Teaching at the Policy–Practice Interface: Public Policy, School Education, and Teacher Experiences in India

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Abstract

Background- Public policy has played a central role in shaping India's school education system through reforms aimed at access, equity, and quality. Despite sustained policy activity, persistent gaps between policy intent and classroom realities continue to affect teacher performance, job satisfaction, and school functioning.

Objectives- This study examines the key challenges and implementation gaps in India's school education policies by foregrounding teachers' perspectives. It aims to identify systemic constraints affecting policy execution, analyze their implications for organizational climate and teacher well-being, and generate evidence-based policy recommendations.

Methodology- The study adopts a mixed-method research design. Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire assessing workload, job satisfaction, leadership support, organizational climate, and perceived policy effectiveness. Qualitative data were generated through semi-structured interviews with school teachers to capture lived experiences of policy implementation. Secondary data from policy documents and prior research were used to contextualize findings. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis.

Findings- The findings reveal three persistent tensions: limited administrative capacity, increasing workload and compliance pressures, and a widening disconnect between policy expectations and classroom feasibility. Teachers report chronic challenges related to high pupil–teacher ratios, inadequate infrastructure, uneven digital readiness, and weak accountability mechanisms. These conditions negatively influence job satisfaction, professional motivation, and organizational climate, often compelling teachers to compensate for systemic shortcomings.

Conclusion and Implications- The study concludes that policy effectiveness in school education depends less on reform expansion and more on institutional capacity, leadership quality, and teacher well-being. Incorporating teacher perspectives into policy design and implementation processes is essential for bridging policy–practice gaps. The findings underscore the need for capacity-building governance, reduced administrative burden, and context-sensitive digital reforms to strengthen the sustainability of educational policy outcomes in India.

1. Introduction

India's school education system has long been shaped by ambitious public policy frameworks designed to expand access, strengthen quality, and address deep-rooted inequities. Yet the real story unfolds inside classrooms, where teachers often navigate a landscape that differs sharply from the policy imagination. Here's the thing: policies may promise transformation, but teachers experience the system as it actually functions, not as it is written. Their perspectives offer the closest view of how reforms succeed, stall, or quietly fail.

Across the past two decades, the country has seen sweeping initiatives including the Right to Education Act, technology-driven governance reforms, and renewed emphasis on accountability and learning outcomes. These reforms have undeniably moved the system forward, but recurring tensions remain. High pupil–teacher ratios, inconsistent administrative support, inadequate infrastructure, and heavy workloads continue to burden frontline educators. Digital interventions create new opportunities but also expose uneven readiness, especially in schools where resources or training lag behind policy expectations.

Teachers' experiences reveal these fault lines with clarity. Their levels of job satisfaction, perceptions of organizational climate, access to professional support, and everyday constraints collectively shape the quality of teaching and learning. When policies overlook these lived realities, reforms lose traction. What this really means is that teacher perspectives are not just important—they are diagnostic. They point us to the policy gaps that matter most.

This study examines the challenges and contradictions embedded in India's school education policies by situating teachers' voices at the center of the analysis. The aim is straightforward: to understand where policy succeeds, where it struggles, and why certain implementation failures persist despite repeated reform cycles. By drawing connections between governance structures, working conditions, and classroom practice, the paper argues for a more grounded, teacher-informed approach to educational policymaking.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Public Policy Frameworks and School Education in India

India's school education system has been shaped by a series of ambitious public policy interventions aimed at universal access, equity, and quality enhancement. Landmark frameworks such as the Right to Education Act, 2009 and the National Education Policy 2020 articulate normative commitments to inclusion, accountability, and learning outcomes (Government of India, 2009; Government of India, 2020). However, international policy research consistently observes that education reforms often encounter implementation bottlenecks when institutional capacity does not match policy ambition (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2015).

Empirical studies on Indian school education highlight persistent contradictions between policy mandates and school-level realities. Analyses of primary education reforms document violations of pupil–teacher ratio norms, uneven infrastructure provisioning, and weak monitoring mechanisms, suggesting that governance challenges stem less from policy absence and more from execution failures (Sheokand, 2017c; Sheokand, 2017d). Broader policy assessments further reveal that reforms frequently prioritize procedural compliance over pedagogic support, producing fragmented accountability structures and diluted outcomes (Sheokand, 2017i).

2.2 Leadership, Organizational Climate, and Institutional Functioning

A strong body of international literature identifies school leadership as a central determinant of organizational effectiveness, teacher motivation, and instructional quality (Fullan, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020). Leadership practices influence how policies are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted within schools, thereby shaping institutional climate.

Recent empirical work in the Indian context demonstrates that leadership styles significantly affect organizational climate and teacher performance. Evidence indicates that supportive and transformational leadership practices foster professional trust, collaboration, and engagement, while hierarchical and compliance-driven approaches intensify stress and disengagement (Sheokand, 2025a). Further research mapping organizational climate reveals multidimensional pathways through which leadership influences job satisfaction and professional commitment, underscoring climate as a mediating variable between policy and practice (Sheokand & Dhola, 2025).

Insights from organizational studies outside education reinforce this perspective by conceptualizing institutions as learning organizations where adaptive leadership and shared values enhance resilience and performance (Mansukhani & Choubisa, 2017; Pilani Campus, 2017).

2.3 Teacher Job Satisfaction, Professional Values, and Well-Being

Teacher job satisfaction has emerged as a critical indicator of school system health. International research consistently links satisfaction to workload balance, autonomy, recognition, and supportive organizational cultures. When these conditions deteriorate, motivation and instructional effectiveness decline.

Indian studies extend this literature by foregrounding the role of professional values and psychological well-being. Research on professional value orientation demonstrates that teachers' core beliefs about purpose, ethics, and professional identity significantly influence both their engagement and student outcomes (Sheokand, 2025b). Complementing this, mixed-method evidence grounded in motivational theory shows that chronic workload pressure and administrative burden undermine occupational well-being, particularly when hygiene factors such as recognition and support are absent (Sheokand, 2025c). These findings reposition teacher well-being as a systemic policy concern rather than an individual issue.

2.4 Workload, Stress, and Policy Overload

A recurring theme in education policy research is the intensification of teacher workload driven by expanding accountability regimes. Documentation requirements, reporting mandates, and compliance checks increasingly consume instructional time, producing what scholars describe as policy overload (Ainscow, 2020).

Recent empirical analyses of Indian teachers' work environments reveal that job stress emerges from the interaction of administrative demands, role conflict, and emotional labour. Importantly, resilience and organizational support function as mediating mechanisms, indicating that stress outcomes are shaped by institutional context rather than reform alone (Sheokand & Borad, 2025). Comparable insights from policy research in allied social sectors argue for calibrated, needs-based frameworks that align institutional expectations with practitioner capacity, as demonstrated in conceptual applications of the risk–need–responsivity model (Lad & Mansukhani, 2024).

2.5 Digital Governance Reforms and Institutional Readiness

Digitalization has become a central pillar of contemporary education reform, with policies promoting smart classrooms, online platforms, and data-driven monitoring. While digital governance promises efficiency and transparency, international evidence cautions that such reforms succeed only when institutional readiness is ensured (OECD, 2019).

Empirical studies on digital classrooms in India reveal a persistent gap between policy vision and infrastructural reality. Limited connectivity, insufficient devices, and inadequate training constrain meaningful pedagogic integration of technology (Sheokand, 2017b). Earlier analyses of e-governance similarly indicate that digital initiatives often remain symbolic when treated as technological solutions rather than organizational transformations (Sheokand, 2016a). Broader policy scholarship further warns that persuasive reform rhetoric can obscure structural weaknesses unless grounded in empirical realities (Mansukhani, 2023).

2.6 Social, Gendered, and Cultural Contexts of Policy Implementation

Policy implementation unfolds within social environments that shape teacher experiences in unequal ways. International frameworks emphasize that gender norms, social hierarchies, and economic vulnerability influence institutional functioning and professional agency (UNESCO, 2015).

Research on women's work across education, agriculture, and informal sectors highlights how policy frameworks often overlook gendered constraints such as safety, mobility, and unpaid emotional labour (Sheokand, 2017f; Sheokand, 2018a; Sheokand, 2018c). Broader policy analyses demonstrate that neglecting socio-cultural context leads to policy stagnation and limited institutional engagement, as seen in studies of marginalized crafts and informal economies (Mansukhani, 2018). These insights underscore that educational governance cannot be divorced from the social realities teachers inhabit.

2.7 Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature converges on a clear conclusion: India's school education reforms are characterized by strong normative intent but limited institutional grounding. Leadership quality, organizational climate, workload management, professional values, digital readiness, and socio-cultural context consistently shape policy outcomes. Yet policy design continues to privilege compliance mechanisms over capacity-building and teacher well-being.

Despite growing empirical evidence, teacher perspectives remain underutilized as systematic policy intelligence. Existing studies often examine governance, leadership, stress, or digital reform in isolation. There remains a need for integrative research that connects public policy frameworks with teachers' lived

institutional experiences. Addressing this gap is essential for developing reforms that are not only ambitious in intent but viable and sustainable in practice.

3. Research Objectives

This study is guided by four interlinked objectives designed to examine the intersection of public policy and everyday school realities:

1. To identify the major public policy challenges influencing school education in India.

2. To analyze the gaps between policy provisions and their actual implementation at the school level.

3. To understand teachers' perspectives on job satisfaction, workload, organizational climate, and professional experiences within current policy structures.

4. To propose evidence-based policy recommendations that align systemic reforms with the practical demands of teaching and learning.

These objectives collectively anchor the study in its central argument: policy reforms achieve meaningful impact only when they reflect the lived realities of the educators responsible for delivering them.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical design that integrates quantitative insights with qualitative depth. The goal is to capture both the structural dimensions of policy implementation and the experiential realities of teachers who inhabit the system daily.

4.2 Population and Sampling

The population comprises school teachers working in public and private institutions across diverse geographical settings. A multistage sampling approach is used to select respondents, ensuring representation from urban, semi-urban, and rural schools. The sample includes teachers across different subjects, experience levels, and administrative contexts to capture a broad range of perspectives.

4.3 Data Collection Tools

Two primary tools are employed:

- **A structured questionnaire** focusing on job satisfaction, workload, leadership support, organizational climate, digital readiness, and perceived policy effectiveness.

- **Semi-structured interviews** designed to explore deeper reflections on policy implementation, classroom challenges, administrative gaps, and professional expectations.

These tools allow the study to move beyond surface-level observations and uncover the nuanced ways teachers interpret and negotiate policy demands.

4.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from questionnaires are analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns and trends in teacher experiences. The qualitative interview data are examined through thematic analysis, enabling the identification of recurring themes related to policy gaps, working conditions, and organizational culture. The combination of these approaches allows for a richer and more grounded interpretation of findings.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Participation is voluntary, and all respondents are assured confidentiality. Data are used exclusively for academic purposes, and no identifying information is disclosed. Ethical approval is obtained from the institutional review board prior to data collection.

5. Policy Challenges in School Education

5.1 Administrative and Managerial Gaps

One of the most persistent challenges in India's school education system lies in the administrative architecture responsible for implementing reforms. Schools frequently operate within rigid bureaucratic hierarchies where responsibilities are fragmented and accountability mechanisms remain inconsistent. Head teachers often juggle administrative, instructional, and compliance-based duties without adequate training or institutional support. This strain reduces their effectiveness as instructional leaders and weakens the policy-to-practice chain. Research across states shows that schools relying heavily on paperwork-driven reporting tend to emphasize compliance rather than meaningful pedagogic improvement. These administrative gaps create a disconnect between policy directives and the actual capacity of schools to fulfil them.

5.2 Infrastructure and Resource Limitations

Infrastructure continues to shape the quality of schooling in significant ways. Although policies mandate norms for classrooms, sanitation, libraries, and teaching-learning materials, many schools fall short of these expectations. High pupil–teacher ratios further complicate instructional delivery, undermining both classroom management and individualized attention. Resource allocation disparities across states and school types—especially between rural and urban contexts—magnify these challenges. When physical conditions are inadequate, teachers must compensate through additional emotional and cognitive labour, which affects performance and job satisfaction. The literature consistently notes that without stable resource availability, policy goals related to quality improvement become aspirational rather than actionable.

5.3 Digital Readiness Versus Digital Reality

Digital reforms are now central to India's education policy narrative. Initiatives such as smart classrooms, e-content platforms, and digital attendance aim to modernize governance and pedagogy. Yet the on-ground reality reveals mixed outcomes. Schools with limited connectivity, unreliable electricity, or outdated equipment struggle to implement digital mandates effectively. Teachers report that training often focuses on technical demonstrations rather than sustained pedagogic integration. Digital reforms, when introduced

without addressing foundational infrastructural deficits, become symbolic—satisfying the appearance of innovation without enabling meaningful change. This digital readiness gap underscores the need for a more grounded and context-sensitive approach to technology integration.

5.4 Monitoring, Accountability, and Policy Overload

The intent behind monitoring systems is to ensure fidelity of implementation, but in practice, they frequently contribute to policy overload. Teachers are required to produce extensive documentation, maintain multiple registers, and participate in frequent reporting exercises. These administrative demands consume instructional time and shift attention away from teaching. Moreover, the accountability system often prioritizes quantitative indicators—attendance, enrolment, test scores—over qualitative aspects of teaching and learning. When teachers perceive monitoring as punitive rather than supportive, it reinforces a culture of compliance rather than reflective practice. These tensions weaken the very reforms meant to improve outcomes.

5.5 Social, Cultural, and Gender-Based Challenges

Policy implementation unfolds within social contexts that shape both teacher experiences and student learning. Gender norms influence teacher mobility, safety, work-life balance, and professional autonomy, especially for women educators in rural or marginalized communities. Social attitudes toward disability, caste, and economic vulnerability further complicate the enactment of inclusive education policies. Policies may prescribe inclusion, but the cultural environment determines whether inclusion is lived or limited. Without addressing these wider socio-cultural determinants, school policies fall short of creating genuinely equitable learning spaces.

6. Teacher Perspectives and Ground Realities

6.1 Job Satisfaction Trends

Teacher job satisfaction serves as a critical indicator of system health, yet it remains one of the most overlooked dimensions of educational reform. Teachers consistently report that satisfaction is shaped less by policy intentions and more by everyday teaching conditions—classroom load, administrative expectations, interpersonal dynamics, and the availability of support structures. When workload increases without corresponding institutional support, teachers experience a decline in motivation and emotional energy. This dissatisfaction directly affects instructional quality, student engagement, and overall school performance. The evidence is clear: job satisfaction is not a peripheral issue but a central determinant of system effectiveness.

6.2 Organizational Climate and Professional Culture

The organizational climate of schools has a strong influence on how teachers interpret and navigate policy reforms. Schools with collaborative cultures—where leadership is responsive, colleagues are supportive, and communication is transparent—tend to foster higher levels of professional commitment. Conversely, environments characterized by authoritarian leadership, limited collegial interactions, unclear expectations, or inconsistent communication generate stress and disengagement. Teachers emphasize that climate is not shaped by infrastructure alone but by daily micro-interactions that determine whether they

feel valued, heard, and respected. Policy reforms that overlook this human dimension often fail, even when technically sound.

6.3 Workload, Administrative Burden, and Emotional Labour

Teachers routinely highlight workload as a core barrier to effective teaching. Beyond classroom instruction, they are responsible for administrative compliance, record maintenance, student documentation, co-curricular planning, and periodic reporting cycles. These tasks expand with every new policy layer but rarely come with time allowances or support staff. The cumulative burden contributes to role overload and burnout. Teachers also carry significant emotional labour—mediating conflicts, managing student behaviour, and addressing the socio-emotional needs of children. When emotional labour remains invisible in policy design, teachers feel undervalued despite their central role in holding the system together.

6.4 Classroom Realities Versus Policy Mandates

Teachers repeatedly point to contradictions between policy prescriptions and what is actually possible inside classrooms. Policies may mandate continuous assessments, activity-based learning, inclusive practices, and digital integration, but classroom constraints—large class sizes, resource shortages, and limited training—make consistent implementation challenging. Teachers describe these mandates as aspirational but disconnected from ground realities. This gap undermines their sense of efficacy and leads to frustration when performance expectations rise without supportive conditions. The resulting tension becomes a silent barrier to reform success.

6.5 Reflections on RTE Implementation

The RTE Act remains a landmark reform, but teacher narratives highlight unresolved challenges. PTR norms are widely violated, infrastructure mandates remain unevenly met, and prohibitions on corporal punishment or discrimination often depend on local enforcement rather than systemic accountability. Teachers also observe that the Act increased documentation and administrative oversight but did not always provide the structural resources needed to meet its expectations. These contradictions reveal that while the RTE transformed the policy landscape, its implementation continues to rely heavily on teachers compensating for systemic shortcomings.

7. Discussion

The findings reveal a school education system caught between ambitious policy aspirations and the practical constraints of everyday teaching. Teachers' experiences make one thing unmistakably clear: the core obstacles to reform lie less in policy design and more in the misalignment between administrative expectations, institutional capacity, and classroom realities. When policies expand faster than the system's ability to implement them, teachers become the shock absorbers of reform. They absorb the workload, carry the emotional burden, and compensate for structural limitations that policies fail to address.

7.1 Misalignment Between Policy Vision and Institutional Capacity

A recurring theme across teacher narratives is the system's limited administrative capacity to manage complex reforms. Policies that assume robust monitoring structures, sufficient staffing, and strong

leadership often falter when these assumptions meet under-resourced schools. The tension between what policymakers expect and what schools can feasibly deliver becomes a structural barrier, weakening reform outcomes. This misalignment reinforces a compliance mindset where fulfilling paperwork requirements becomes more important than improving teaching quality.

7.2 The Human Element: Teacher Well-Being and Motivation

The analysis shows that teacher well-being is not a soft or secondary concern—it is central to the functioning of the system. Job satisfaction, organizational climate, and emotional labour significantly shape instructional quality. When teachers feel overburdened, undervalued, or unsupported, their capacity to deliver meaningful learning diminishes. The literature strongly suggests that reforms succeed when they cultivate supportive professional cultures rather than layering additional compliance duties onto schools.

7.3 Digital Reform: Promise Without Grounding

India's digital ambition remains strong, but the ground reality is fragmented. Technology reforms often arrive without foundational readiness—limited devices, unreliable connectivity, and insufficient training. Teachers view these reforms as well-intentioned but out of sync with everyday constraints. The symbolic adoption of digital tools without deep integration reduces their pedagogic value. For digital governance to achieve impact, reforms must be aligned with actual infrastructural capacities and accompanied by continuous support rather than one-time training.

7.4 Policy Overload and the Burden of Implementation

Teachers operate within a system where every reform cycle introduces new demands without removing older ones. The result is policy overload: multiple mandates, overlapping monitoring systems, and rising administrative burdens. This environment weakens teacher autonomy and contributes to burnout. The irony is striking—policies designed to improve learning inadvertently take teachers away from the classroom. Reform success therefore requires a shift from quantity to quality in policy design, prioritising clarity, feasibility, and support over expansion.

7.5 The Centrality of Teacher Voice in Policy Reform

The most significant insight emerging from the analysis is the value of teacher voice as a diagnostic tool. Teachers understand where reforms fail, why they stall, and what practical changes would make them work. Their lived experience bridges the gap between policy imagination and classroom reality. When policy design marginalises teacher perspectives, reforms become detached, ineffective, and unsustainable. Incorporating teacher voice is not merely participatory—it is strategic. It strengthens policy design, improves implementation, and ensures reforms are grounded in real-world conditions.

7.6 Why Policy Must Shift from Compliance to Capacity

The broader implication is that India's education system needs a paradigmatic shift—from compliance-driven governance to capacity-building governance. Strengthening leadership, empowering teachers, improving coordination across departments, and reducing administrative burdens are structural changes that allow policies to flourish. Without this shift, even well-designed reforms will continue to face resistance, dilution, or silent failure.

8. Policy Recommendations

The analysis highlights an urgent need for reforms that move beyond policy expansion and focus instead on strengthening school-level capacity. The following recommendations translate the study's insights into practical pathways for improving governance, working conditions, and classroom quality.

8.1 Strengthen Administrative and Leadership Capacity

Schools require leaders who can interpret policy, coordinate resources, and support teachers effectively. This calls for:

- Targeted leadership training for head teachers

- Reducing administrative fragmentation across departments

- Empowering school leaders with greater decision-making autonomy
  When leadership capacity increases, policy implementation becomes more coherent and responsive.

8.2 Invest in Realistic, Need-Based Infrastructure

Infrastructure improvements must be aligned with actual school needs. Priority areas include:

- Addressing pupil–teacher ratio imbalances

- Ensuring reliable sanitation, electricity, and classroom space

- Providing consistent access to learning materials
  A foundational infrastructure base reduces teachers' compensatory labour and improves instructional quality.

8.3 Recalibrate Digital Reforms to Ground Realities

Digital initiatives should be designed with a clear understanding of school contexts. This means:

- Ensuring basic digital infrastructure before introducing advanced tools

- Offering continuous, hands-on training rather than one-time workshops

- Providing on-site technical support to maintain devices and platforms
  A context-sensitive digital approach prevents symbolic implementation and enhances pedagogic value.

8.4 Reduce Administrative Burden on Teachers

Teachers should spend more time teaching and less time completing compliance tasks. Key steps include:

- Streamlining reporting requirements and merging redundant registers

- Introducing support staff for administrative tasks in larger schools

- Replacing punitive monitoring with supportive supervision
  Reducing bureaucratic load directly strengthens teacher well-being and classroom focus.

8.5 Institutionalize Teacher Voice in Policy Design

Teachers must become active contributors to policy formulation and review. This can be achieved by:

- Creating structured teacher-feedback mechanisms at district and state levels

- Involving teachers in curriculum review committees

- Establishing formal channels for reporting implementation barriers
  Policies that integrate teacher insights tend to be more feasible, grounded, and impactful.

8.6 Prioritize Teacher Well-Being and Professional Growth

Improving teacher motivation requires addressing both professional and emotional needs:

- Introducing well-being programs and stress-management supports

- Providing opportunities for career progression and mentoring

- Acknowledging the emotional labour teachers perform daily Investing in well-being is not optional; it is a core condition for sustainable reform.

8.7 Enhance Inclusivity Through Context-Aware Policies

Inclusive education requires more than policy mandates. Practical improvements include:

- Training teachers to address disability-related needs

- Strengthening gender-sensitive school environments

- Engaging communities to challenge socio-cultural barriers Inclusion succeeds only when schools have the tools and support to enact it meaningfully.

8.8 Shift From Compliance to Capacity-Building Governance

Reforms must move away from documentation-heavy compliance toward system strengthening. This shift involves:

- Simplifying policy mandates

- Prioritising depth over volume in reform planning

- Building long-term institutional capacity rather than introducing short-lived initiatives Capacity-building governance makes reforms sustainable and teacher-friendly.

9. Conclusion

This study underscores a central truth about India's school education system: policy reform cannot succeed unless it meaningfully engages with the realities of the people responsible for implementing it. Teachers stand at the intersection of policy ambition and classroom execution. Their experiences reveal the cumulative weight of administrative gaps, infrastructure limitations, digital disparities, and rising

workload expectations. These pressures shape not only their job satisfaction and well-being but also the quality of learning that students receive.

The evidence points to a systemic misalignment between policy design and institutional capacity. Reforms frequently introduce new mandates without resolving foundational constraints, resulting in policy overload and symbolic compliance. Digital initiatives, though promising, often exceed the readiness of schools to adopt them. Organizational climate and leadership support emerge as decisive factors influencing how teachers navigate these challenges. In this environment, the absence of teacher voice from policy processes becomes a structural weakness rather than a procedural oversight.

Addressing these issues requires a shift in the reform paradigm—from expansion to strengthening, from compliance to capacity, and from top-down directives to teacher-informed policymaking. Enhancing leadership preparation, reducing administrative burdens, investing in realistic infrastructure, and embedding teacher perspectives into governance systems are not peripheral adjustments; they are essential conditions for lasting change. When policy aligns with ground realities, schools become environments where teachers can teach effectively, and students can learn meaningfully.

The study reinforces a simple but powerful insight: education reforms thrive when teachers are supported, empowered, and valued. Placing teacher experience at the center of policymaking offers a pathway toward more equitable, resilient, and effective school systems in India.

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