Unit 5: Bureaucracies

In most countries, education is delivered via large-scale public-sector education bureaucracies. These bureaucracies are complex in a few different ways. First, they usually comprise multiple administrative agencies with different and sometimes overlapping functions (e.g., both the curriculum authority and the examinations board influencing what is taught), spread across different administrative levels (e.g., central, regional, district, school). Second, they exist to facilitate the delivery of education, which itself is a ‘thick’, complex task requiring co-creation between teachers and students across numerous and varied classroom contexts.

Given this complexity, conventional civil service bureaucracies face difficult challenges around managing and delivering quality education. A common response to these challenges is a pattern of bureaucratic administration called ‘isomorphic mimicry’. These systems are characterized by top-down, standardized management that depends on ‘thin’, input-based indicators (e.g., how many textbooks have been distributed, how many students are enrolled) that ‘look right’ when in fact they are not converting inputs into the desired ‘thick’ outputs (e.g. how many children are learning).

An alternative administrative paradigm involves a ‘thicker’ approach that is centred on a bureaucracy-wide sense of shared purpose or mission. Under this approach, individual bureaucrats need to be granted the autonomy to make decisions that respond to the needs and challenges of their specific contexts (rather than being micro-managed). At the same time, they must be supported with adequate training and resources that enable them to serve the shared purpose. This is particularly the case with the ‘middle tier’ of bureaucrats (e.g. district education officers) who can play a key role in maintaining alignment between the central government and teachers and schools on the frontline, but who are often neglected in education reform in low- and middle-income countries.

After completing the unit, students should:

- understand the multiple levels and multiple functions of education bureaucracies
- be able to explain the limitations of conventional bureaucratic structures in implementing complex service delivery in education
- understand the importance of (a) alignment with a shared purpose, of (b) both supporting bureaucrats and trusting them with autonomy in improving the complex work of education bureaucracies

Required Readings


Further Readings


On the limitations of narrowly standardized, top-down management and the value of purpose-aligned, empowered autonomy in improving education bureaucracies


Further examples of the shortcomings of isomorphic mimicry in reform:


On different levels within the bureaucracy


The middle tier: district officials, circuit supervisors, school inspectors, et al.


**Empirical evidence on the importance of school-level leaders**
