which demands engagement and pro-social reciprocity and cooperation among each other through the deepening of the moral obligation of teachers to children’s education and well-being.

Norms are considered to be an outcome of learning in a strategic interaction context; hence in order for the social norm of teacher accountability to be present, we will need more innovative and personalized approaches to motivate individual teachers to actively cooperate in achieving sustained behavioral change. They will do so, because a) they expect that others will engage in socially cooperative behavior (empirical expectation); and b) they believe that others also expect them to engage in socially cooperative behavior. What is also crucial to this picture is the fact that the mutual cooperation and accountability among teachers is not only dependent on the teachers themselves but can also be facilitated and reinforced by the demands of an external reference group namely, the state and the parents/local community – evident in the fact that lower absenteeism is correlated with “active” PTAs and monitoring by the state.

Recent scholarship on building “social accountability” within the Indian context, drawing upon experiences of citizen participation, right to information, and social audits, reflects on how it can contribute to improved governance, increased development effectiveness through better service delivery, and citizen empowerment. The research identifies that critical to the success of social accountability initiatives is civil society and state capacities, and the synergy between the two actors; and it also argues that the effectiveness and sustainability of social accountability mechanisms is improved when they are “institutionalized”. “This involves two things: first, the state as a ‘willing accomplice’ in the broader accountability project, needs to render its own “internal” mechanisms in a way that makes it structurally amenable to accountability, and second, the state needs to identify and adopt mechanisms to facilitate and strengthen civic engagement and citizen voice” (2009) (see figure).

Hence, creating a social norm for teacher accountability cannot be viewed as a stand-alone intervention or one of the many interventions within a larger package of teacher reforms. Rather the social norms approach should anchor as well as be anchored within the overall package of teacher reforms, being weaved into the warp and weft of the reform process. The effort to create a norm has to take into account what has transpired earlier in the education sector, learn from it and build on the lessons to take it forward, however challenging it may be to make sense of the evidence. Most importantly, it has to involve coordinated action by a range of stakeholders - teachers, state, parents/communities, civil society organizations, and citizens – at the national, state and local level in understanding the issue and in identifying possible solutions.

**IV. Outlining prospective strategies/framework to support the “emergence” of a social norm to address teacher accountability**

In this section, I explore possible strategies that can be adopted to initiate the change process towards the emergence of a social norm for teacher accountability within the Indian context. The identified
framework and strategies draw upon existing evidence and ideas and concepts discussed during the course of the learning programme with a particular focus on the resonance and transferability of ideas as well as relevance to the issue under consideration. The proposed strategies are suggestive with a view to initiate a dialogue on their feasibility and understandably raise more questions than answers. These include:

Re-categorization and activating appropriate “scripts” to support the emergent norm: The passage of the Right to Education Act by the parliament in 2009 provides an opportune context for the broader re-categorization of the “teacher” as “duty-bearer”, education as an “entitlement” of children, and the provision of education as a “social guarantee” on the part of the state (of which the teacher is one of the key representatives). This discursive shift in script can be potentially harnessed to introduce the micro-script of mutual accountability” among teachers with a major role to be played by the state, teacher unions, and parents/communities in facilitating the change. This will be particularly challenging since existing “scripts” associated with “welfare” and largesse of the state are embedded in psyche of both the citizen and the state, to a large extent. For instance, the government school in the village for most parts is viewed as a “government school” not “our” school.

Harmonization of legal, social, and moral norms: The enactment of the “Right to Education Act” provides the emergence of a legal norm to uphold the right of a child to claim an education; and the presence of “intrinsic” factors associated with being a teacher indicates the presence of a moral norm regarding the role and expectation associated with teachers. Within this context, introducing the social norm of teacher accountability may promote increased identification with the new “legal” norm of rights and may also indirectly strengthen the moral imperative associated with being a teacher.

Strengthening internal motivation of individual teachers: This is related to strengthening of the “moral” imperative framing the teaching profession and is mostly missing in the policy discourse. Efforts should be made to promote social prestige and recognition to ensure that the opportunity to educate children, and thereby improve their well-being, serve as a powerful incentive to attract individuals into the teaching profession. It may be interesting to apply narrative analysis techniques to understand how teachers perceive and value internal motivation and what do they believe are the triggers/factors for heightened motivation and performance to better plan interventions.

Strengthening of teacher identity, as an individual as well as a collective: In order for the social norm of teacher accountability to emerge, it is critical that a positive sense of identity – as an individual as well as a collective – emerges, encompassing teachers’ role, responsibilities and status in society and involving both the subjective sense of individuals who engage in the occupation of teaching and how others view teachers’, including peers, children, parents, and administrators (Welmond 2002xx). The role of teacher unions and PTAs role in strengthening group identity is particularly important.

Development of a recruitment strategy to attract high-caliber entrants: While, it is important to focus on the existing teaching cadre, in the long run, it is critically important to create “teaching” as a highly respected occupation which attracts individuals who are intrinsically motivated and can be trusted to perform well for society with little monitoring. In order to build that reputation it is equally important for current recruitment to policies to set up a mechanism whereby one can gauge individuals’s inclination and motivation. It may be relevant to explore the recruitment mechanism of “Teach for America” to understand their teacher’s motivations and also to explore the sustainability of doing so. Another aspect of recruitment that may also be worth pursuing includes decentralizing teacher hiring and salaries and a possible strategy could also be promoting the idea of recruiting to a “post” rather than a cadre to ensure that teacher deployment is rationalized.

Developing appropriate contractual agreements to promote good performance: Incentives and contractual agreements cannot be wished away; and it is important for the state to implement the right mix, whereby you don’t encourage “free-riders” and nor do you let incentives or lack of it crowd out intrinsic motivation among teachers. Thus, a crucial issue for education policy is what kinds of
contractual arrangement will ensure the highest quality teaching force for a given expenditure and equally important is the will and ability of the state to effectively enforce sanctions on erring teachers.

**Teacher professional development:** There is enough evidence to say that the presence of teacher professional development through provision of opportunities for advancement throughout a career in a transparent manner can serve to motivate teachers to excel in their work. In addition, specific technical training and capacity-building can also foster a sense of mastery in one’s job; and people who feel that they can be capable and effective as teachers are more likely to choose to become a teacher and also be effective teachers.

**Adequate and functioning school facilities:** Job characteristics, such as the availability of adequate facilities in school and materials with which to teach are basic material conditions and are essential as borne out by the teacher absenteeism study. Hence the emergence of norms has to be supported by the provision of school infrastructure by the state and in some cases supplemented by the community. The Right to Education Act provides standards for school infrastructure. In remote areas, the absence of infrastructure is particularly vexing and not surprisingly the rates of absenteeism are higher as teachers often commute from distant locations. In cases of teacher vacancies in remote areas, one can also explore provision of accommodation for teachers and hardship allowances as incentives. In addition, on the flip side good infrastructure also impacts on “demand” creation for education among parents and children.

**Recasting teacher unions as supportive institutions:** Considering the highly politicized nature of teacher unions, it is essential to initially engage with the political leadership to transform education as a non-partisan issue and to neutralize the political clout and role of teacher unions. It may be possible to “re-script” their roles around teacher’s professional development and the emotive notion of “children’s education”. Teacher reform should be demand-driven. The people most affected by reform not only should want change, but also must want to change. Teacher unions should attach themselves to a particular vision of reform, and where there is neither the demand nor the vision for reform exists, efforts need to be undertaken to generate them. Teacher unions need to be recast as institutions of value deliberations and deliberative democratic practice - to produce well-informed teachers with an enhanced capacity for consensual action for the common good.

**Strengthening school-community linkages:** The presence of school management committees or/and parent teacher committees are an integral part of the Right to Education Act and play and can play an essential role in addressing teacher absenteeism and accountability. Active PTAs can facilitate adherence to the social norm of mutual accountability among teachers and also help create “reciprocal norms” between teachers and parents/community – for instance regular attendance by children in turn for regular attendance by teachers or vice versa. Trust will be a critical element developing in developing reciprocity between teachers, schools, and parents/community, a social capital that is often in short supply because of the fact that teachers/bureaucracy do not send their children to the same government schools; and which is a metaphor for the lack of ownership by teachers of their schools and the socio-economic distance between the parents and the school.

In order for this enterprise to be successful, it is important that parents/communities are able to exercise their “voice”; however the mere creation of local participatory institutions and provisioning of them with information does not in itself result in effective exercise of voice. Micro level participatory spaces like PTAs need to be nurtured, resourced and empowered in order for them to mobilize collective action. More importantly they need to be embedded in a larger institutional structure where the entire delivery mechanism is geared to be responsive to PTA’s so that PTA’s have incentives to participate and engage with the government and schools and alter the “terms of recognition”, especially with reference to the socio-economic distance that separates them from teachers and the state.

**Mapping and identifying of key networks and “leaders”** among teachers and communities is essential for engaging with the diffusion model of change. However one will need to be aware of the
small - large group dynamics because decreasing anonymity, increasing trust, and peer approval associated with small groups are essential for the emergence of the norm

Overall, the proposed strategies can be operationalized in concrete material terms within a framework comprising of three essential cohering elements:\textsuperscript{xvii}: a) identification of \textit{normative ideals} representing various aspects of the broad idea of a being a teacher, including moral characteristics that can be seen to be intrinsically important in terms of the objective of pro-social behavior, such as public accountability, cooperation for larger good, democratic deliberation, and an equitable distribution of power; b) establishment of supporting \textit{institutions and capacities} which go beyond these normative intents, and include such instrumental arrangements as transparent associations, responsive support structures, quality training institutions, effective grievance redressal systems, transparent and equal monitoring structures and contracts, and quality school infrastructure; and c) finally, while institutions provide opportunities for achieving normative ideals, how these opportunities are realized is a matter of \textit{practice} and depends on democratic participation, values deliberation and action.

\textbf{VI: Conclusion: Information gaps and programmatic challenges}

This is no doubt easier said than done and the multiple and competing correlates of teacher absenteeism and the inconclusive evidence of what works and does not work in improving teacher performance and accountability as outlined in earlier section highlights the intractability of the issue. However, given the relative silence on the dynamics of empirical and normative expectations in framing teacher absenteeism, there is merit in re-assessing our traditional ways of working and expanding the range of policy options from the predictable to the not so predictable to address it. As a first step, we need to acknowledge that there are no quick fixes and simple solutions; and that the proposed strategies need to be implemented together to transform the “payoff” structure to attract and motivate effective teachers. While we do not have complete evidence on how these will impact on attendance and motivation, the immediate next step could be to build the evidence base on the issue. If done right, the social approach norm in the long run may provide an effective paradigm for teachers’ accountability, the cornerstone of educational systems, in the long run.

However, some immediate challenges and concerns need to be kept in mind, while one embarks on such an enterprise. These include: a) need to build a consensus on using the social norms approach in addressing teacher absenteeism and motivation. While the idea has a lot of merit, the evidence to tackle “motivation” through normative shift is limited and most importantly requires a longer time horizon which may be difficult to overcome in the current obsession with results and short time-frame of projects in the development sector; b) how to make the transition from demonstrated evidence from gaming experimentation to facilitating organic processes of change in real societal contexts; c) how to grasp the big picture, including the interrelationships among social norms and facilitate coherence across them - e.g. within education there are overlapping norms - sending children to school, teacher accountability, no child labor etc.; hence any attempt has to be holistic and which understands the accompanying multiple micro-scripts of power, socialization, and exclusion; and d) the challenge of monitoring and evaluating empirical and normative expectations to build the evidence base, how to capture “real” reasons for teacher absenteeism and motivation, and developing indicators for “right to education”.
For the sake of the paper I am going to assume that teacher absenteeism, although imperfect, is a proxy measure for deeper problems of performance, accountability and governance that are themselves barriers to educational progress.


Kremer, Michael, Karthik Muralidharan, Nazmul Chaudhury, Jeffrey Hammer, and F. Halsey Rogers. 2005. "Teacher absence in India: A snapshot." Journal of the European Economic Association, 3:2-3, pp. 658-67. The findings are based on unannounced visits to 3700 primary schools in 20 states representing 98% population. It covered government schools, rural private and private-aided schools. The study relied on direct physical verification of teacher’s presence. India had the second highest average among 8 countries where data was collected in a similar fashion.

Unlike developed countries, teacher absenteeism in India does not imply a substitute teacher is provided (trained or untrained is irrelevant) is provided. Considering that one-third schools in India are still single teacher schools, this means that majority of children end up not attending school when the teacher is absent; and in non-single teacher schools - teachers who are present end up managing more children and are unable to do justice to the children who they are responsible for in the first instance – further contributing to deteriorating quality of education.

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Aiyar, Yamini “What prompts collective action for accountability? Available at The Accountability Initiative at http://www.accountabilityindia.in

UNICEF-UPenn Learning Programme on Social Norms 2011 - Lectures/tutorials

Ibid.


Appadurai, Arjun (2004) in his essay “The capacity to aspire: Culture and the terms of recognition” argues that societies’ less privileged (the very poor, the dispossessed) have a lesser capacity to aspire not, of course, because they have less intelligence or imagination but because they have fewer navigational tools at their disposal. In other words, they don’t have the necessary information, experiences or support structures to help them make informed choices about their futures. And without those, there is also less confidence to take risks and to take the road unmapped.