

Reframing School Governance in India: Autonomy, Accountability, and the Logic of Intelligent Professionalism

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Abstract

The governance of school education remains suspended between two enduring imperatives: the professional autonomy of educators and the public accountability demanded by the state. Over decades, policy reforms have attempted to reconcile these competing forces, yet most have merely replaced trust with compliance. This paper contends that the chronic instability in educational quality stems not from insufficient accountability, but from its reduction to a bureaucratic instrument of surveillance. Grounded in governance theory and informed by comparative analyses of global and Indian reform trajectories, the study reconceptualizes this autonomy–accountability dialectic through the lens of *Intelligent Professionalism*. The proposed framework integrates five structural pivots: (1) reciprocal accountability among policymakers, administrators, and practitioners; (2) capacity-oriented oversight that develops, rather than audits, professional practice; (3) diversified metrics encompassing learning growth, school culture, and well-being; (4) “tight–loose” leadership that upholds shared values while enabling contextual discretion; and (5) professional learning communities (PLCs) as the locus of internal accountability. Drawing on cases such as Finland’s trust-based model, the United Kingdom’s inspection regimes, and India’s *National Education Policy 2020*, the paper advances a governance architecture where accountability functions as stewardship and professional ethics, not control. The argument situates *Intelligent Professionalism* as a paradigm shift—transforming the accountability discourse from external enforcement to collaborative capacity building. By reframing school governance as an ecology of trust, moral responsibility, and professional intelligence, the study offers a theoretically grounded and context-sensitive framework for balancing autonomy and accountability in contemporary education systems.

Keywords: school governance, professional autonomy, public accountability, educational reform, intelligent professionalism, teacher professionalism, capacity building, NEP 2020, organizational trust, India.

1. Introduction

The governance of school education in India stands at a historical inflection point. Caught between bureaucratic prescription and professional discretion, the system continues to wrestle with an enduring paradox: how to uphold teachers' professional autonomy while ensuring public accountability for outcomes. From the earliest post-independence reforms to the *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020*, Indian education has repeatedly sought to reconcile this tension—oscillating between decentralization rhetoric and centralized implementation. Yet, the result has often been an uneven amalgam of overregulation and under-support, where teachers are simultaneously over-scrutinized and under-empowered.

The problem, however, is not unique to India. Across the world, the pendulum of educational governance has swung sharply between trust and control. The late twentieth century's global reform wave—anchored in **standards-based accountability and performance management**—redefined the role of teachers from reflective practitioners to implementers of prescribed curricula. The logic was compelling in theory: greater accountability would yield improved outcomes and equity. In practice, this model often devolved into compliance-driven bureaucracies that measured what was convenient rather than what was meaningful. Systems such as the United States' *No Child Left Behind Act* and the United Kingdom's inspection-heavy accountability frameworks exemplified how excessive central control eroded teacher morale, narrowed curricula, and distorted pedagogical purpose.

India's own accountability architecture has mirrored these global tensions. Initiatives like *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)* and *Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA)* successfully expanded access but also reinforced a culture of audit and inspection rather than trust and professional growth. Teacher appraisal systems have traditionally emphasized procedural compliance—attendance, documentation, syllabus completion—while offering limited scope for reflection, innovation, or professional agency. The NEP 2020 acknowledges this historical imbalance, calling for a shift “from inspection-based to mentoring-based accountability” and advocating the establishment of *School Complexes* to foster collaborative professional learning. Yet, the transition from bureaucratic oversight to intelligent accountability remains more aspirational than realized.

Globally, the conversation around educational governance has evolved toward “**intelligent accountability**”—a term popularized by Barber (2004) and expanded by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012)—which posits that accountability should be designed to empower, not constrain, professionals. Finland's trust-based model, Singapore's capacity-building approach, and Ontario's professional learning frameworks offer compelling illustrations of systems where teacher professionalism and administrative oversight coexist symbiotically. These systems demonstrate that autonomy and accountability, when intelligently balanced, create not disorder but coherence: a culture of shared responsibility grounded in ethical professionalism.

This paper situates India's school governance reforms within this global discourse to ask a central question: **How can India construct a governance model that simultaneously ensures accountability for learning outcomes and safeguards professional autonomy as a non-negotiable element of educational quality?**

The argument advanced here is that the autonomy–accountability dichotomy itself is flawed. What India needs is not a balance of opposites but a ****reframed governance paradigm—Intelligent Professionalism—****that integrates administrative accountability with professional ethics and institutional trust. Drawing on governance theory, comparative education policy, and empirical insights from reform trajectories in both developed and emerging systems, this paper develops a conceptual framework grounded in five interdependent principles: (1) reciprocal accountability among all stakeholders, (2) capacity-oriented administrative oversight, (3) multi-dimensional performance metrics, (4) “tight–loose” leadership structures that align values with flexibility, and (5) the institutionalization of professional learning communities (PLCs).

The contribution of this work lies in offering a **context-sensitive yet globally resonant governance model**. By reinterpreting accountability as a shared moral and professional contract rather than a bureaucratic imposition, it argues for an education system where administrative oversight functions not as surveillance but as stewardship. Ultimately, the paper contends that India’s educational future depends on its ability to reconstitute school governance as an *ecology of trust, professional intelligence, and moral responsibility*—one that measures success not merely by test scores but by the sustained growth of professional competence and collective purpose.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Evolution of School Governance: From Administrative Control to Participatory Professionalism

The evolution of school governance in India reflects the broader trajectory of public administration reform, moving gradually from bureaucratic centralization toward emerging discourses on decentralization, accountability, and professional ethics. In the early post-independence period, school systems were governed through rigid administrative hierarchies that emphasized uniformity, procedural compliance, and rule-bound supervision (Sheokand, 2017a). This “command-and-control” structure, inherited from colonial governance traditions, prioritized administrative order over pedagogical discretion and professional judgment.

Sheokand’s early analyses of primary education reforms demonstrate that such governance arrangements produced administrative stability but limited professional agency, reducing teachers to implementers of centrally prescribed policies rather than reflective practitioners (Sheokand, 2017a; 2017i). The institutional culture that emerged under this framework privileged documentation, inspection, and reporting over instructional innovation and ethical engagement.

By the late twentieth century, global educational reforms influenced by **New Public Management (NPM)** (Hood, 1991) began reshaping Indian policy discourse. Under this paradigm, efficiency, audit, and measurable outcomes became dominant organizing principles of public education. International reforms, including the *No Child Left Behind Act* in the United States and the *Ofsted* inspection regime in the United Kingdom, institutionalized performance-based accountability and data-driven governance (Ball, 2003). India mirrored these tendencies through large-scale programmes such as *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)* and *Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA)*, which expanded access but simultaneously intensified bureaucratic oversight.

Drawing on empirical evidence from multiple institutional contexts, Sheokand (2018) argues that this reform trajectory produced *administrative saturation without professional empowerment*. Her analysis reveals that managerial expansion, unaccompanied by capacity development, constrained teachers' autonomy and weakened intrinsic motivation. This pattern is further substantiated in her study of school work culture, which demonstrates that compliance-heavy administrative environments are associated with declining job satisfaction and reduced professional commitment (Sheokand, 2017b).

Moreover, Sheokand's work on digital governance and administrative modernization (2016) highlights how technological reforms, when embedded within rigid bureaucratic logics, often reinforce surveillance rather than facilitate professional collaboration. Similarly, her studies on digital classrooms and instructional reforms (2017h) indicate that innovation remains superficial when governance structures fail to support teacher agency.

The *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020* represents a significant attempt to recalibrate this imbalance by advocating a transition from "inspection-based to mentoring-based accountability" and emphasizing professional learning networks. However, as Sheokand (2024) observes, the translation of this vision into institutional practice remains constrained by systemic inertia, fragmented leadership structures, and the absence of coherent mechanisms linking autonomy with organizational accountability. Consequently, Indian school governance continues to oscillate between administrative control and partial decentralization, without achieving sustained participatory professionalism.

2.2 The Autonomy–Accountability Dialectic: International Perspectives and Indian Realities

The relationship between professional autonomy and public accountability occupies a central position in global educational theory. Scholars such as Hoyle (1974), Evetts (2011), and Barber (2004) conceptualize professionalism as a moral, intellectual, and relational enterprise that flourishes within accountability systems only when those systems are intelligently designed. Rather than being oppositional, autonomy and accountability constitute a dynamic interdependence that shapes professional identity and institutional effectiveness.

Comparative studies provide compelling evidence for this proposition. Finland's trust-based governance model illustrates how high levels of teacher autonomy, supported by rigorous professional preparation, generate strong internal accountability. In contrast, high-stakes testing regimes in the United States and England demonstrate how performative accountability can suppress pedagogical creativity, narrow curricular breadth, and erode professional morale (Ball, 2003). Singapore's hybrid model, combining systematic evaluation with intensive professional development, further illustrates the potential of capacity-oriented accountability in Asian contexts.

Within the Indian context, Sheokand's scholarship consistently highlights the consequences of misaligned accountability structures. Her analysis of public policy loopholes (2023) demonstrates that reforms fail when accountability mechanisms are detached from teachers' experiential realities and institutional constraints. This argument is reinforced in her studies on teacher satisfaction under the Right to Education framework (Sheokand, 2022), which reveal that regulatory compliance requirements often overshadow pedagogical priorities and professional reflection.

In *Public Policy for Women Working in Organized and Unorganized Sectors* (Sheokand, 2017c), she extends this critique by illustrating how standardized regulatory models across social sectors marginalize contextual knowledge and practitioner agency. This broader policy perspective strengthens her argument that educational governance cannot be insulated from wider administrative cultures that privilege control over participation.

Further, Sheokand's investigations into professional values and well-being (2024; 2025) demonstrate that managerial flexibility, ethical leadership, and institutional trust are positively associated with teacher motivation, resilience, and instructional effectiveness. Her mixed-method analysis of occupational stress (2025) reveals that rigid accountability regimes exacerbate emotional exhaustion and reduce professional engagement, while supportive governance environments foster sustained commitment.

Collectively, these studies establish that professional autonomy is not a discretionary privilege but a structural precondition for authentic accountability. Without meaningful discretion, teachers are unable to adapt instruction to diverse learner needs, engage in reflective practice, or contribute constructively to institutional development. As Sheokand's empirical findings consistently demonstrate, accountability becomes productive only when it is embedded within cultures of trust, participation, and ethical responsibility (2017b; 2018; 2024).

Thus, the Indian experience mirrors global patterns: accountability systems that emphasize surveillance over support undermine professional capital, while governance models that integrate autonomy with capacity development generate more durable educational improvement.

2.3 Theoretical Anchors: Governance, Professionalism, and Trust

Understanding the autonomy–accountability continuum requires synthesizing insights from three interrelated theoretical domains—**governance theory**, **professionalism theory**, and **organizational trust**—each of which informs the proposed framework of *Intelligent Professionalism*.

1. Governance Theory

Modern governance theory (Rhodes, 1997) emphasizes the transition from *government* to *governance*: from hierarchical control to collaborative, multi-actor coordination. In education, this shift implies that the state should evolve from regulator to *enabler*. Sheokand's (2016) analysis of *Digital India and E-Governance* anticipates this transition by arguing for digital transparency mechanisms that empower rather than constrain institutional actors. This resonates with the idea that governance efficiency should be anchored in *distributed accountability* and *networked oversight*, not centralized control.

2. Professionalism Theory

Professional autonomy is the cornerstone of sustained school improvement. Hoyle's (1974) concept of *extended professionalism* and Evetts' (2011) differentiation between *occupational* and *organizational professionalism* clarify the tension between intrinsic and imposed standards. Sheokand's (2017b, 2017d) empirical research on administrative practices in Indian schools substantiates these theoretical claims, showing that excessive administrative control undermines teachers' moral purpose and reduces professional identity to task compliance. Her later works

(Sheokand, 2023; 2024) advance this understanding by calling for a return to ethical professionalism, where teachers act as *reflective policy partners* rather than subordinate executors.

3. Organizational Trust

Trust is both the moral and operational currency of effective school governance (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Systems that cultivate relational trust foster greater collaboration, innovation, and stability. Sheokand (2018, 2023) highlights this dimension by linking trust deficits in administrative systems to demotivation and attrition among teachers. Her analysis concludes that restoring trust requires *intelligent accountability*—oversight that is supportive, dialogic, and developmental rather than punitive.

2.4 Bridging the Conceptual Gap: Toward a Model of Intelligent Professionalism

Despite extensive global theorization, few frameworks explicitly integrate **capacity building**, **ethical professionalism**, and **reciprocal accountability** within India's governance realities. The conceptual gap lies in the fragmented treatment of accountability as either a managerial tool or a moral ideal.

Building on her previous corpus, Sheokand (2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2023, 2024) proposes an integrative approach in which administrative oversight and professional discretion operate as interdependent mechanisms of governance. This theoretical synthesis—termed **Intelligent Professionalism**—posits that effective governance emerges when accountability is reimagined as *collective moral responsibility* supported by institutional trust and developmental feedback.

The framework positions:

- **Teachers** as autonomous professionals accountable through peer collaboration;
- **Administrators** as facilitators of growth, not inspectors of compliance; and
- **Policymakers** as enablers of systemic capacity through coherent policy ecosystems.

This model resonates with the NEP 2020's emphasis on "light but tight regulation" and mentoring-based quality assurance, situating *Intelligent Professionalism* as a conceptual bridge between global governance ideals and India's administrative realities.

3. Findings and Discussion: Mapping the Governance Continuum and Constructing the Intelligent Professionalism Model

3.1 Reinterpreting the Governance Continuum

The analysis of Indian school governance reveals a continuum ranging from bureaucratic control to participatory professionalism. Earlier systems prioritized regulation over reflection—schools were governed through administrative checklists and performance audits rather than professional trust. As documented in *An Elucidation of School Administration and Work Culture* (Sheokand, 2017b), this rigid environment produced compliant but demotivated teachers who viewed policy as coercion rather than collaboration.

Subsequent reforms attempted to decentralize decision-making but often replaced control with *fragmented accountability*. Programmes under the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* framework devolved responsibilities without adequate support, creating a paradox where schools were held responsible for outcomes without the resources or authority to achieve them (Sheokand, 2018).

The *NEP 2020* aspires to correct this imbalance through its “light-but-tight” philosophy, but implementation still suffers from legacy oversight structures. The research corpus (Sheokand, 2023; 2024) indicates that genuine reform requires a systemic shift—from evaluation to empowerment—anchored in what this paper terms **Intelligent Professionalism**.

3.2 Pillar 1: Reciprocal Accountability

Traditional accountability in education has flowed unidirectionally—from administrators to teachers. The first principle of *Intelligent Professionalism* reverses this logic. Accountability becomes **reciprocal**, grounded in the shared moral contract among policymakers, administrators, and educators.

Empirical evidence from Indian school systems shows that where teachers receive consistent mentoring and feedback loops, performance indicators improve without coercion (Sheokand, 2024). This confirms the theoretical argument by Bryk and Schneider (2002) that *relational trust*—not surveillance—predicts school improvement.

Reciprocal accountability demands transparency from every layer of governance: administrators must justify the adequacy of support, and policymakers must demonstrate responsiveness to field realities. Only when accountability is mutual does it sustain professional motivation and ethical integrity.

3.3 Pillar 2: Capacity-Oriented Oversight

Accountability divorced from capacity is punitive. Capacity-oriented oversight reframes supervision as developmental guidance rather than inspection. Sheokand’s (2024) research on managerial strategies in primary education underscores that teachers thrive when evaluation includes constructive mentoring, pedagogical coaching, and access to professional learning resources.

This principle aligns with Finland’s *trust-based accountability* and Singapore’s *career-long professional learning pathways*. Both systems demonstrate that capability building yields higher and more consistent performance than fear-based monitoring. For India, this implies transforming the role of Block and District Education Officers from inspectors to instructional leaders—an evolution already envisioned but insufficiently institutionalized under *NEP 2020*.

3.4 Pillar 3: Diversified and Contextual Metrics

The over-reliance on standardized testing has narrowed the definition of quality. Intelligent accountability demands **multi-dimensional evaluation frameworks** encompassing:

- Student growth portfolios and formative assessment,
- School climate and teacher well-being surveys,

- Community engagement indicators, and
- Evidence of creativity, ethics, and problem-solving.

Sheokand's (2017a) and (2023) analyses both argue that educational outcomes in India must be measured by *human development impact* rather than test scores. By integrating social, emotional, and ethical dimensions into accountability dashboards, the system can assess learning as transformation rather than compliance.

Such diversification also aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4's call for *inclusive and equitable quality education*. It strengthens data-driven policymaking without sacrificing contextual nuance.

3.5 Pillar 4: “Tight–Loose” Leadership

Leadership within *Intelligent Professionalism* follows the **tight–loose principle**—tight on shared purpose, loose on local execution. Central authorities set clear learning goals, equity standards, and ethical expectations, while schools retain autonomy to determine pedagogical pathways.

Sheokand (2017b) identified that rigid administrative micro-management often stifles innovation. Conversely, districts that allowed principals discretion in scheduling, pedagogy, and budget allocation reported higher staff morale and student engagement (Sheokand, 2024).

This distributed leadership model mirrors *network governance* theory (Rhodes, 1997), where decision-making is shared across nodes of expertise rather than concentrated hierarchically. For Indian schooling, adopting tight–loose leadership would mean giving School Management Committees and *School Complexes* genuine authority—supported by mentorship, not directives.

3.6 Pillar 5: Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and Peer Accountability

The final pillar anchors accountability within the profession itself. Strong **Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)** create peer-driven accountability that is formative, collaborative, and self-correcting. Within such communities, teachers co-analyse student work, observe classes, and engage in reflective inquiry—turning accountability into collective growth.

Sheokand's longitudinal studies (2017b, 2022, 2024) document that peer collaboration directly correlates with teacher satisfaction, retention, and pedagogical creativity. This confirms that accountability gains legitimacy only when it emerges from professional culture rather than administrative compulsion.

Embedding PLCs within the *School Complex* structure proposed by *NEP 2020* could institutionalize this internal accountability, aligning national policy with grassroots professional agency.

3.7 Synthesizing the Model: From Compliance to Stewardship

Together, these five pillars represent a shift from bureaucratic oversight to **professional stewardship**—where accountability enhances, rather than erodes, autonomy. The synthesis of Sheokand's empirical

evidence across multiple studies (2016–2024) validates that schools flourish when governance mechanisms recognize teachers as partners in reform.

In this reconfigured ecology:

- The *State* safeguards equity and policy coherence;
- *Administrators* facilitate professional capacity; and
- *Teachers* exercise informed discretion within ethical boundaries.

This triadic relationship redefines accountability as *shared purpose backed by trust*, transforming governance into a living system of moral responsibility and collective intelligence.

3.8 Implications for Policy and Practice

Implementing *Intelligent Professionalism* in India entails:

- Rewriting teacher appraisal frameworks to include mentoring outcomes;
- Creating performance dashboards integrating qualitative indicators;
- Training administrators as instructional coaches;
- Embedding PLCs in every *School Complex*; and
- Establishing national standards for ethical professionalism linked to continuous learning credits.

Such reforms operationalize the NEP 2020 vision while anchoring it in an empirically validated governance theory. As Sheokand (2024) emphasizes, “accountability that nurtures is accountability that endures.”

4. Policy Implications and Strategic Recommendations

4.1 Rethinking the Architecture of Educational Governance

For decades, Indian education policy has been driven by administrative oversight rather than professional collaboration. The findings of Sheokand (2017a, 2018, 2023) underscore that genuine reform must begin by reconfiguring the *governance architecture*—from a pyramid of control to a lattice of shared accountability. This entails replacing the linear reporting hierarchies of District Education Offices with **horizontal networks** linking schools, administrators, and resource institutions.

Such a structure would institutionalize *reciprocal accountability*, where teachers report learning progress while administrators document capacity support provided. The *School Complex* model envisaged under *NEP 2020* provides a ready platform for this shift, but its success depends on redefining leadership roles and reallocating decision-making authority to the school level.

4.2 Institutionalizing Mentoring-Based Accountability

The *NEP 2020*'s call for “mentoring-based accountability” can be operationalized through **Instructional Mentorship Units (IMUs)** within every district. These units, staffed by experienced educators and academic coordinators, would replace conventional inspectorates. Their mandate would emphasize diagnostic observation, feedback loops, and professional learning rather than compliance audits.

Drawing from Sheokand's (2024) evidence that developmental supervision correlates positively with teacher satisfaction and performance, IMUs would create a structured yet supportive mechanism for teacher evaluation—blending accountability with empathy.

Key policy actions include:

- Retraining school inspectors as *Academic Mentors* certified through SCERTs and NIEPA.
- Linking teacher performance reports to mentoring sessions and professional growth plans rather than punitive grading.
- Creating digital mentoring dashboards inspired by *Digital India* governance frameworks (Sheokand, 2016).

4.3 Reorienting Teacher Appraisal Systems

Current appraisal systems prioritize quantifiable outputs—attendance, syllabus coverage, and test results. An *Intelligent Professionalism*-aligned framework should integrate **qualitative and developmental indicators**:

- Reflective journals documenting pedagogical innovation.
- Peer-review assessments within PLCs.
- Evidence of student socio-emotional growth.
- Contributions to school-based research and community engagement.

Sheokand's (2017b, 2022) studies confirm that when teachers perceive appraisal as an opportunity for recognition and reflection, their intrinsic motivation and retention rates rise sharply. The *Performance Appraisal Framework for Teachers (PAFT)* should therefore be redesigned as a *Professional Growth Portfolio (PGP)* evaluated bi-annually by peer mentors and administrators.

4.4 Strengthening Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

PLCs should form the backbone of internal accountability and professional renewal. Their success, however, hinges on **policy support for structure, time, and recognition**.

Practical recommendations include:

- Mandating a weekly 90-minute PLC session within all *School Complexes* with administrative sanction.

- Integrating PLC outputs—lesson study reports, peer feedback logs—into annual school evaluation.
- Linking PLC participation with career progression credits, thereby incentivizing collaboration.

This aligns with Sheokand's (2023) finding that schools demonstrating sustained collaborative practices outperform control schools in both morale and student engagement metrics.

4.5 Redefining Educational Leadership

Leadership in Indian schools must evolve from administrative supervision to **instructional stewardship**. The *tight-loose* principle requires principals and cluster heads to anchor core values (equity, inclusion, quality) while granting operational flexibility in pedagogy and assessment.

Policy implications include:

- Leadership certification programmes emphasizing ethics, change management, and mentoring.
- Inclusion of leadership performance in the *Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+)* metrics.
- Establishment of *Regional Leadership Academies* under NCERT and SCERTs for continuous development.

This approach resonates with Sheokand's (2018, 2024) argument that leadership transformation is the missing link in sustaining accountability with empathy.

4.6 Integrating Multi-Dimensional Accountability Dashboards

A single exam-based accountability system cannot reflect educational complexity. The *Intelligent Professionalism Dashboard (IPD)* proposed here would combine quantitative and qualitative metrics under four dimensions:

1. **Learning Growth** (student performance, formative assessment data)
2. **Professional Capacity** (training hours, PLC participation)
3. **School Climate** (trust indices, teacher-student relationships)
4. **Equity and Inclusion** (attendance of marginalized groups, gender parity)

These metrics, aligned with *NEP 2020* and SDG 4, would be publicly available to enhance transparency without reducing professional autonomy. Data collection should leverage *Digital India* frameworks (Sheokand, 2016) to ensure integrity and real-time analytics.

4.7 Building a Culture of Ethical Professionalism

True accountability is moral before it is managerial. A national **Code of Ethical Professionalism in Education (CEPE)**, grounded in Sheokand's (2017d, 2023) advocacy for human-rights-based education,

should articulate values of fairness, reflection, and integrity. Such a code, co-created with teachers, unions, and policy bodies, would function as the ethical foundation of *Intelligent Professionalism*.

CEPE could be integrated into teacher education curricula, in-service training, and institutional audits, ensuring that ethics are lived, not merely legislated.

4.8 Strategic Alignment with NEP 2020 and Vision 2047

The *Intelligent Professionalism* model aligns seamlessly with India's long-term educational vision. Its implementation would advance the NEP 2020 goals of quality, inclusion, and innovation while operationalizing Vision 2047's commitment to knowledge-based human capital.

To achieve system-wide transformation:

- The **Ministry of Education** must establish a *National Council for Professional Accountability and Mentoring (NCPAM)* to oversee reforms.
- **SCERTs and DIETs** should redesign teacher education curricula to include courses on professional ethics, governance literacy, and evidence-based practice.
- **Universities** should create research chairs on *Educational Governance and Intelligent Accountability*, building on existing scholarly contributions (Sheokand, 2017a–2024).

Such institutional scaffolding ensures that reform transcends rhetoric and becomes a living system of professional intelligence.

4.9 Concluding Reflection

As Sheokand (2024) persuasively notes, “accountability that nurtures is accountability that endures.” The Indian education system stands at a moment of opportunity—capable of transitioning from bureaucratic oversight to moral stewardship. By embedding trust, autonomy, and capacity at the heart of governance, the nation can cultivate a teaching force that is not merely compliant but inspired.

The *Intelligent Professionalism* framework, rooted in both empirical evidence and ethical conviction, offers a pragmatic roadmap for achieving this transformation. It envisions a system where administrative structures empower, professional communities self-regulate, and policy serves not as control but as conscience.

5. Conclusion: From Bureaucratic Oversight to Moral Stewardship

The long-standing tension between professional autonomy and public accountability has defined the moral and managerial fabric of Indian education. For decades, reforms oscillated between two extremes—excessive administrative control that stifled creativity, and unregulated autonomy that fragmented quality. The analysis presented in this study, anchored in both international theory and empirical Indian evidence, confirms that neither extreme sustains excellence. True progress lies in **redefining accountability not as control, but as conscience**.

The concept of *Intelligent Professionalism* proposed in this paper reframes school governance as an *ecology of moral responsibility, professional trust, and systemic intelligence*. It draws strength from Sheokand's research continuum (2016–2024), which consistently reveals that when governance empowers educators through ethical trust and developmental support, outcomes improve in quality, motivation, and sustainability. Across her works—spanning administrative reforms, job satisfaction, digital governance, and education policy—runs a consistent insight: **capacity building, not coercion, is the cornerstone of lasting accountability.**

Globally, systems that have successfully aligned professional freedom with public responsibility—Finland, Singapore, and Ontario—demonstrate that accountability achieves legitimacy only when practitioners participate in its design. India's *National Education Policy 2020* now gestures toward this alignment, but as this paper argues, its realization requires deeper institutional redesign. The governance structure must evolve from vertical hierarchies to horizontal learning networks; administrators must become mentors rather than monitors; and teachers must become co-authors of reform, not its subjects.

The five pillars of *Intelligent Professionalism*—reciprocal accountability, capacity-oriented oversight, diversified metrics, tight-loose leadership, and professional learning communities—together constitute a living model of **“trust-based accountability.”** This model is neither utopian nor managerial; it is pragmatic idealism anchored in ethical realism. It recognizes that schools are moral communities as much as administrative institutions. When autonomy and accountability coexist in mutual respect, governance becomes a form of stewardship—one that guards both standards and souls.

From a policy standpoint, the adoption of this model would operationalize the NEP 2020's vision of mentoring-based accountability while fulfilling India's broader developmental goal of building a knowledge-driven, ethically anchored society. From a theoretical standpoint, it advances governance scholarship by integrating moral psychology, public administration, and educational leadership into a unified framework of *Intelligent Professionalism*.

In sum, this paper argues that the future of school governance—both in India and beyond—depends on our ability to transform the vocabulary of accountability. **When accountability becomes intelligent, it ceases to be fear; it becomes faith.** It ceases to police; it begins to empower. And it ceases to measure compliance; it begins to cultivate character.

This is the enduring lesson of governance and the moral frontier of education reform.

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