

Public Deliberation in Zones of Awkward Engagement: Education Reforms in Kerala (India)

“Imagine that you're either the referee, coach, player, or spectator at an unconventional soccer match: the field for the game is round; there are several goals scattered haphazardly around the circular field; people can enter and leave the game whenever they want to; they can throw balls in whenever they want; they can say "that's my goal" whenever they want to, as many times as they want to, and for as many goals as they want to; the entire game takes place on a sloped field; and the game is played as if it makes sense. If you now substitute in that example principals for referees, teachers for coaches, students for players, parents for spectators and schooling for soccer, you have an equally unconventional depiction of school organizations. “ (Weick, 1976, p.1)

Karl Weick's (1976) radical illustration of schools captures some of the dilemmas endemic to public schooling in democratic societies. The mass scale, universality, and complexity of expectations makes sociologists like Weick look for a rational bureaucratic organizational structure since *all* students resident in the area are supposed to have the opportunity to be socialized into adulthood *and* gainful employment through public education, that too *within* social structures that are persistently plagued by endemic social inequalities (Bidwell, 1965; UN 1975). I argue that the scale, complexity, and inequality justify my selection of public education as a thematic area for the scrutiny of public deliberation in contemporary Kerala.

But who is this public and how do they deliberate? Like Bohman (1996), I reject the idea of a phantom public. Therefore, methodologically I begin by identifying some of the prominent stakeholders, their claims, justifications, and most pressing concerns. This methodological shift also extends Bohman's (1996)

theorization of public deliberation and Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs' (2004) recognition of informal talk as public deliberation. I argue that classroom resistances to teaching, staffroom resistances to policy implementation, and parent exists from public school networks are practices that publically air disagreements, and are therefore rich sites of public deliberation, albeit unconventional. Stakeholders live out diverse perspectives and work towards different goals – hence I suggest that unconventional public deliberations in such “zones of awkward engagement” (Tsing, 2004) require examination. Before I proceed, I present my theoretical framework and methodological design, and describe the historical and political context of my work.

Theoretical Framework: I begin with the normative definition used by Chambers (2003) of public deliberation as debate and discussion “aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants” (p. 309). Public deliberation is inclusive of informal talk as long as local, national, or international issues of public concern are talked about (Cook, Delli Carpini, & Jacobs, 2004) and as long as the dialogue is a joint social activity (Bohman, 1996).

Bohman (1996) recognizes social complexity, inequality, and cultural pluralism as social facts that undermine normative justifications of deliberative democracy and public deliberation to the point of skepticism: social facts seem to make the realization of normative ideals improbable. This prompts Bohman

(1996) to pay close attention to “realistic social facts” as he attempts to extend normative theorizations of public deliberation. As Bohman (1996) explains: “I try to be realistic about such social facts without being skeptical, and to be normative in orientation while insisting on sociological descriptions that illuminate real potentials for deliberation in current institutions and practices” (p. 18). He identifies the two main features of public deliberation from such realistic accounts as: “deliberation is a dialogical process and that it is public to the extent that it is a joint social activity involving all citizens” (p. 17).

Furthermore, Bohman (1996) goes on to extend previous conceptions by re-imagining compromise, by expanding models that correct for social inequalities, and by reinterpreting popular (rather than anonymous) sovereignty as the rule by deliberative majorities. For those who deny that consensus can be reconciled with pluralism, Bohman argues that consensus does not necessarily mean convergence of beliefs. Rather, it is enough that “outcomes and decisions allow an *ongoing cooperation with others* of different minds that is at least *not unreasonable*” (p. 100). Secondly deliberations may seem to favor the best off. Working off Amartya Sen’s capability approach Bohman argues that expanding the capacities, resources, and networks needed for public deliberation can correct for effects of social inequalities. Last, social complexities may make one skeptical of the effectiveness of public deliberation. Addressing complexity, Habermas (1992) suggests the separation of informal, anonymous public spheres from formal decision-making. Bohman (1996) rejects this idea of a phantom public by

pointing out that “deliberation describes the public way in which majorities are formed” (p. 193) and elaborates the interdependencies of seemingly large complex social institutions.

Can classroom or staffroom resistance be considered public deliberation? I argue that the high stakes and disagreements involved necessitate deliberation. Deliberation is generally about solving problems, and classroom and staffroom practices attempt to overcome a problematic situation by solving a problem or resolving a conflict through joint social activity. Therefore, I argue that these deliberations are public. Bohman (1996) writes: “publicity does not consist of the full knowledge of all relevant reasons and interests; rather it is the particular way in which reasons are offered so that they can be communicated to others and elicit answers from them. To offer a reason is to call for a response from others; if the potential audience of this response is unrestricted and general, both the reason and the audience to which it is directed may be called “public”. (p. 46)” Given the scale of people directly engaging with the issue, I argue that classroom resistances, staffroom resistances, and the like are public since the potential audience has become general.

This expansion of public deliberation leads me to my second theoretical framework. As diverse stakeholders engage with a social issue from their particular perspectives, Tsing (2004) describes the intensification of connections, frictions, and gaps in “zones of awkward engagement”. As Tsing (2004) writes, in zones of awkward engagement, “words mean something different across a

divide even as people agree to speak” (p. xi). Tsing’s theorization allows me to expand Bohman’s (1996) concepts of public deliberation in view of the realistic social facts that contextualize this particular issue.

My final theoretical framework is an internalization of Bohman’s (1996) attention to “realistic social facts”. The skepticism of public deliberation that Bohman addresses is similar to the skepticism I often feel concerning education. Is the transformative power of education available only for those who are already privileged? Is engagement and negotiation obsolete considering the nature of complexities involved, which include changing global employment markets and expectations regarding national development? Therefore, like Bohman (1996) does for public deliberation, I use sociological investigations about (American) schooling as my “realistic” theoretical framework. Are schools in North America and Kerala comparable? In some ways yes, and in other ways no. Like Bidwell (1965) describes for schools in the US, mass, universal, and uniform services are required of Kerala’s public schools. Many of the students served don’t want to be there and for some, the teachers are not keen to have them in their classes either. But public education is a *mandatory public good*. Equal service has to be provided for all but individual needs have to be met.

Additionally, racial achievement gaps in the US are comparable to Dalit achievement gaps in Kerala, and Dalit advocacy groups find in the public education system a ritual charade that legitimizes historical social advantages (Meyer & Rowan, 1978; Bourdieu, 1986). This realistic framework illuminates the

normative, philosophical theorizations I draw on because even I tend to become skeptical of the normative when realistic concerns remain unaddressed.

To summarize, I began with Chamber's (2003) normative definition of public deliberation. Then I examined Bohman's (1996) description of deliberation as a dialogical process that is public to the extent that it is a joint social activity involving all citizens" (p. 17). In light of the realistic social facts that contextualize the issue under consideration, I take "debate and discussion" to the actual sites where deliberations are most intense. Then I argued that these deliberations are public since the potential audiences have become unrestricted and general due to the scale and nature of the issue. To strengthen my argument, I draw on Tsing's (2004) conceptualization of increasing frictions, connections, and gaps in zones of awkward engagement. Last, I explicate a sociological analysis of schools in order to inform my discussion with realistic social facts pertinent to education.

Objectives: In the context of the recent education reforms in Kerala who are the stakeholders, and what are their claims, justifications, and most pressing concerns? What methods of public deliberation can be observed between members of stakeholder groups?

Methods and Data Sources: I began this investigation as a bystander trying to understand the education reforms that were happening around me. I graduated high school from a private school in Kerala, where hyper-competivity had created alienated learning situations. About a decade later, when I heard about

the institutionalization of “learner centered, activity oriented, issue based education” within the National Curricular Framework (2005) and the Kerala Curricular Framework (2007), I found the arguments compelling. However, the resistances that enveloped my queries – from teachers, parents, and Dalit groups prompted this journey.

In my village in Kerala, I thought myself related to everybody around me. Then I realized that I did not count the entire village when I said “my village”. My village is geographically segregated, with the erstwhile untouchable castes (Ezhavas) living across the river, and the erstwhile slave castes (Pulayas) living on their hill. Yes, I am related to all the Syrian Christians in my village but I have no interactions with Dalits (Pulayas) or Other Backward Castes (Ezhavas). This recognition promoted me to study the responses to the reforms more systematically.

The primary arguments in this paper are based on preliminary fieldwork I conducted in June and July of 2012, and informed by my own personal histories and the absences I note in them. Since the curriculum, textbooks, and evaluation patterns in public schools have changed, my first default perspective was a loose network of policy makers who had worked towards this change. I met with and built relationships with the former director of the State Council for Educational Research and Training (SCERT), research officers, administrators, and politicians. Given my own life history of alienating schooling and subsequent interest in the transformative potential of education, it was easy for me to understand their

perspective. I moved along this network with relative ease as I sat in on meetings and discussions, listened to phone conversations about my project, and observed office proceedings as they occurred around me. The network widened to District Institute of Education and Training (DIET) offices, District Education Office (DEO) offices, teashops, and schools.

Alongside, my interest in Dalit perspectives took me to the hillside in my village that is also a center of Dalit activism. Resisting oppression from my Syrian Christian ancestors, Poikayil Appachan and other Pulayas from my village had formed a socio-religious institution in the early 1900s. PRDS or Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha is by now a fairly well researched organization. This network was much harder to access. In my initial meetings I was looked at with suspicion. However, institutional relationships with a prominent Dalit scholar who was affiliated with PRDS helped tremendously in forming genuine relationships. Here too, I was told: *you should meet this person*, and I was soon inducted into a parallel network of relationships. Again, I participated in conversations, attended activist meetings, talked over tea and lunch, and was inducted into a growing affective and intellectual network.

Both these sets of relationships provided access to high schools, and one primary school, where I was allowed to observe classroom practices, staff meetings, teacher training sessions, administrative and managerial activities, and special activities organized for pedagogic enhancement. As I built relationships

with networks that were suspicious of each other, I found myself increasingly participating in practices of public deliberation.

“After a sufficient length of time, speakers begin to use expressions that they did not employ before; the process of trying to convince others may alter not only one’s own mode of expression but also the reasons one finds convincing. One often hears oneself say things when made accountable to other specific actors that one might not have endorsed otherwise. This back and forth movement is part of the more general process of interpretation... Novel re-interpretations signify the success of a dialogue ...” (Bohman, 1996, p. 58)

I was constantly incorporating and reinterpreting contributions from different perspectives as my own. This made me realize that it is not disinterest but *interest* and *emotional engagement* with multiple perspectives that can lead to some kind of objectivity. I find myself and my work playing the very roles I investigate.

Lastly, the robust, negative relationships between public-school-parent aspirations for private schools and public-policy aversion for private schools, and the comparable reforms within the largest private school affiliating board in Kerala led me to conduct a similar exploration of private school networks. Here, the investigation was more formal and structured. I interviewed school founders, principals, teachers, private tuition teachers, parents, and students, and observed staffroom, classroom, and out-of-class practices.

Tsing (2004) writes that the central feature of all social mobilizing is “negotiating more or less recognized differences in goals, objects, and strategies of the cause” (p. x). In trying to understand this diversity I become part of this social mobilization, and like Tsing (2004), I follow the ethnographer’s surprises as I trace frictions, connections, and gaps in contemporary Kerala. And, like Tsing (2004), I place relationships and affect at the center of my investigation.

Historical and Political context: As policymakers pointed out in conversations, independent India’s first priority and challenge concerning public education was access: education had been the domain of the elite and now it had to be made accessible to all, given India’s socialist, democratic orientation. Even today, many of India’s states struggle with this challenge of access. However, Kerala’s peculiar social and political history had created a network of schools well before independence (Tharakan, 1984), which for a long time formed the basic justification for Kerala’s *exceptionality* in the field of education. Kerala’s education system becomes exceptional when compared with most other Indian states as far as access is considered, and unexceptional when academic achievement is considered. For instance, in the 2009 national achievement survey for grades 7 and 8, Kerala scored less than the national average for Math, Science, and Social Science (NCERT, 2009, pp. 51, 71, 79).

Public education has never been given the priority it deserves in India though political and policy rhetoric abounds (Sen, 1999). Therefore, the construction of the National Curricular Framework (2005) with relatively greater

deliberation and democratic participation was an exceptional occurrence. The immediate context of this exercise was the alleged Hinduization of education during the political leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party, and the new leadership under the Congress government initiated discussions on curricular reforms. The National Curricular Framework (2005) recommends an activity oriented, learner centered curricular approach and based on these recommendations the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) conducted a model revision of textbooks. Indian states were expected to localize these recommendations and draw their own curricular frameworks and revise textbooks for their public schools.

Before I proceed, I must clarify the term “public school”. Following in the British tradition, India’s public schools are elite private schools. Public education, therefore, holds the meaning of educating an elite, privileged class for public roles of leadership (for public good) and the connotation of an education system that is accessible to all residents (Feinberg, 2012). In this paper, I use the term “public schools” to refer to non/nominal fee-charging schools that follow the Kerala State Government syllabus.

By 2005 Kerala had completed one set of reforms in its public schools as part of the World Bank supported national level District Primary Education Program (DPEP). Curricular changes that were initiated in primary schools in sample districts in 1997 had been extended to all districts and all grades. To consolidate and align these changes with the National Curricular Framework,

Kerala drew its own Kerala Curricular Framework by 2007, following which textbooks were revised a second time. Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad, an advocacy group affiliated to the Communist Party of India, pioneered the DPEP reforms and the KCF with the government headed by the Left Democratic Front (LDF). With the United Democratic Front (UDF) coming to power in 2011, political activity and interest in education has diminished.

At the same time, the largest private school affiliating board in Kerala (and India), the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), instituted a series of changes within its affiliated schools. The CBSE follows NCERT syllabi and textbooks and in lieu of the revisions that had taken place, CBSE instituted continuous and comprehensive evaluation (CCE) of scholastic, co-scholastic, physical, emotional, social, and attitudinal domains of each child. Kerala's public schools follow the textbooks and CCE developed by the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT). Therefore, similar reforms have been instituted in all public and most private schools in Kerala.

Reform perspectives, claims, justifications, and concerns: The formally articulated claims of the reform perspective, according to the National Curricular Framework (2005) and Kerala Curricular Framework (2007) are: learner centered, activity oriented, and issue based educational opportunities are essential for individual and social development and for social justice. Development here refers to the freedoms and capacities of the learners to lead the kind of lives they have reason to value (Sen, 1999). Such an orientation allows children to enjoy

learning without burden, to construct knowledge and engage in genuine, deep learning, and to develop attitudes and values desirable for responsible democratic citizenship while overcoming differences of caste, class, and gender.

Typical to the circulation of Learner Centered Education in developing country contexts, “this is arguably too great a set of expectations for any single change, let alone one that faces considerable implementation barriers. “

(Schweisfurth, 2011, p. 427) Nevertheless, continuing with the reform perspective, some of the salient justifications the NCF and KCF present to support their claims are:

1. Children are mercilessly over schooled to the point where schooling is burdensome, stressful, and may cause education related suicides. The NCF position paper on Curriculum, Syllabus, and Textbooks opens with such an instance of suicide. This hyper competitiveness makes learning joyless and promotes rote learning (*mugging up*), which is seen as superficial learning. Such learning goes against the very spirit of learning – “(an) education that should give hope, teach the worth of life, develop capabilities to shape it” (NCF Position Paper 2.3, p.1). Therefore, to promote genuine learning, children have to be provided with opportunities to construct knowledge and enjoy learning through developmentally appropriate activities. Examination reforms specifically target hyper competitiveness, rote learning, and education related suicides.

2. The quality of education in schools is worrisome. With particular reference to Kerala, George and Kumar (1999) write: “Only about 50% of the students who

appear for the examination get through in spite of liberal valuation and provision of grace marks. Only one third of the children who join the first standard pass the matriculation examination” (p. 5). More generally, the NCF records that “many of those who enter drop out of unconcerned schools without learning anything” (NCF Position Paper 2.3, p.1). To improve the quality of education student interest in learning has to be stimulated, which is possible only if classroom transactions become interesting, related to the life of the child outside of school, issue based, and activity oriented.

I clarify the different demographics targeted by the two justifications. The first justification, related to exam stress and hyper competitiveness is applicable largely to private schools and highly selective public schools in Kerala. These populations have economic capital and can afford fee-charging schools or have the means to convert other capitals to procure admission to selective public schools. Hypercompetitiveness arises primarily due to the manner in which *socially acceptable higher education* is structured in Kerala, which is accessed through a separate set of entrance exams.

These are exams organized to select applicants for highly sought after professions like medicine, nursing, engineering, law, civil services, and chartered accountancy. The intensity of competition for these professions necessitates learning to the test and extensive private coaching. Thus, the first justification is *less* applicable to lower income groups and outlier populations who have been marginalized from this route (Nair & Nair, 2008).

At the same time, the second justification of lack of quality and standards is not so applicable to the population that attends most private schools or highly selective public schools. The failing standards are more accurate descriptions of public schools, which cannot institute any mechanisms for selectivity. For examples of student work in such schools see p. 37 of *Padhikatha Padhangal* by Padmanabhan & Komath (2012).

Returning to the reform perspective, I have presented salient claims and justifications from policy documents. Now I trace conversational justifications. Policy makers in Kerala articulate learning as a “state of energy” (*orjavastha*) and education as a process of consciousness raising that changes ones ways of knowing and being. This is the learner centered education teachers should facilitate, and if students in public schools can imbibe (*ulkolluka*) this philosophy of learning it will not only equip the learner for any job but also reform society and realize the genuine purpose of public education. Hyper competitiveness may condition societal aspirations but it need not determine them.

The most pressing concerns recorded by the reform perspective are two. The first regards “market forces” and a second less pressing one relates to teacher resistance. This is probably because the first is perceived to be outside the controls of education policy while sustained engagement continues with teachers. Market forces include private school networks, study guide companies, and entrance coaching institutions; these “manipulate” parents to value

particular professional courses, which conditions and even over determines teaching practices.

Private schooling in Kerala is organized around middle class aspirations for “decent” employment as doctors, engineers, lawyers, civil servants, and chartered accountants, and private schools offer *only* Science and Commerce subjects in 11th and 12th grades. Furthermore, most schools organize their Science cohorts as Medical and Engineering cohorts. Medical and Engineering entrance exams decide entry to state subsidized professional colleges and very rarely do private school students *not* attend coaching classes for entrance exams. Public policy supporters lament that this fetishization conditions schooling practices, middle class aspirations, and working class desperations over educational non-mobility. Only when *public school students can compete with middle class students in entrance exams*, will public education be seen to have provided all students with equal opportunities.

Last, policy supporters claim that teacher resistance stems from this conditioning and a lack of understanding of the true nature and value of education, as well as increased workloads. “The new method requires more work and teachers find that difficult”, explains a Headmaster. Creating lesson plans that can engage the diverse students in the class, many of whom come to school only because of the provision of mid day meals, and finishing the portions set for the grade level can be particularly challenging. But, this is the only way

genuine learning can transpire, particularly for the underprivileged, he elaborates.

Dalit perspectives, claims, justifications, and concerns: The Dalit perspectives I recount here are primarily two. I was able to interact more extensively with the first than with the second. The first perspective circulates amongst relatively privileged Dalits who self-identify as professionals. I also came across this perspective amongst administrators within the Government Education Department. The term that proponents use to refer to this perspective, and one that seemed to be in some circulation is *pelagogy*.

A take off on the term pedagogy (the science of teaching), pelagogy arguments claim that the education reforms are targeted solely at Pelayars (colloquial for Pulayar, an erstwhile slave caste and the largest sub-caste amongst the protected Scheduled Caste population). Public schools are left with disadvantaged populations since the middle classes, including upwardly mobile Dalits, have mass exited the public school system for private schools, particularly after the reforms were instituted.

This claim seems to be somewhat upheld by recent research. According to the Economic Review (2010), 177 CBSE schools newly started functioning during 2009-10 – an increase of 30 % (p. 243). Furthermore, a comparative study of two government schools in Trivandrum by Padmanabhan & Komath (2012) provides further insight – of the 61 students in 7th and 9th grades, 28 were Scheduled Caste (45.9%) and 26 were from Other Backward Castes (42.6%) (p. 37). In an English

test the researchers administered, 22 of the 28 SC students fared very poorly and 3 wrote nothing at all. 16 of the OBC students fared very poorly, 8 moderately well, and 2 did very well. Malayalam test results were similar (p. 38).

All the proponents of this perspective criticize one particular policy initiative – “all pass”. According to this directive, all students pass the lower grades till they reach the 10th grade, at the end of which matriculation exams are held. “Since students know that they will move to the next grade come what may, why should they care about studying? Due to this policy, students move on without acquiring any of the foundational elements necessary for the next grade. (*Eenayam dalitha vibhagathille kuttikalude adisthanangale thakarkkuva*)” says a Dalit parent whose child attends a relatively selective public school.

Proponents further accuse the new “continuous evaluation policies” (CE) of institutionalizing grade inflation. With CE, “anybody and everybody (*ethu pottanum*) can pass matriculation exams”. To clarify, continuous assessment directives state that 20% of the scores of the matriculation exams should come from internally held assessments, which include project work, collection, seminar, and assessment (Continuous Evaluation for 10th Grade, SCERT, p. 2). A teacher explains: “Since CE is not a centralized, anonymous assessment, all students get the highest possible score, i.e. 20, or at the most 18 or 19 out of 20. Then a student needs only 10 marks to pass the matriculation examination; cumulatively you will get 30 and you will pass!”. Falling academic standards are thus ascribed to the examination reforms instituted by the reforms.

Again, statistical indicators support this claim. According to the Economic Review 2010, “during 2010, the SSLC students eligible for higher studies was 90.72% and in the previous two years were 91.89 % and 92.09%.” (p. 246) Such high pass percentages co-exist with public knowledge that students who pass these exams may barely be able to read or write (Ajaykumar et al, 2011; Padhmanabhan & Kodoth, 2012).

The most pressing concern for this perspective is Dalit student inability to exit the (disastrous) public school system due to economic poverty. Though some Dalit children attend low fee charging private schools, parents are uncertain that their children will be able to continue in private schools since fees increase significantly as students move on to higher grades. For them, only when Dalit students can compete with middle class students in entrance exams, will loyalty to public schools hold any meaning.

The last Dalit perspective I present here is sketchy but important and requires further follow up. I was able to interact with very few Dalit parents who remain economically underprivileged. They work as day laborers, domestic helps, or as agricultural laborers. The parents I met wanted their children to do well, so they spend the little resources they have to buy the most popular study guide *Labour India*. They could offer little help at home, afford no private tuitions, but they still held on to the possibility of their children breaking the cycle of poverty through education. Here again, this meant professional courses, particularly medicine and engineering.

Teacher perspectives, claims, justifications, and concerns: As the populations under consideration increase and become more diverse, my observations and accounts become less generalizable. I am unable to address variations to provide for sophistication or accuracy. Nevertheless, I include these perspectives in their present limited forms because of the contextualization they provide for the instances of public deliberation that I examine later. I must also note that my conversations were with high school teachers, not middle school or primary school teachers.

Almost all the public high school teachers I interacted with claim that the new policies and expectations are unpractical and un-standardizable. How then can students who exit schools be judged for college readiness or job readiness?

Teachers claim that as long as society requires standards for social inclusion they have to teach students to attain these standards. Since their students come from disadvantaged socio-economic families, societal standards, however they change, will always be difficult for their students to acquire. Therefore, competition with private school students will always be unequal.

Additionally, public school teachers claim that insistence on *teaching accountability as opposed to learning accountability* has led to wide spread deterioration of standards. They claim that totalized expectations of school performances leaves them with no choice but to allow students to copy answers, projects, and assignments leading to unprecedented grade inflation.

Furthermore, high school teachers justify grade inflation and falling standards by

pointing out that the students who come to their classes have such low standards that any kind of grade level teaching becomes impossible. Therefore, the only alternative they have is to teach students to the test or to allow copying.

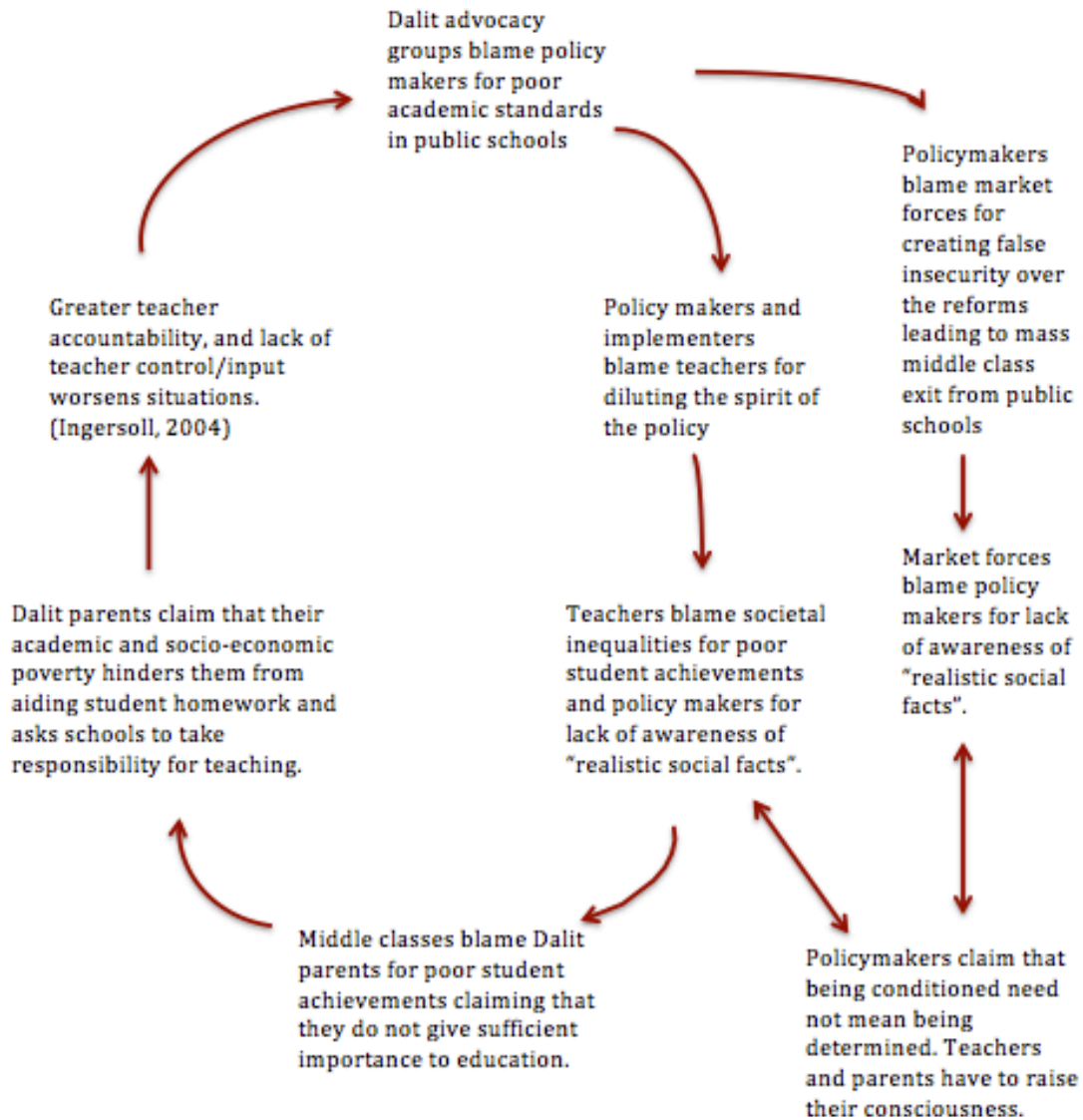
Last, Padmanabhan & Komath's (2012) study emphasizes the relationship segregations that exist between teachers and students in public schools, with teachers drawn primarily from upper castes and students hailing largely from the lower castes and/or classes. During my conversations with public school teachers, they talked about their students as economically, socially, and culturally disadvantaged (*avarude paristhithi moshama*) and therefore not as educationally competitive as private school students.

Student perspectives: My conversations with students transpired largely at school. I primarily visited high schools and students were expected to be preparing for their matriculation exams: this limited possibilities of conversations. Furthermore, most of the conversations I had were with girls since social interaction with the other sex is discouraged. In fact many of the schools I visited had separate corridors and stairways for boys and girls. And, most of the girls were shy and did not respond to my attempts at conversations. I am uncertain whether this is another aspect of the relationship segregation Padhmanabhan & Komath (2012) write about and I need to explore other alternatives and need longer periods of stay at school sites.

Private school perspectives, claims, justifications, and concerns: Private school founders and principals claim that the reforms instituted by their affiliating

school board is necessary for global competitiveness and for the moral upliftment of a society whose values are being “attacked by globalization”. Creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking are seen as essential 21st century skills, and rote learning is passé. The skills acquired through learning experiences should go beyond the confines of a classroom or job aspirations since global employment markets are unpredictable and volatile. Furthermore, private school leadership look to cultural and moral revitalization in order to accommodate, localize, and own these paradigm shifts. Internal variations can be noticed across low-fee charging and high-fee charging private schools but school board directions elicit a certain degree of emphasis on global competitiveness and morality.

Unlike public school challenges of teacher resistance or societal lack of readiness, private school reform challenges have to do with *reconciling advantages* of learner-centered education with requirements of entrance exams. The private school board, CBSE, is hesitant to experiment with entrance exam readiness since the very rationale of its popularity is tied to entrance exam readiness. CBSE has instituted changes up till the 10th grade and “traditional” learning and evaluation patterns continue in 11th and 12th grades. As far as students are concerned, there seems an almost totalized aspiration for Medical, Engineering, and Chartered Accountancy professions. I summarize the salient points below:



Public deliberation in zones of awkward engagement:

“The more difficult the ... exercise becomes, the more necessary it seems. Otherwise we resign ourselves ... The international experts have already given up. The only ones who bother to struggle over these issues are activists, students, ... – and the communities with whom they interface.” (Tsing, 2004, p. 266)

The tangential accusations I trace in the previous section places actors in zones of awkward engagement. Negotiation and deliberation across these perspectives are difficult, but for the stakeholders involved, it is also necessary. Each perspective arises from its own set of lived experiences and circulates and

negotiates with other perspectives – in specific situations. “And thus it is necessary to begin again, and again, in the middle of things” (Tsing, 2004, p. 2).

In this section, I begin with some such specific situations. And I begin in the middle of things: in the classroom, before I move on to other related spaces – a staff meeting and a teacher training session. I focus on a particular theme: teaching method. The reforms envisage a teaching method that is non-teacher centered, related to student life outside of the schools, activity based, and one where students construct knowledge. In the examples I provide, teachers negotiate components of the method expected of them with the realistic social facts of 1) present student knowledge (which they argue is relatively poor due to student economic, social, and cultural poverty) and 2) matriculation exams (which society has agreed is the method of assessing academic competence).

Public school A: Grade 10 A, Malayalam medium Number of students: 34
Subject: English Literature (Poem: Night of the Scorpion)

Teacher: Please take page no. 26. Activity 1.

Reads out Activity 1 in English: Do you think this poem has any contemporary relevance?

(In Malayalam) You are supposed to do this. But, I am going to write this answer on the (black) board. You should write it down neatly.

Contemporary means *samakaleeka*.

This blackboard is terrible (difficult to read from due to spotting and aging) I'll dictate the spellings.

Dictates answer: It has relevance to the Endosulphan protest when hundreds of innocent people were subjected to suffer untold misery; the whole society came to their rescue.

Come to their rescue means *sahayathineththuka*.

What is the spelling of protest? Repeat after me. (In Malayalam)

P r o t e s t. (*Class repeats after teacher*).

Student 1 takes out her copy of 'Labour India' study guide to check for spellings. The dictated answer is from Labour India.

Interview with the teacher:

Most of my students do not know English. They come from very disadvantaged circumstances. How can one get these kids to pass the Matriculation exam! I make them write out all the answers neatly. Even if they copy down the question and write something (*athum ithum*), they will get some marks. My only goal is to get them to pass the matriculation exam. With the new methods, in other schools, teachers may make children discuss and all that. But when it comes to the exam, those kids have nothing to write. But here, all our children pass the exam. (The school had a 100% pass percentage in 2010-2011).

Paraphrased from Malayalam.

Public School B: Grade 9 C, Malayalam Medium Number of students: 24
Subject: English: Informal Letter (Based on lesson about Bertha and Belsha)
(An informal letter has been dictated during the lesson)

Teacher: *Homework question is dictated:* Suppose you have joined a new school. Write a letter to your friend describing your first day experience.

2nd para is different (said in English)
For the rest of the answer (1st and last para) write what I have dictated earlier. You have to answer the question only in the 2nd para. (in Malayalam)

Teacher walks around class checking student work.

In interviews with the teacher, she too says that her children come from very disadvantaged backgrounds, and that she is shocked every time she visits their houses. She considers it her moral obligation to help these children pass the matriculation exam. She also mentions that she prays for "her children" (those in her class) regularly.

Staff meeting in Public School A (in Malayalam)

Headmaster: These are directions from the DEO (District Education Officer). The classroom should be scattered (*chitharikidakkanam*), there will inspections soon. I'm not saying that we should do this out of fear of the DEO. But, that is how learning should be. Students should be engrossed in their activity.

Teacher A makes a face at other teachers gathered around. Teacher A is the *senior assistant* (a position similar to that of a Vice Principal).

In a later conversation with Teacher A in the Headmaster's office in his presence, she says: If they (those who come to inspect if the new methods are being followed) want to see us using their methods, they should inform us earlier. Otherwise, this is all they will get to see. What can the DEO do? He'll send me a paper (memo), so what?

District Teacher Training workshop. Subject: English-Teaching Writing

Number of teachers: 31

The English teacher from public school B is attending this workshop.

The power point slide has the following information:

Stages of Writing:

1. Getting ideas
2. Organizing ideas
3. Writing the first draft
4. Reformatting and sequencing
5. Rewriting and redrafting
6. Editing

Teacher Trainer A: Do we ask children to write a first draft or do we ask them to write a fair draft? Do we take a first draft to publish? 1st draft is not a fully correct one. Don't correct them when they (students) are writing their first draft. Let them write, or they will miss the flow. This is called unity of ideas. That will get affected by your interruption. They should write individually. Then they can revise and redraft in groups. Then, teacher can make edits. Finally teacher publishes the student work.

In English

In later conversations with Teacher A (from public school B) and Teacher Trainer B, I mention to Teacher Trainer B that the methods being discussed here are not applicable to the classes Teacher A teaches. Teacher A agrees wholeheartedly and proceeds to explain that her students cannot read or write English, at best they can copy down what she writes on the blackboard. She wants to know how she can get them to write drafts and revise.

Teacher trainer B clarifies that these workshops are for "teacher empowerment". If teachers become resourceful, they can bring about all the changes they want. These ideas help teachers to empower themselves.

It is such interactions that in the aggregate become resistance to the reforms and/or public opinion about the reforms. Consider the number of people

involved: according to government statistics, more than 90% of school-aged children in Kerala attend public schools. If you consider the number of households in concern, a significantly large percentage of the entire population of the State interact directly with this issue. I do not presently have data on student-parent, parent-teacher, and parent-parent interactions about the reforms but will have them moving forward.

In the interactions I describe, teachers are deliberating social facts with reform objectives *publicly*, since their negotiations are open to scrutiny by parents and policymakers. Present student knowledge has to be negotiated with expectations regarding matriculation exams (and in the abstract, entrance exams). I argue that these deliberations attempt to solve issues concerning the public through joint social activity (Bohman, 1996). This is how public deliberation actually takes place in my context, and I suggest that we must be attentive to actions, conversations, silences, gestures, and more in specific situations to understand how deliberations transpire.

In some instances actors may be discussing in the conventional sense (like in the conversation between the teacher trainer and the teacher, and the delayed conversation between the headmaster and the teacher) though they seem to be *talking past each other*, which is characteristic of zones of awkward engagement. However, “(s)ince we do not know how things may turn out, it’s worth attending to states of emergence – and emergency” (Tsing, 2004, p. 269).

Even for instances where the discussion and debate are not conventional, I argue that these are still public deliberations. For instance, classroom interactions present a public declaration of the reasons for teacher resistance. This elicits responses from both parents (in terms of school choice) and policymakers. The particular teaching methods used are seen to have been instrumental in procuring 100% pass percentages in matriculation exams; this directly affects parent school choice.

Furthermore, as Bohman (1996) writes, “it is enough that “outcomes and decisions allow an *ongoing cooperation with others* of different minds that is at least *not unreasonable*” (p. 100). The relative consensus over teaching methods in terms of parent school choice is at least *not unreasonable*. And, these are the deliberations that describe the public way in which majorities are formed. My corpus of data is incomplete, and if specific situations of parent deliberation, be it actions, conversations, or other forms of discussion and debate, can be brought to bear on the situation, my argument may seem more complete. Furthermore, comparisons with private school interactions (data yet to be analyzed) will illuminate complexities and inequalities within the issue. These interactions and negotiations are not well-oiled machines or inevitable trajectories – these are zones of awkward engagement pregnant with possibilities and challenges. I do not mean to suggest that my methodology can encompass all social issues but I do suggest that there is much we can learn from this particular case.

Conclusion: I began by identifying some of the prominent stakeholders, their claims, justifications, and most pressing concerns. I use this methodological shift to extend normative theorizations of public deliberation. I argue that practices that publically air disagreements are rich sites of public deliberation, albeit unconventional. Stakeholders live out diverse perspectives and work towards different goals – hence I suggest that unconventional public deliberations in such zones of awkward engagement require examination.

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