

How ‘Soft Governance’ Can Help Improve Learning Outcomes

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On the surface, global gains in educating children have been remarkable. Access has expanded enormously. So, too, has knowledge about ‘best practices’—both education-sector-specific knowledge about how students learn and successful teachers teach, and knowledge about ‘best practice’ arrangements for governing education systems. Yet the combination of access and knowledge has not translated into broad-based gains in learning outcomes. Why?

In seeking to address this question, a useful point of departure is [the 2018 *Learning World Development Report*](#)’s distinction between proximate and underlying causes of learning shortfalls. Proximate causes include

the skills and motivations of teachers, the quality of school management, the available of other inputs used in schools, and the extent to which learners come to school prepared to learn. Underlying these are the governance arrangements through which these inputs are deployed. Specialist knowledge on the proximate drivers of learning outcomes can straightforwardly be applied in countries where governance works well. However, in countries where the broader governance context is less supportive, specialist sector-specific interventions to support learning are less likely to add value. In these messy governance contexts, knowledge about the governance and political drivers of policymaking and implementation can be an important complement to sector-specific expertise.

To help uncover new ways of improving learning outcomes (including in messy governance contexts), the Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) Programme has championed a broad-ranging, interdisciplinary agenda of research. RISE was organised around a variety of thematic and country-focused research teams that probed both proximate and underlying determinants of learning. As part of the RISE work programme, a political economy team commissioned studies on the politics of education policy adoption (the [PET-A studies](#)) for twelve countries (Chile, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, South Africa, Tanzania and Vietnam). A December 2022 RISE [synthesis of the individual country studies](#)¹ laid out and applied a framework for systematically assessing how political and institutional context influences learning outcomes—and used the results to suggest some ‘good fit’ soft governance entry points for improving learning outcomes across a variety of different contexts. This insight note elaborates on the synthesis paper’s argument and its practical implications.

Key Points

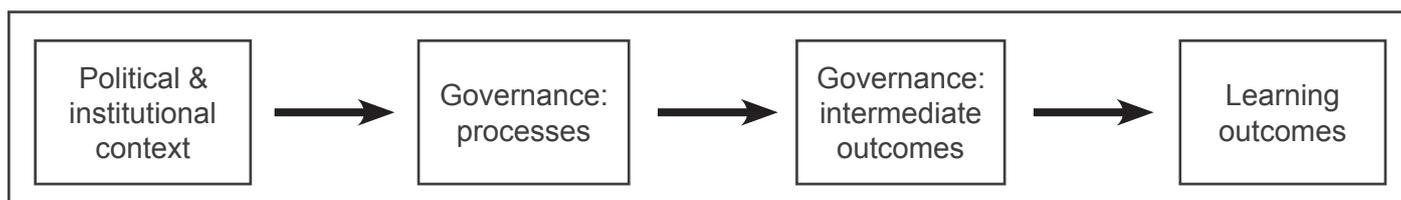
- Distinguishing between proximate and underlying causes of low learning is essential for improving learning outcomes. Specialist knowledge about learning adds value where governance is good, but is less effective where underlying governance is messy.
- A recent RISE synthesis applied a framework for systematically assessing how political and institutional context influences learning outcomes to a set of studies of the political economy of education policy adoption in twelve countries
- The results of this synthesis suggest some ‘good fit’ soft governance entry points for improving learning outcomes across a variety of different political and institutional contexts.

¹ Brian Levy (2022). How Political Contexts Influence Education Systems: Patterns, Constraints, Entry Points. Research on Improving Systems of Education. PE04. <https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-2022/PE04>

I. The analytical approach

Figure 1 depicts a causal chain that links learning outcomes and a country's broader political and institutional context. As per the figure, context and outcomes are linked via the effects of a series of governance processes—a chain of interactions that link politicians, policymakers, senior officials, managers, front-line providers, and citizens²—on the functioning of education systems.

Figure 1: Context, governance, and development outcomes



Viewed from the perspective of education sector policymakers, the political and institutional context is exogenous. On occasion, this exogenous context is benign—in the sense that policymakers find themselves in a ‘sweet spot’ where ‘best practice’ specialist expertise can straightforwardly be deployed. All too often, though, as the PET-A country studies show, exogenous conditions do not support the straightforward application of ‘best practices’. What then? Evidently, the task is to expand the space available for efforts to enhance an education system’s learning orientation, within the confines of prevailing political and institutional realities. Looking across the case studies points to an intriguing possibility—space can be opened up via a set of (context-aligned) ‘soft governance’ initiatives.

How might ‘soft governance’ entry points help open up space for policymakers and other stakeholders committed to strengthening learning? Table 1 provides a summary overview of the argument laid out in this note. The paragraphs that follow elaborate on the table’s rows (soft governance entry points) and columns (contexts). Section II elaborates on each of the three top priority ‘good fit’ alignments that are highlighted in the body of the table.

Table 1: Improving learning outcomes when governance is messy—top priorities across contexts

	DOMINANT	IMPERSONAL COMPETITIVE	PERSONALISED COMPETITIVE
Leadership level: purpose	<i>Top priority: influence ideas of political leaders vis-à-vis education</i>		
Bureaucracy level: mission		<i>Top priority: Foster socially-socially embedded bureaucratic autonomy</i>	
Stakeholder level: alliances			<i>Top priority: Foster local (including school-level) alliances</i>
Citizen level: expectations			

Source: Author

² For a pioneering exploration of this chain of interactions, see World Bank, *Making Services Work for Poor People*, World Development Report 2004 (Washington DC: World Bank and Oxford University Press).

The rows in Table 1 comprise four ‘soft governance’ entry points. Each entry point is (loosely) aligned with a distinct level in the chain of governance processes that link politicians, policymakers, public officials, and citizens.

- *The leadership level—purpose*: What are the goals of the education system? How to strengthen leaders’ orientation towards learning?
- *The bureaucracy level—mission*: How to empower mission-oriented public officials within the education system?
- *The stakeholder level—alliances*: Which influential stakeholders champion learning? How to foster co-operation among these stakeholders, thereby strengthening their collective influence?
- *The citizen-level—expectations*: How do the expectations of parents, communities and citizens influence the extent to which the education sector is learning-oriented? How might learning-oriented influences be strengthened?

Note that each ‘soft governance’ entry point is framed in a way that directs attention to the extent of political influence of the relevant level’s stakeholders. Note further that each also directs attention to the ideas that motivate stakeholders.

The columns in Table 1 group the PET-A case studies into three distinct political-institutional contexts. (The three-fold categorisation draws on a broader, decade-long effort to construct a conceptually rigorous and practically useful framework for analysing the relationship between political-institutional contexts and development outcomes.)³ Each of the three contexts is characterised by a distinctive set of incentives and constraints for education sector stakeholders: The three contexts are:

- *Dominant contexts*, where power is centred around a political leader and a hierarchical governance structure, top-down leadership potentially can provide a robust platform for improving learning outcomes. However, as the case studies detail, all too often dominant leaders’ goals vis-à-vis the education sector can veer in other directions. (The dominant-context PET-A case studies are Ethiopia, Indonesia under Soeharto, Nigeria, Tanzania and Vietnam.)
- *Impersonal competitive contexts*, where a combination of strong formal institutions and effective processes of resolving disagreements can, on occasion, result in a shared commitment among powerful interests to improve learning outcomes—but with this outcome not evident in any of the relevant PET-A case studies. (The impersonal competitive PET-A case studies are Chile, India, Peru and South Africa.)
- *Personalised competitive contexts*, which lack the seeming strengths of either their dominant or their impersonal competitive counterparts; there are multiple politically-influential groups, multiple competing goals, and no credible framework of rules to bring coherence either to political competition or to the education bureaucracy. (Case studies of Bangladesh, Ghana, Kenya and South Africa’s Eastern Cape province are discussed in the synthesis paper under the personalised competitive rubric.)⁴

The synthesis paper (and the individual PET-A case studies on which it is based) explore in detail how the political and institutional constraints that prevail in each context can, in different ways, render ineffective many specialised sectoral interventions intended to improve learning outcomes.

³ Brian Levy, *Working with the Grain: Integrating Governance and Growth in Development Strategies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Brian Levy, Robert Cameron, Ursula Hoadley and Viothan Naidoo (eds.) *The Politics and Governance of Basic Education: A Tale of Two South African Provinces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Tim Kelsall, Nicolai Schulz, William Ferguson, Matthias vom Hau, Sam Hickey and Brian Levy, *Political Settlements and Development: Theory, Evidence, Implications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022)

⁴ Coverage of personalised competitive contexts (and especially of the local-level dynamics in these contexts) was limited in the PET-A studies. The Bangladesh and Ghana cases are from Samuel Hickey and Naomi Hossain (eds.) *The Politics of Education in Developing Countries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). The Eastern Cape case, and much of the discussion of Kenya is drawn from chapters 5, 9 and 10 of Brian Levy, Robert Cameron, Ursula Hoadley and Viothan Naidoo (eds.) (2018). *The Politics and Governance of Basic Education: A Tale of Two South African Provinces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

II: Aligning contexts and ‘soft- governance’ entry points

The cells in the body of Table 1 highlight three distinct ‘soft governance’ strategies, one for each context. The paragraphs that follow elaborate on each.

Leadership and purpose

In a recent paper, Michelle Kaffenberger brings the influence of purpose to centre stage. As she puts it:

“While much effort in the education sector focuses on changes to technical practices or support functions, little attention is given to the purpose the education system is striving to achieve....This is a critical missing link for improving learning outcomes...An underlying driver of learning outcomes lies at the core of an education system: its purpose...While many countries have paid lip service to a commitment to the purpose of learning, this purpose is often not embedded in education systems.”⁵

The ways in which purpose influences the governance of education varies across contexts. In dominant contexts, the relationship between purpose and outcome is direct. As the relevant PET-A country studies detail, dominant leaders vary in the goals they set for their country’s education system:

- Vietnam, alone among the dominant PET-A countries, showed sustained, unambiguous commitment to achieving good learning outcomes throughout an education system that provided universal access to its citizens.
- Ethiopia has been subject to far-reaching shifts in both the character of its dominant leaders, and in their visions for the education system. Emperor Haile Selassie’s focus (he ruled from 1941 to 1974) was narrow and elitist (under Haile Selassie); the military government that followed gave priority to the expansion of access; Meles Zenawi (president from 1991 to 2012) gave heightened focus to quality, but also saw education as a mechanism to protect the interests of subnational groups.
- Tanzania prioritised ‘Education for Self-Reliance’ between 1967 and the early 1982, prioritising the acquisition of skills needed for rural agrarian development, and tightly rationing access to secondary education. Only in the mid-2000s did the government systematically begin to invest in expanding secondary education.
- In Indonesia under General Soeharto (president from 1968-1998), priority was given (as per the PET-A case study) “to training students to be loyal and obedient to the Indonesian nation, the Indonesian state and, to some extent, their religion rather than promoting acquisition of basic skills.”
- Nigeria’s succession of military leaders between 1966 and 1998 moved early to take over schools from Christian missions and private owners, and to extend mass education throughout the country; over time, governance of the system became increasingly clientelistic, arbitrary and predatory.

As Table 1 suggests, in dominant contexts such as these the top ‘soft governance’ priority for education sector reformers is thus to engage with leaders ‘technocratically’ as to the value of prioritising learning, and what might be done to improve learning outcomes.

Focusing on the purposes of leaders will, however, generally have less traction in competitive contexts, where there often is no unambiguous leader, but rather multiple politically powerful groups, each with distinctive goals vis-à-vis education, and each pressing for influence. In personalised competitive contexts, political power is endemically fragmented, and

⁵ Michelle Kaffenberger (2022). The Role of Purpose in Education System Outcomes: A Conceptual Framework and Empirical Examples. RISE Working Paper Series. 22/118. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISEWP_2022/118

goals (for education and beyond) continually contested. By contrast, in impersonal competitive contexts a combination of strong formal institutions and effective processes for resolving disagreements might in principle result in a shared commitment among powerful interests to improve learning outcomes, with formal rules putatively providing a ‘container’ within which purpose can be clarified. However, as the four PET-A case studies of impersonal competitive contexts detail, this is not how things played out in practice.

Socially-embedded bureaucratic autonomy

Viewed through a normative lens, impersonal competition provides a supportive context for pursuing learning. This normative vision is built around great expectations of what formal rules can achieve. These expectations include: ensuring that all parties accept the legitimacy of elections and their outcomes; helping elected political leaders manage the ongoing subsequent challenge of aligning the interests of political allies, who are likely to vary in both their goals and the extent of their allegiance; facilitating interactions among political leaders and senior, technically-skilled public officials in structured processes to craft coherent policy goals, aligned with the winning political platforms; and insulating the public bureaucracy from political pressures, while also sustaining the morale, results-orientation and effectiveness of the public sector policymaking and implementation apparatus.

In practice, however, things were messier in all four of the impersonal competitive PET-A cases:

- In Peru, there was ongoing conflict over purpose between politicians on the one hand, and sectoral stakeholders and experts on the other.
- In India, there was a large disconnect between (national) policymakers and (state-level) implementers.
- In Chile and South Africa, there was an ongoing pre-occupation with formal systems, with correspondingly less de facto attention on how to improve learning.

While the country-specific patterns of messiness are distinct, underlying them is a shared public management challenge.

As Francis Fukuyama explains, public bureaucracies (indeed all large organisations) confront an inherent tension between control and discretion:

“Organisations in all societies seek to get optimal performance...not by setting up elaborate systems of monitoring and accountability but rather by relying on norms...All good managers know that it is ultimately the informal norms and group identities that will most strongly motivate the workers in an organisation to do their best, and thus spend much more time on cultivating the right ‘organisational culture’ than on fixing the formal lines of authority.”

The tension between control and discretion is less evident in countries with a longstanding foundation of political legitimacy and longstanding norms of public service (e.g., France, Finland and Japan); they are well-placed to use ‘lighter-touch’ rulemaking to foster performance. However, in contexts where norms are weaker and political conflict is endemic but formal institutions are relatively well-developed, both politicians and public managers are likely to seek to govern education via a dense web of formal rules. The result can be to undercut the goal-orientation, motivation, and initiative of public officials; they become pre-occupied with process compliance rather than the effort to improve learning outcomes.

How to unleash the latent, mission-driven energies of public officials in service of improved learning? ‘Cutting back on red tape’ is not a useful answer—discretion without oversight can be a formula for opportunism. Nor is an intensified focus on stronger hierarchical accountability for results likely to be helpful. Long experience with so-called ‘new public management’ has shown that a pre-occupation with top-down oversight can all too readily translate into a rise in mutual

distrust, and accompanying demotivation.⁶ Rather, as Fukuyama's insight suggests, what seems to make the crucial difference is a sense of mission, (and accompanying de facto peer-to-peer monitoring and accountability) even in the absence of a dense panoply of rules. Where might this sense of mission come from? From organisational leaders (as per Fukuyama). Or from "social embeddedness"—being part of a developmental alliance with a sense of shared purpose.

On the surface, there might seem to be no rationale for fostering developmental alliances in impersonal competitive contexts. In these contexts, formal rules already putatively insulate policymakers and implementers (down to the school-level) from political pressures. However, a pre-occupation with formal rules leaves unaddressed the influence on public sector governance of power and ideas. Both, however, can be central to public performance.

In her study of *Good Government in the Tropics*, Judith Tandler highlighted how a sense of mission, rooted in 'social embeddedness', can be key to how public officials perform. Thus:

"When workers talked about why they liked their jobs, the subject of respect from clients & 'my community' often dominated their conversation...It was difficult to separate out the story of the community as outside 'monitors' of the health workers from the story of the workers as embedded in that community through close relationships of respect and trust".⁷

Social embeddedness also can be key to fending off non-developmental political pressures. In his study of the forging of bureaucratic autonomy in the early twentieth century USA⁸, Daniel Carpenter showed that autonomy was not conferred by formal rules, but was won politically:

"Bureaucratic autonomy requires the development of unique organisational capabilities...the belief by political authorities and citizens that agencies can provide solutions to national problems found nowhere else... It requires political legitimacy, strong organisational reputations embedded in an independent power base...linkages to the numerous power bases of politics..."

For the education sector, the contrasting PET-A cases of Chile and Peru point to the potential value of social embeddedness in fostering learning (and the hazards of its absence).⁹ In Chile, interactions among stakeholders largely were top-down and systematically managed. As per the PET-A country study:

"An elite/expert consensus was established in early 90s...Technical experts' capacities are reflected in pieces of legislation that follow a smooth legislative process, where legislators have little to add or modify because they are not expert in the field."

By contrast to Chile, the Peru PET-A country study detailed an ongoing back-and-forth jockeying among stakeholders, messy compromises with the teachers' union, and multiple policy reversals:

"Political and sectoral instability caused by the general weakness of the country's political and institutional system, as well as by corruption, have had a profound influence on the nature and especially on the pace of reforms during this period. The education sector has been led by 20 ministers in 25 years—a figure that in and of itself is illustrative of the radical degree of discontinuity in policy making."

⁶ For a discussion, see Dan Honig, *Navigation by Judgment: Why and When Top-Down Management of Foreign Aid Doesn't Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Also Dan Honig (2022). *Managing for Motivation as Public Performance Improvement Strategy in Education & Far Beyond*. Research on Improving Systems of Education. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-Misc_2022/04

⁷ Judith Tandler, *Good Government in the Tropics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

⁸ Daniel Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁹ Strikingly, as the synthesis paper highlights, the PET-A case study of Vietnam points to the value added of social embeddedness for fostering commitment to learning even in a dominant context.

Insofar as better-aligned institutional arrangements and more systematic, consistent policies are likely to be more effective than ‘messier’ ones, learning outcomes would be expected to show more improvement over time in Chile than in Peru. Yet, as the synthesis study details, between 2000 and 2018 Peru turns out (as per the PISA International Student Assessments) to have achieved very large gains in learning outcomes, while the gains in Chile were modest. Why?

Paradoxically, Peru’s messier, less formalistic and more iterative process of policy formulation and adaptation helped build broad legitimacy among stakeholders—importantly including trust in the technocrats and professionals responsible for its formulation—thereby enhancing their ability to push back increasingly effectively against idiosyncratic initiatives proposed by political appointees. As the PET-A study put it:

“Civil society organisations—NGOs, universities, think tanks and research centers—have also played a key role in defining policy agendas [and...] in the development of education policies and reforms. Though not always able to contain either technocrats’ or other policy makers—agreements are often ignored by ministerial administrations and political parties—they have certainly contributed to the continuity of agendas and to the advancement, through piecemeal, of reforms.”

By contrast, the Chile PET-A study points to the risks of a too-narrow technocratic perspective:

“Good intentions to improve educational quality, resources and carrots and sticks have not been enough to move the Chilean educational system in the direction that its political authorities wanted...The top down character of Chilean educational policy making and the insufficient use of institutional voice mechanisms might backfire as the mounting social tensions and the 2019 social movement casts some doubts about its survival.”

A provocative implication follows from the Peru and Chile PET-A cases (and also the Indian and South African cases, discussed in the synthesis paper). Perhaps the risk of confusing form with function is greatest in precisely those competitive contexts where the possibility of a high-performing, coherent impersonal system, though not yet achieved, seems tantalisingly close. The unintended consequence could be a narrow pre-occupation with formalistic institutional reforms—reforms that risk adding to the proliferation of rules, even as underlying political conflicts and associated contestation over what should be the goals of a country’s education system remain unresolved. In many impersonal competitive contexts, soft governance efforts to strengthen the ‘social embeddedness’ of the education system might well be the high-potential road that, so far, largely has not been taken.

Local alliances

In personalised competitive contexts, contestation among stakeholders invariably leads to policy incoherence, bureaucratic fragmentation, and high risks of predation; these realities also imply that there is little prospect that efforts to strengthen public systems can gain traction. Yet, as the experiences of both Ghana and Bangladesh suggest, fragmentation can have a silver lining—it can create space for alliances of developmental stakeholders to successfully push back against predatory pressures, and eke out islands of effectiveness in at least some locales. These islands can be as localised as an individual school, as school-level case studies in South Africa’s Eastern Cape province detail.

Having some islands of effectiveness is better than having none (especially, of course, for those who are part of them). But there might also be ways to realise gains beyond the individual islands. One possibility might be to work proactively to diffuse the experience of successful islands – perhaps via the cultivation of peer-to-peer networks, perhaps via support from civil society organisations looking for innovative ways to help improve learning. But (as per Table 1) there may also be more far-reaching ways of leveraging networks of mutual purpose and mutual accountability among citizens more broadly.

Consider the range of expectations that non-elites might have vis-à-vis public schools and their governance:

- At one end of the spectrum are societies with a longstanding foundation of political legitimacy, and longstanding norms of public service where there is a realistic expectation that public education systems can be successful, without direct involvement in governance by parents and communities.
- At the other end are settings where non-elites are passive for an opposite reason – cynicism shaped by experience of an education system deeply mired in patronage, predation, political capture, opportunism and corruption.
- In between are two intermediate patterns:
 - Contexts where the general expectation—shared among parents, communities, citizens, public officials, and politicians—is that ‘government should deliver’, even in the face of the reality that such delivery is mediocre at best. (This expectation was evident at the school-level in South Africa’s Western Cape province and perhaps also in Chile and Indonesia as well—though the information provided for the latter in the PET-A studies is very limited and indirect.)
 - Contexts where formal institutions are messy, but nonetheless the societal expectation is one of “all for education”—that parents and communities, especially, have an active role to play in supporting a learning-oriented education system. As the synthesis Working Paper details, Kenya offers an example of how this might work.

The last set of expectations points (ambitiously) towards the benefits that might follow from a broader effort to inculcate among citizens a vision of ‘all for education’. Such a focus aligns well with the realities of personalised competitive contexts. But perhaps there is potential also in impersonal competitive (and, as the Vietnam case suggests, even in some dominant) contexts where education bureaucracies are stronger.

In sum, as the PET-A case studies document, across the range of less-than-perfect governance contexts, there are large limits to what technocratic initiatives aimed at improving institutions and strengthening learning are able to achieve. In such settings, perhaps one way to renew commitment to learning—relevant not only in personalised competitive contexts, but more broadly—is to cultivate the idea that improving learning outcomes is everybody’s business, and to create opportunities for engagement, to invite citizens to become active participants in a shared endeavour to equip coming generations with the capabilities they will need to be part of a vibrant, thriving society.

Brian Levy joined the Johns Hopkins faculty in 2012, following a 23-year career at the World Bank, where he was at the forefront of sustained efforts to integrate governance concerns into the theory and practice of economic development. Between 2007 and 2010 he was head of the secretariat responsible for the design and implementation of the World Bank Group's governance and anti-corruption strategy. He worked in the Bank's Africa Vice Presidency from 1991 to 2003, where his role included leadership of a major effort to transform and scale-up the organization's engagement on governance reform. He has worked in over a dozen countries, spanning four continents. He has published numerous books and articles on the institutional underpinnings of regulation, on capacity development in Africa, on industrial policy, and on the political economy of development strategy. He received his PhD in economics from Harvard University in 1983.

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