Chapter 3: The Field and its Many Incommensurabilities

In the previous chapter, the methodological framework of the thesis was discussed. As noted there, the thesis uses Institutional ethnography and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis as techniques to critically examine the constitution and operation of LSE as a field of power. The focus is particularly on revealing the ‘textual’ (Smith, 1993) and discursive relations of power that link micro-sites and experiences, to macro processes and networks. Further, the aim is also to identify the ‘inconsistencies, contradictions and paradoxes’ that emerge in this process (Berg, 2009), as local and situated accounts of knowledge emerge, and as actors engage with these various discursive regimes of power. Therefore actors’ local contexts and experiences become significant points of entry in understanding how these regimes of power come to be negotiated, and socially constituted and re-constituted in practice.

Thus, in producing a critical account of LSE, I begin with a ‘thick’ description of the local context of the field. I undertake this description in order to be able to show, later, how the global discourses on LSE got reinterpreted and contextualised based on the local socio-historical conditions and the cultural contexts and knowledge of the actors on the field. At the same time, this description also helps me show how these local contexts were also influenced and modified by these global discourses, and the cultural and economic processes associated with them.

Thus, the aim in presenting this thick description of the field is two-fold: on the one hand, it is to show how the different actors, located
in varied socio-historical positions on the field, were affected differently by these discourses and practices of power; it is to show how they were both ‘subjects’ and ‘agents’, manoeuvring their lives in relation to the structural constraints operating upon them.

On the other hand, it is this close examination of the field that also allows me to show how these LSPs ‘failed’ to be responsive to the context\(^1\) and to present the politics of ‘discipline’ that is embedded within these supposedly ‘benevolent’ technologies of learning, in the later chapters.

Thus, in the following sections, I start with a description of the local context of the schools, and the teachers and children who make it up, before concluding with a description of the organisations and their staff. I set these profiles up as a contrast in this chapter, in order to set the context for some of the observations made in the later chapters, with respect to the differences in understanding of LSE between the two groups.

3.1. The Government / Aided Schools in Bangalore

As explained before, while the initial plan had been to examine the state-sponsored LSP operating in government schools in Bangalore, certain factors and conditions associated with the school itself made this

\(^1\) ‘Failed’ can be understood in multiple senses of the term. At the first level, the kind of ‘failure’ that immediately caught my eye on field was how LSPs ‘failed’ to have a psychological impact on the subjects. This led to me to see the second form of ‘failure’ – which was how these programmes seemed to be unrelated to the lives and contexts of the children in government schools. This, then helped me identify how the programmes were, actually, oriented to a different end of preparing the poor for neo-liberal change. However, the programmes failed in this sense too, as they were not able to fully bring about this change, as actors appropriated the programmes to their own ends. Thus, ‘failed’ also refers to this third sense of the term, where it represents a failure of capitalist discourses, policies and practices to bring about a complete economic transformation of the social.
difficult. This was not just to do with the fact that the national LSE programmes, that were to have been operational within these schools, had been recalled in Karnataka since 2007. It also had to do with the fact that teachers and students were unable to clearly recall what had been done as part of the LSPs within these schools. Thus, even when asked about the programmes that had been conducted in the past, neither teachers, nor students were able to present a lucid picture of what had been taught/learnt through these programmes.

Further, while many of the schools visited had programmes run by external agents (e.g., NGOs, private educational service providers), the regular school staff and teachers had little knowledge of, control over, and/or involvement with these. Thus, they were able to provide little information about these programmes.

But, what was perhaps more surprising than this was the lack of knowledge and interface with these externally-run programmes even on the part of DSERT. Even when these were brought to DSERT’s attention, the official in-charge of LSE and AEP for Karnataka simply responded by stating that as long as these external programmes did not seek government funds, they were free to operate within these schools without permission (personal communication, December 12, 2012).

This was surprising, considering the fact that the state-run LSP had to be halted due to public protests over the teaching of what was considered to be ‘inappropriate’ content for children. Despite this, neither the schools, nor the education department, or the School Development and Monitoring Committee (SDMC), teachers, and parents could be seen paying careful attention to, or raising concerns about the content of these externally-run programmes.
Thus, in order to understand this curious scenario wherein LSE had become a politically sensitive topic, and yet, had no objections that seemed to be raised over its practice by NGOs and other private educational providers, I started paying closer attention to the schools and the various stakeholders involved with it.

Most schools in my study (as is the case with most government and aided schools in India), were made up of those, who Nita Kumar (2007), has called the ‘provincial other’—that is, those far removed from the discourses of ‘modernity’ and the circuits of the global knowledge economy that the elite, ‘new middle class’ (Fernandes, 2006), urban, India occupies - even when located at the heart of India’s Silicon Valley, Bangalore. In stark contrast with middle class spaces and circuits, the provincial, government, and aided schools were marked by a strong culture of authoritarian discipline and a traditional understanding of children as incapable of self-direction, that afforded little agency to the child for self-making. Thus, in making these spaces ‘provincial’, it was not just children’s social class and location (most belonged to highly disadvantaged and marginalised communities) that contributed to the making of this character of the school. What also contributed to this was the school culture and the teachers themselves, with their traditional approach to education and children’s learning.

Despite belonging to forward castes (DISE, 2008-2009; Sriprakash, 2013), embodying a middle class status and lifestyle (Mooij, 2008; Morarji, 2014; Sriprakash, 2013), government school teachers, in their professional lives, have been noted to jointly uphold (along with the local communities), certain patriarchal values and

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2 DISE data indicates that close to 70 per cent of teachers in government, aided and private schools come from the forward castes.
beliefs (e.g., refer Clarke, 2003; N. Kumar, 2007; Sarangapani, 2003). Even with access to modern forms of education, and training in progressive pedagogies (Sriprakash, 2013), teachers have held on to their traditional positions as ‘venerated-gurus’ (Sarangapani, 2003; Sriprakash, 2013), emphasising their mastery and final authority over collected wisdom (Sarangapani, 2003).³

Drawing also from this status awarded to them by society at large, which sees them as ‘knowledgeable adults’ and parental figures in relation to the child, it is noted that teachers wield a considerable formal authority over the child,⁴ while also maintaining a social distance from them (Anitha, 2000; Sarangapani, 2003).

Further, these relations of authority and distance have also been complexly influenced by their own beliefs in traditional, social norms and caste-based practices (thus, indicative of a continued patriarchal mind-set), as well as the shared social understanding of our communitarian culture, in which social hierarchy is seen as a necessary part of the interdependent character of society (Clarke, 2003). Based on such an understanding of society and their roles, teachers, it is noted, have, largely, seen themselves as responsible for morally reforming and disciplining the child (ibid). The child, who is seen as an ‘empty vessel’, is sought to be filled up with ‘good sense’ - which was expressed by

³ This belief in the teacher as a ‘guru’, to be highly honoured was very much a sentiment that was widely prevalent on my field. Not only was this repeatedly reiterated within the everyday life at school by students and teachers through the expression “GurugaLige gaurava koDuvudu”; but it was specifically made visible on Teachers’ Day, when students organised a big ceremony for the teachers, honouring them with vermillion, garlands and shawl, gifts and food (‘oota haakuvudu’).

⁴ This is encapsulated in the use of the term ‘meek dictator’ by Sarangapani (2003), indicating the little control they have over the planning of education, but the great authority they wield in their relations with the child.
many teachers as “OLLe buddhi hēLikoDuvudu” in the context of my field.

In fact, the government school teachers interviewed for my study considered this to be particularly important for the children within these schools visited. These were children who mostly belonged to disadvantaged communities, such as that of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), for whom government schools have become the last refuge and hope (as indicated by many studies; e.g., Batra, 2013; Chavan, 2009; De, Noronha & Samson, 2002-2003; Dyer, 2009; Mooij, 2008; Velaskar, 2010). Most came from working class migrant families that had traditionally been occupied in agriculture or artisanal work (e.g., communities such as that of Vanniyars, Yadavas, Kurubas, Kumbaras, Labbaïs, and also Gowndars, Mudaliars, Vokkaligas. There was also a very small portion of Muslims and Christians in some of these schools).

Hailing originally from rural Karnataka and Tamil Nadu (e.g., Mandya, Raichur, Belgaum, Gulbarga, Kanakpura, Tirpatur), many of their families had moved to the city in search of better job opportunities. However, Velaskar (2010) notes that within these urban contexts, it is these groups that have to deal with the most number of insecurities, linked to food, housing, jobs and education.

With parents who were currently occupied in the informal sector (as garment factory workers, drivers, masons, construction workers, welders, coolies, domestic help, watchmen, plumbers, electricians, or carpenters plumbers), with an educational status of State Secondary Level Schooling (SSLC) or below, they were often perceived by the teachers as ‘backward’ and illiterate. Thus, they were also seen as incapable of providing adequate and appropriate socio-cultural training,
and care for the child. Teachers thus blamed this ‘culture of poverty’ that the children came from (often highlighting its negative features such as alcoholism, broken families and illness), as responsible for the academic failure, and other ‘deficits’ in the child. Further, they pointed to a lack of parental time and investment in children’s education and socialisation as also one of the prime reasons for school failure among these children. In fact, some even pointed out that, unlike private middle class schools, to which their own children went, they even took care of children’s homework and exam preparation at school itself, since these would not be addressed at home. (As an indicator of this, I often saw teachers in these government schools, asking children to copy answers multiple times over into their note-books as practice, or to copy and answer question papers more than once. During exam time, children, in some schools such as AGS, were also seated in long rows on the playing field, and were made to rote learn their lessons).

Thus, blaming the children’s background and culture as contributing to ‘deficits’, teachers, by and large, appeared to reproduce the stereotypes and practices of social discrimination prevalent within the larger social set-up, within the site of the school itself. This included a belief that children within these schools were ‘coarse’, ‘dull’, ‘rowdy’, and ‘unmanageable’, primarily lacking ‘discipline’. In fact, these stereotypes about children’s behaviours also took on gendered forms, with boys, mostly, considered to be ‘rowdy’, and girls seen to be given to dangers of sexual attraction, elopement, and exploitation within the school, as well as within the neighbouring localities. Thus, teachers constantly spoke to girls about the dangers of attraction, warned girls

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5 A government school in south Bangalore.
particularly about auto drivers, stating many girls had eloped with them, only to land in trouble later.

Children were, therefore, primarily seen as requiring ‘discipline’, to overcome these behaviours, and all means were seen as legitimate to achieve this. This was also gendered in many ways, with instructions on how to behave within and outside the school (e.g., being demure, walking with one’s head bent down, going home straight after school, without hanging on the streets, etc.), for girls, and the use of corporal punishment with boys (who were particularly considered to be ‘rowdy’), forming a constant feature of the education process.

That corporal punishment was considered a legitimate means towards this process of disciplining was evident from the fact that the use of this authority to correct children’s behaviours was even awarded to ‘teachers’ agents’ – that is senior, male students, who were recruited by teachers to maintain class discipline, reduce noise levels in class, and ensure completion of desired tasks, at some schools such as AGS. (In fact, during one of my visits to AGS, I was also able to overhear some teachers rue the fact that they would no longer be able to recruit a particular ninth standard student to maintain order, since he had hit and injured another child, and had injured him badly on the chest, the previous day. This had led to the child’s parents threatening to complain to a local gang that was politically connected, and the situation had become complicated. During another visit to the same school I had witnessed this boy entering an eighth standard classroom, and pulling children up by the collar, in the presence of the life skills facilitator and myself, demanding that they pay up towards the Gauri-Ganēsha festival 6

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6 This was usually the ‘alpha male’ within the student body, who was generally feared by most of the student body, and who wielded considerable power over the other students.
that the senior boys were organising. Some girls from this class had also reported that this boy had used an iron rod to hit those who had not paid up, on an earlier occasion. However, there appeared to be an informal acceptance of this kind of authority wielded by the student, with neither students, nor teachers objecting to his behaviour.

Further, other forms of disciplining included segregating children seen as ‘dull’ and ‘unmanageable’, into separate classrooms (that even the life skills facilitators were dissuaded from visiting); as well as legitimising practices of servility (such as having children serve food, and wash teachers’ used plates and cups, sweep the staffroom, run errands for them, vacate seats for them on the bus, etc.) These latter practices were again divided along gender lines with, tasks such as washing of vessels and plates falling to the girls, while running errands and sweeping tasks were given to the boys. Teachers understood these tasks as preparing children for their future roles (e.g., domestic roles, in the case of girls), and these expectations were also internalised by the students themselves, who saw all of these tasks as their sacred duties. (This was expressed in the term “GurugaLige gaurava koDuvudu”, meaning to ‘respect and honour the teacher.’ In fact, my refusal to be a part of this tradition, by allowing students to wash my plate or serve me food at school, became a significant hurdle for me in building rapport with them, and assimilating within the school, since students saw my practices and beliefs as foreign, and upper class, and were therefore, cautious in approaching me).

Thus, largely, all the different non-academic practices applied within the schools (from corporal punishment, to assignment of tasks such as cleaning plates), were all seen as educative experiences for the child, in order to develop the appropriate personal, social and cultural
behaviours and attitudes in them. In fact, a wide range of external programmes that I was able to observe within the schools that intervened into its schedule and disrupted classes, all appeared to be seen as beneficial for intellectually, morally and culturally improving the child. These ranged from health awareness, environment awareness (which included a special programme during Gauri-Ganēśha on using eco-friendly idols made of mud, and a campaign to ban plastic from the school’s premise, on Teachers’ Day, undertaken by the corporator, at AGS), civic awareness, citizenship education, LSE, moral and value education, and remedial learning programmes.7

Interestingly, these external programmes were often recruited to achieve the schools’ own notions of discipline and cultural improvement – a point that was also reiterated by the life skills organisations I worked with, to me. (This will be described in more detail in the later chapters). Similarly, children also understood these programmes through the lens of the school, and oriented to even fun-filled, activity-based programmes for self-reflection and development, such as LSE, as programmes that taught them to be obedient, to respect teachers, and how to lead life. (This will also be discussed in more detail in the subsequent chapters).

Thus, from these observations made within schools, what emerges is a picture of the school as a space for culturally disciplining the child, by preparing him/her to comply with established norms, roles, and expectations of society. Rather than being spaces within which students could develop into autonomous, self-managing individuals, schools

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7 In fact, on some days I was able to even observe two different organisations conducting the same programmes (i.e., LSE) within the same school, and classes.
appeared as spaces of regulation, with a narrow vision for children’s development.

Within this authoritarian cultural context of the school, the introduction of progressive, child-centred pedagogies (including LSE), that envisaged a particular kind of agency and self-direction on the part of students, remained largely alien, and externally imposed, both, on students and teachers. (This has also been noted by several other scholars, such as Clarke [2003]; N. Kumar [2007]; Sriprakash [2013], and others). Further, the targets of learning of such programmes, such as the ability to independently and critically think, were in conflict with the behavioural targets that were of interest to schools, namely, marks, attendance, pass percentages, and other overt behaviours that signified respect and obedience (e.g., wishing the teacher).

As evident from the above discussion, within this context, children’s education and learning was a hierarchically organised, top-down process, focused on moulding individuals for their specific social roles within society. With such expectations placed also on external agencies, such as life skills organisations, what was largely ignored, both by schools, and the programmes, in providing education, were critical questions around the relationship between schooling and the larger context of the children’s lives.

For example, for a large number of children, in the schools I visited, schooling had to be balanced with work as car washers, newspaper boys, cooks, flower sellers, etc., in order to support the family’s meagre income. In other cases (most often, in the case of girls), it had to be balanced with domestic chores such as cooking, washing, cleaning or looking after young ones, since parents often worked long hours, in physically challenging jobs that left them with little energy.
when they returned home. In other instances, prolonged illness or alcoholism of parents had forced some of the girls to attend to these household chores of cooking, cleaning and looking after their younger siblings. In such cases, girls were expected to take on the regular domestic duties. This, often, affected children’s performance and motivation to attend school.

In other instances, poverty, which loomed large over their lives, also led to instances wherein education was at the verge of being discontinued or was discontinued (particularly, in the case of girls). I had a chance to witness this on a couple of occasions on field. For example, during one field visit, an eighth standard girl, Ramya, from ANMS, who had returned to school after a prolonged period of absence, tearfully explained to me the condition at her home. With her brother and herself having fallen ill, a large portion of the family income had to be utilised for medical expenses. Following this, the family had found itself in a tight situation, with not enough resources to even purchase bus tickets to send children to school.

Under these circumstances, her mother, she had explained, resented the expenses on schooling, considering it a luxury, when they had not even had money to celebrate the ‘Pongal’ festival that had just gone by. Therefore, she had told Ramya’s father to, at least remove her (Ramya) from school. It was the foresight of her father, who, she

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8 An aided Tamil minority charity school
9 Pongal is the harvest festival celebrated by the agricultural class in South India, particularly, in Tamil Nadu, at the beginning of January (the Tamil month of Thai). Since 2008, this has also gained a political character, with the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) deciding to establish this date as also the Tamizh New Year (which was otherwise celebrated in the month of April, or the Tamil month of Chithirai). DMK, a political party in the state which has won credence as an anti-Brahmin party, has sought to make this change as a counter to the hegemony of Brahminical rule, and as a celebration of the victory of the farming class, and other marginalised groups.
reported, had borrowed some money from the neighbours to bring the children to school, that had saved Ramya from losing out on education (personal communication, January 15, 2013).

In other instances, the relation between schooling and poverty manifested itself in other ways. For example, as several children explained to the life skills trainers and counsellors who sought to help them perform better academically, at AGS, a hurdle for studying at home was posed by the structural limitation of the houses in which they lived. With many children living in single room houses in crowded, low-income colonies or slums in Bangalore (such as Venkatapura, Belandur, Iblur, Tannery Road, Jeevanahalli, Ambedkar Nagar, Dodigunta, Chennakeshvara Beedhi, Tin factory, Jogpalya, Lido, Kagadaspura, Indiranagar, K R Puram), activities such as sleeping and studying had to be coordinated with the activities of other family members, due to constraints of space and other resources.

For example, many children reported being unable to study after eight- or nine ‘o’ clock because lights in the houses would be switched off early. Their parents, who would come home tired from a long day of work, and would have to leave early the next day, would insist on this, so that they could go to bed early, and get a few hours of sleep.

In other cases, children spoke about the distraction, and noise from the television set (with cable connection that was, remarkably, one of the few amenities possessed by all children, even those with the lowest family incomes) coming from the closely packed accommodations in the neighbourhood, or even from their own houses. Thus, in many cases, children reported having to use parked vehicles near the house, such as autos, scooters, bikes, and other abandoned sites and structures, if one had to escape this noise, and study undisturbed.
This extension of the house onto the streets, and into the neighbourhood was also noticeable in other ways, during house visits, which revealed the poverty of space and resources that these children, and their families had to deal with, on an everyday basis. The shortage of living space meant that the street itself was transformed into one’s personal living space, and it lent itself to a number of daily routines, including to cooking, cleaning grains, washing and drying clothes, giving children a bath, and even to leisure activities such as play (for children), and for gambling,\textsuperscript{10} meetings and discussions (for adults).

Thus, these various limitations with respect to the structural conditions of living often created real barriers for children’s participation in education, but were often ‘misrecognised’ (Bourdieu, 1990) as problems of individual behaviour and motivation. In addition to constraints of space and time, another barrier to ‘studying’, faced by children, was the alternative values that took precedence in families, such as the celebration of festivals, ‘Ooru habbas’ (village festivals), ‘Jaatre’ (fair), and so on. Due to frequent occasions such as these, prolonged absence was a common phenomenon, since children would be taken back to their native places and villages for these celebrations. Similarly, following big festivals, such as Gauri-Ganēsha, Dasaraa, etc., for which the school, and the state provide holidays, it was noticed that the class strength, similarly dropped to nearly half, since families would extend their stay or holiday.

Interestingly, while these alternate cultural values that led to absences were considered significant factors affecting children’s performance, the structural challenges mentioned above, as well as the

\textsuperscript{10} Games of dice or cards could be seen being played on the roads near some accommodations.
various ‘absences’ associated with school, were never seen as contributing to these conditions of failure. For example, teacher shortage was a common phenomenon across several schools. In fact, during visits to some schools, such as UGHS (a government school located in South Bangalore), the head mistress discussed the situation in government schools, stating that the education department had not appointed any teachers in the last few years. Yet, she pointed out they were forced to go on local drives in order to enrol more /all children from the community by the local politicians every year, who sought to gain a good image with the public through this. She added that this amounted to spoiling the future of the child, since they did not have adequate teaching staff to cater to this volume of children (personal communication, February 11, 2012).

Faced with such shortages, then, other schools such as AGS, resorted to using external persons, such as the facilitators from the life skills organisations, as additional hands, and expected them to help out with, both regular classroom teaching, as well as with other duties such as preparing classrooms for examinations (by writing out the roll numbers on each bench), invigilation, and paper correction. Further, they also opened up the space to trainee teacher-students, from nearby colleges, who formed a constant second cadre within the school.¹¹

In addition to the shortage of teachers, ‘absences’, in terms of teacher accountability and adequate usage of school time, were also noted. That these too need to be taken into account when considering student performance, however, was never given attention. There were several instances on field when classes were disrupted due to school or

¹¹ These trainee-teachers who were pursuing their Diploma in Education (D.Ed) sought to teach in these schools in order to fulfil the practical requirements of the degree.
teacher-related factors – for example, there were instances when teaching activities were disrupted due to the space that schools provided to various external actors - from middle class citizens, to local MLAs and corporators, trainee D.Ed teachers, NGOs and corporate organisations - to carry out their own experiments in education. These various actors, who had their own ideas and agendas, were allowed to easily enter and exit the school space, and carry out their activities during the regular working hours of the school. This often led to the suspension of regular classes.

In some extreme cases, classroom time was disturbed due to a lack of accountability among teachers, who suspended classes on occasions such as a colleague’s house-warming ceremony. (An instance of this was observed at AGS, wherein the entire staff of teachers went to attend the ceremony, even when the head master explicitly forbade them. This resulted in the entire afternoon sessions being suspended, since teachers who left at lunch-time had not returned post-lunch).

In another instance, a teacher at MGPS\textsuperscript{12} was seen using class time to practice riding a bike. Thus, such instances represented a lack of accountability on the part of schools, and teachers. This was, however, never considered a problem when discussing students’ performance.

Further, the quality of teaching also never came under review, especially in cases where trainee D.Ed teachers, with little experience and familiarity with the students, were used, as seen at AGS. In fact, in this context, what was also noted was that these teacher-students, who belonged to the eastern states of Orissa and West Bengal, were not even familiar with the local language, Kannada, that the students were most familiar with.

\textsuperscript{12} A government-run higher primary school in north Bangalore.
comfortable with. This is significant, because, within these schools, a knowledge of Kannada was important and central to teaching even within English-medium sections of the school since children did not have adequate exposure or training in other languages, such as English or Hindi. This, therefore, raises questions about the efficacy of teaching carried out in these schools, which also affects students’ performance.

In addition to these internal factors related to the school, other political factors, external to the school, also contributed to the loss of learning time and quality, such as a series of bus strikes and bandhs, between August and September 2012, due to which classes were nearly suspended for a month.

All this made school a ‘porous’ site, within which programmes such as LSE, seemed to be filling up the cracks (i.e., both, academically, as well as in terms of the social-moral disciplining), by taking on the character of the school itself. This was a significant finding about the programmes, since the organisations themselves appeared to have different ideas about the programmes; and it was only through this close comparison of the organisations with the schools that I was able to identify how LSPs became sites for ‘disciplining’ the child in many different ways.

Thus, in the next section, I present a more detailed account of each of the organisations followed in the study, and their programmes. This is important to explain some of the findings presented later in the study. Mainly, I try to present a sense of the culture of the organisations, which stood in sharp contrast to that of the government schools. It is this difference that forms the primary ground upon which much of the analysis, on the problems with LSE, is built in the later chapters.
3.2. Life Skills Organisations as Middle Class Cultural Spaces

Within the schools, while it became apparent that life skills were never really imagined as ‘skills’ for self-regulation, this, in fact, formed the primary discourse about the programmes, within the life skills organisations. This got me thinking about the specific ‘geographies of its circulation’. That is, it forced me consider the discrepancies between the local school contexts, and the kind of the knowledge that was trying to be transacted here through the various LSPs.

Based on ‘modern’ and ‘liberal’ ideas of autonomy and self-help, the discourses and practices of these programmes were largely foreign and unfamiliar ones within the school context. Further, they appeared to be inorganic solutions that did not emerge from within the local context, therefore also, creating great difficulties for its inhabitants (i.e., both the children and teachers in these schools) to grasp. Brought here, by non-governmental and supranational organisations, as universal solutions to ‘poverty’ and ‘risk’, these LSPs appeared to have a certain ‘directionality’ to its flow, moving from western academic institutions and supranational bodies, to local school contexts in India, introduced here by the elite.

Thus, central to the understanding of the dynamics of LSPs within the Indian context, is not just the educational context and the space of the school, but the class-based dynamics that is central to its circulation. In attempting to capture some of the complexities of this process, in this section I undertake a short organisational history of each of the three main organisations that I worked with.

While, all organisations in the study significantly differed from each other in their approach, organisational structures, and methods,
they also appeared to be similar in many ways. Primarily, they were all ‘social enterprises’\textsuperscript{13} started by a set of well-to-do middle class citizens, to ‘give back to society’, the skills they believed to have made them successful. All three organisations stated to be inspired by the WHO’s model of LSE, in their work on ‘empowering’ the poor.

Providing this form of training to the disadvantaged, members within these organisations, saw themselves as a class apart from other commercial enterprises, as well as others in the middle class, by wedding the concepts of social service, with their personal spirit of entrepreneurism. Thus, presenting themselves as ‘socially responsible citizen-entrepreneurs’, they also sought to present themselves as ‘role models’ for others, both in the working class (who were urged to adopt these skills in order to escape their circumstances), as well in the middle classes (who they sought to involve in their activities through promotion ‘volunteerism’ as a desirable form of personal conduct).

In addition to these similarities, all the organisations also jointly, presented the idea of ‘skills’ as the universal panacea to social problems of inequity, lack of access, and discrimination, emerging from historically situated factors such as caste, class, gender, religion, and so on. In the manner typical of the middle class who have staunchly advocated an ‘ideology of merit’\textsuperscript{14} in drawing attention away from these deeper issues (Upadhya, 2007; 2011), the middle class organisational

\textsuperscript{13} I use the term ‘social enterprise’ to describe these organisations, as discussions with members of these organisations was characterised by the use of the language of business – such as the organisation as a ‘brand’; the need to scale; and the need to ‘productise’ life skills training. Many of the organisations also recognised themselves as ‘social entrepreneurships’.

\textsuperscript{14} The ‘ideology of merit’ is a belief that success in business or employment must purely be a matter of individual effort and talent, and a denial of the historically-rooted, caste-based differences through which such talent and individual achievement manifests itself.
spaces within my study were also wiped clean of, and sanitised, of these discussions of caste, class and other forms of social discrimination.

In fact, as proof of the insignificance of such categories, they sought to present their own organisational spaces as ‘flat’ and devoid of these forms of social and organisational hierarchy (emulating corporate enterprises, and their new management policies). However, as will be seen below in the descriptions of the individual organisation, everyday processes, roles and structures of the organisations were marked by the intangible markers of class (and caste\(^\text{15}\)). It is to show how the organisations are thus organised, through their language and culture, as middle class spaces, promoting the new, neoliberal values of ‘individual responsibility’ and ‘personal enterprise’ through their programmes, and avoiding deeper issues of social transformation, that I review each of them below.

3.2.a. Imagine Possibilities (IP)

IP is a young organisation that began as a volunteer-initiative in 1999, and that was formally registered as a ‘professional charitable trust’ in 2003. What started off as a group of young, ‘new middle class’ professionals (Fernandes, 2006), from different fields,\(^\text{16}\) coming together over the weekends, to spend time with underprivileged children from shelter homes in Bangalore, has today grown into an organisation working with over 5000 children, 24 partner NGOs and schools, 1000 teachers and adult workers, and 2500 volunteers, providing life skills training.

\(^\text{15}\) Data on caste, for the members of the organisations could not be directly obtained, since their organisational culture did not allow for a discussion of this. However, an attempt was made to extrapolate this information using surnames and details of individuals’ family backgrounds.

\(^\text{16}\) These span marketing, management, software engineering, chartered accountancy, business and entrepreneurship, photography, advertisement, and contemporary dance.
IP’s goal (as stated on their website) is to ‘empower young people from vulnerable backgrounds to escape their cycle of poverty, overcome adversity, and flourish in a fast changing world’. According to Garima Acharya, the Chief Operating Officer (COO) at IP, this developed from their observation that young people from vulnerable backgrounds returned to the streets, and were unable to get and keep jobs, when asked to leave shelter homes at the age of 17-18 years. The crucial ingredient that they saw missing in these young people were ‘life skills’, and therefore IP developed as an organisation, wholly dedicated to building ‘life skills’ in these children.17

IP’s initial work had, however, not begun with life skills training.18 Rather, having felt the positive effects of their weekend engagement on the behaviour of terminally-ill children at various shelter homes, the organisation had started as a means to provide different opportunities for positive engagement to these children. Thus, initially, IP ran eleven different sports-based programmes, along with other activities, such as weekend outings and dance therapy, and mainly worked on obtaining sponsorships and funding through the wide network of corporates and professionals that they were already connected to (owing to their backgrounds in, and connections with various corporates and industries).

It was only in 2004, when Devesh (the CEO, and a former venture capitalist, who had given up his profession to enter the social sector full-time), happened to chance upon a WHO curriculum for substance abuse, that the term LSE was adopted to their work. Believing that the work they had already been undertaking had been very similar to what the

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17 As communicated by Garima, at a mentor training programme, July 29, 2012.
18 As stated to me by Devesh Arya, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and founder member of IP (personal communication, May 28, 2012).
WHO recommended as LSE, Devesh explained that he decided to adopt the term to his programmes. This was because it would offer his work ‘credibility’ and the ‘NGO language’ that it lacked, he explained (personal communication, May 28, 2012).

Currently, IP delivers life skills classes using two main formats—one, through an arts-based delivery model, and the other, through a sports-based model. IP’s programmes are delivered, free of cost, after-school hours, in 24 aided, and charity-based schools in Bangalore,\(^\text{19}\) for children between 8-14 years. Weekly sessions of two-and-half hours each, are conducted for a batch of 25-30 children (grouped age-wise), who voluntarily join one of the programmes (i.e., arts or sports), that take place on the school premises. A total of 20 sessions (15 structured and 5 unstructured\(^\text{20}\)) are conducted over the academic year for each batch of students, focused around five core skills that have been identified by IP. (These are recognised as the meta-level skills making up the 10 life skills listed by WHO). The five meta-skills include ‘Interacting with others’, ‘Overcoming difficulties and solving problems’, ‘Taking initiative’, ‘Managing conflict’, and ‘Understanding and following instructions’.

Children are expected to attend the programme for a minimum of at least two years, since IP argues that this is the minimum time required

\(^{19}\) When asked about tie-ups with government schools, the COO, Garima had informed me that they were not working with government schools because of the difficulties in getting permissions from the education department (personal communication, April 17, 2012).

\(^{20}\) Structured sessions are sessions for which the lesson plan is given in the training manual given to the facilitators. Unstructured sessions are ones in which the facilitators are free to decide the course of the class. Typically, the unstructured sessions are supposed to be interspersed with the structured sessions. Particularly, facilitators are supposed to judge the mood of the class and use an unstructured session by orienting it towards the needs of the class.
for the programmes to have an impact. (This has also been informed to the schools, and has been negotiated with them in advance).

Programmes, which are planned to be highly experiential in nature, consist of activities such as games, stories, creative writing exercises, drawing, theatre improvisation activities, group discussions, and so on, which are to be followed by a deep process of reflection. A prominent place is given within the programmes to language as a tool for acting upon the self, and to bring about self-reflective change (thus, resembling the practices of ‘concerted cultivation’, within middle class homes [Laureau, 2000; 2002]. This will be discussed more in detail later).21

In addition to this main activity, IP has also instituted smaller games and activities, such as ‘Check-in / Check out’, warm-up activities, and provisions for personal time and conversations with the facilitators, in order to build an atmosphere of fun, warmth, trust and comfort within the sessions.

IP’s curriculum has been sourced from two international agencies working in the area of youth empowerment, with some in-house efforts made to contextualise this to suit Indian schools. According to Garima, this arrangement had been made since they had been unsuccessful in developing their own curriculum; and had also been unable to find like-minded individuals and organisations in the Indian context to do this (‘who would see life skills as already present within individuals, waiting to be discovered, rather than as something fixed’, according to her).

21 In fact, in other ways also, programmes imitated the practices seen in elite, middle class schools – for example, by organising a graduation ceremony and party for the senior-most batches. Students were awarded with certificates and mementos, declaring them as ‘life skills graduates’ at this ceremony; and this was followed by a party, as with elite, private schools, consisting of food, games and dancing to the latest Bollywood and international music.
Thus, she argued, they felt it a waste of effort to work at developing an in-house curriculum, when there already were those who were experts at this (personal communication, April 17, 2012).

Further, IP also believed that programmes must be facilitated within schools by those who came from the children’s communities itself, since they would understand the child and his/her language better. (For this reason, one of their core principles for curriculum development was also that it must be deliverable by anybody). Accordingly, most facilitators from IP came from lower middle class or working class backgrounds, or had been street children themselves. Some had also undergone IP’s LSPs (i.e., had attended their LSPs at the schools or shelter homes they had grown up in, or had received their mentoring programmes) as students.

Many were also local, small-time artists, and sports-persons, who had joined IP, looking to supplement their incomes. (Since, before the development of a formal life skills curriculum in 2012-2013, IP had mainly sought to engage children in art and foot-ball, as a means to provide them with life skills, their hiring process had also focused on those with skills in these domains).

These facilitators, were also the only members of the organisation with a deep connection with the local youth, understanding their cultures, and knowing their local languages and dialects (e.g., Kannada, Tamil, and Telugu). This was in stark contrast with most of the other (managerial) members of the organisation, who were not even familiar with Kannada.

Thus, owing to this significant difference between those who had conceived and envisaged these programmes, and the facilitators who
came from local backgrounds, IP invested heavily in training, in order to ensure the cultural changes it sought to effect, in the facilitators first, through whom it had to be transferred to the children.

These changes, largely, were ones that would fit them into the new neoliberal economy, and included the cultivation of a number of personal attributes, ranging from responsibility and enterprise, to particular forms of communication and self-presentation. Thus, training did not focus just on the pedagogical knowledge of LSE, but on the personal transformation of the facilitator itself, and took on many forms, a primary form being the way in which every day routines within the organisation was arranged.

For example, as some of the facilitators (new to, and enamoured by this culture) informed me, Devesh (the CEO) and others in the organisation, had introduced them to, and expected to be greeted with high-fives and hugs that suggested a ‘flat’ workplace that was not driven by external authority and regulation. Others, spoke of the casual dress code of the organisation, such as jeans, skirts and branded tops (that some had, initially, been uncomfortable with). Even the organisation’s chosen dress code for external events (such as trainings, awareness campaigns, etc.) was a casual, custom-made IP t-shirt to be teamed up with a pair of casual pants. Thus, training in these middle class ways of being were primarily delivered through the consumptive practices of dress, interactions within the workplace, work culture, and also through expectations to get familiar with technology, and participate on platforms such as social media to promote the organisation’s work.

Having been initially recruited on a part-time contract basis, facilitators were also positioned differently within the organisation as part-time staff, with little decision making opportunities or say about the
programmes, unlike most of the other members who were full-time, middle class employees. (This situation changed later, towards the middle of my field work in 2012, when IP introduced a new Human Resources [HR] policy. Regularising the contract of the facilitators, IP decided to make them more accountable to the organisation.)

The new policy also sought to bring in a system of accounting to the hours put in by the facilitators by offering them benefits such as promotions, and performance-based incentives, and so on. Thus, facilitators were voluntarily allowed to take up additional portfolios, such as that of ‘lead facilitator’22 or ‘programme facilitator’23. (While, a fair evaluation cannot be made of this as yet, since sufficient time for facilitators to be promoted to higher management levels has not elapsed, what could be seen up to the point of my field work, was that promotions were still limited to clerical jobs, or roles of routinely monitoring other facilitators).

Thus, the organisation itself functioned, less as a traditional NGO, and more like a new-age corporate or software firm, wherein the code for everyday work culture was signified by a curious combination of strong accountability, and casual informality. While, work hours and targets sought to be strongly monitored and clocked, on the other hand, the organisational space was also marked by easy inter-personal relationships, and a lack of formality and hierarchy at the surface level.

22 Lead facilitators were those in charge of training other adults (such as school teachers) to conduct LSPs with children.
23 This was the lowest level managerial position within the organisation, and mainly involved the supervision of other facilitators. Thus, the programme facilitator was in charge of ensuring facilitators’ attendance and punctuality to sessions, completion of their duties and tasks such as collection of school data and data entry, preparation of reports. They also supervised the usage, return of resources given to facilitators to conduct sessions, and were in charge of inventory management. They also attended meetings with the school management, receiving complaints and feedback from them.
In other areas, such as team meetings too, this informal ease among members was seen. For example, in the year that I followed the organisation, team meetings, which were attended by all full-time staff (from the CEO to the admin assistant) were, consecutively, chaired by members holding lower positions within in the organisation. At this weekly event, all matters from board level decisions, to events on the field, were openly discussed with all members, who could cross-question each other on these matters, including the CEO.

Thus, IP, essentially, appeared as a ‘flat’ organisation, in the first instance; yet, underlying this structure was a strongly inscribed, tacit hierarchy that set limits on individuals’ roles. For example, as observed during a weekly team meeting (dated 13 April, 2012), Devesh had planned to show a sensitizing film to the team, and had wanted to discuss its relevance following the screening. However, the team did not appear to be interested in this; and one of the members, Riya Mathews (a programme anchor) informed him that she needed to go to conduct an appraisal of one of the facilitators. She added that she could do it later provided the facilitator would wait. Stating this, she asked the facilitator, John, when he would be leaving. To this, Devesh, immediately replied, “Well, not before the appraisal is over”, and continued to screen the film.

Following the screening, Devesh waited silently for the group to share their experiences, but there was a long silence with no one contributing any thoughts. Taking this as a cue to break up the meeting, Joel Mathias, the head of the programme delivery vertical, stood up to leave, but no one else moved. Suddenly, realising this, Joel asked out loud, “Isn’t the meeting over?” Another team member responded stating “No, Devesh wants to debrief.” After some more silence, finally,
Garima opened up the discussion by sharing some of her thoughts. However, this incident was a clear indicator of how hierarchy was tacitly established and followed within the organisation.

This had clear implications on who shared authority within the organisation for planning and decision making. For example, as it became apparent later, during a curriculum feedback sessions, this also influenced the manner in which the planning of the curriculum itself was undertaken (i.e., top-down), despite Garima’s comment about having facilitators who understood the communities they worked with better.

For example, this was made clear, during a curriculum feedback session (dated 8 October, 2012), when one of the facilitators, Gautam, tried to explain to their international curriculum developer, Christiana Munro that children do not understand the links between the activities (which are heavily metaphorical and rely on a familiarity with specific kinds of language, as will be shown later) and their application to everyday lives. Christiana responded to this by telling the facilitators to use stories from their own lives, in explaining to children how these skills can be applied. Gautam again tried to explain to her that only when children came up with their own stories would they know if they had understood what was taught; otherwise they tended to simply listen to and repeat what was told to them. Despite expressing such difficulties with the format on field, Christiana continued to brush these concerns aside, asking them to suit it to the children’s needs, not paying attention to the fact that what the facilitators were trying to explain to her was about the starkly different cultural context of the school.

Structured in these many ways as a formal, corporate organisation, everyday work was marked by formal meetings (aided by google mail
and calendars that were used to coordinate formal requests for such events, even though members sat in adjacent rooms, or tables less than ten feet apart). Further, goals of networking, visibility and scale, became the most visible feature of everyday work. In fact, most of the discussion within the organisation, and during team meetings, mainly, revolved around these topics, rather than on the LSP itself. Thus, during a team meeting informing the team about the change at the board level and the induction of a new board member, Rohan Ferreira, Garima stated that his sights were set on expansion, since he believed that it was “irresponsible not to scale” (team meeting dated, 20 April, 2012). During the same meeting, models to achieve “rapid scale” were also discussed, which mainly revolved around designing short, two-day training programmes for partner NGOs and teachers, as a way to indirectly reach a larger number of children.

Branding and networking were also prime strategies applied to achieving this target of scale. Thus, plans to develop a new corporate brand image that would establish the idea that “Life skills means IP”, were also discussed during the annual plans, goals and objectives meet (dated April 20, 2012). Further, as part of its visibility campaign, IP also constantly participated in the various ‘Runs’ and ‘Marathons’ organised in Bangalore (that have become popular in the last five to seven years), and urged its employees and volunteers to join these runs, and also bring as many additional participants as they could. IP provided them with incentives for recruiting the largest number of volunteers for such events (since a larger group provided them with greater visibility). In 2012, they also decided to open a new chapter of their organisation in the United Kingdom, and participate in various charity events there, as a
way to be able to better network with charities and individuals there, and channelize funds.

A final point about IP’s programme structure is the three supplementary programmes that they had, in addition to the life skills training. The first was a Youth Centre, run for youth in the age group of 14-18 years, to equip them with foundational skills required for career development, and “to help them make healthy career choices and transit successfully” (as mentioned on their website).

The second component was a volunteer engagement programme, to sensitise others from the middle class to the difficulties faced by these children, since, it was believed that this awareness was a crucial ingredient for creating a non-discriminatory world. One part of this volunteering programme was a mentoring component which used middle class volunteers from the lay public as mentors to disadvantaged youth, to support and guide them on future decisions and difficult times. Mentors, who were mostly individuals with corporate and professional backgrounds, with little or no training in psychology (like the managerial group at IP itself), worked with these youth by setting up weekly appointments, providing them with new experiences such as a visit to the mall (which, IP argued could be anxiety provoking experiences for the youth, and yet a desired dream), and by being a confidant in whom they could unburden their difficulties.

Another component of the volunteer engagement programme was a corporate volunteer engagement model, through which IP sought to provide customised volunteering experiences to various corporate organisations seeking to fulfil their quota of ‘corporate social responsibility’ (CSR), by not only funding social initiatives, but by
assigning specific number of hours for their employees to engage in volunteer work.

Finally, a third component of their programme was a teacher training component, through which they sought to develop empathy in teachers, and expand their creativity in working with children from vulnerable backgrounds. This component of their programme, was also a strategy to reach their goal of 2,40,000 children (indirectly) by 2015. (Further details of this component, in terms of the implications of this strategy for scaling, is discussed in Chapter 6).

3.2.b. Viveka Youth Brigade (VYB)

In stark contrast with the small, yet, growing character of IP, VYB was an old, established non-profit, development organisation, with several years of grass-root experience. Started by a group of local medical doctors from Mysore, in 1984, to provide medical services to the poor, over the years it has grown into a large organisation of over 450 employees, more than 50 projects, spread across the districts of Mysore, Hassan, Kodagu, Dakshin Karnataka and rural Bangalore, and several national and international collaborations. VYB is primarily engaged in providing health, educational, and socio-economic empowerment to rural and tribal communities.

The LSP was just one small component of one of their educational projects, started by a US-returned, senior-level marketing professional, of a large American Information Technology (IT) firm, Rajesh Sridhar. A personal crisis, and a period of soul searching during his corporate tenure had led him to explore several psycho-therapeutic options, such as neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) and Myer Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) personality inventory (in which he also obtained
training). It was this training and experience that he applied to the development of a LSP for underprivileged youth following his return to India.

Once in India, Rajesh came to associate himself with VYB, wanting to contribute meaningfully to society. Expressing his desire to start a programme for the urban poor, Rajesh had received support from VYB to start an independent project, called Inspire, in Bangalore (supported by funds from Dell Foundation), to provide academic support to the urban poor. The LSP had been developed as a part of this project since he believed that ‘personality’ was an important component of academic and career success. Based on this plan, his initial attempt had been to provide ‘soft skills’ for children of the urban poor in all government schools and pre-university colleges in Bangalore. However, since schools had shown no interest in this, but were mainly concerned with academics, the initial plan had to be modified, and the programme started by providing educational infrastructure and support for teaching-learning to schools.

For my work, since, my primary interest was in LSPs, I mainly followed the Inspire project, which had remained an independent function of the main organisation, and had little interface with it, during the initial period of my field work. The aim of project was that of

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24 The term ‘soft skills’ and ‘life skills’ were interchangeably used within the organisation. Members of the organisation told me that by ‘soft skills’ they had meant ‘life skills’. This was again an indicator of how, influenced by the corporate culture within which members such as Rajesh had been trained, they sought to model programmes for children, along similar lines. This was also a point of contention within the organisation, as life skills facilitators, who actually delivered these programmes within schools, did not come with the same backgrounds. Belonging to more modest backgrounds, and trained in psychology, the use of the term ‘soft skills’, instead of ‘life skills’, was seen by them as a denial of their own knowledge and identities, within the organisation.

25 As told to me by Pavan Raghunath, the former HR and life skills team manager at VYB (personal communication, February 8, 2012).
“Breaking the cycle of poverty for families by improving the quality of education at the school level and encouraging students to pursue job-oriented degrees by providing scholarships and innovative family saving programs” (as stated on its website).

The project had four main components:

a. an academic tutoring programme that made use of audio-visual aids to support slow learners, and revise topics already completed at school. Supporting this component of the programmes, VYB’s Bangalore office had a huge team of content writers, proof readers, video editors, etc., who were in charge of creating audio-visual modules based on the Karnataka state education board syllabus;

b. an additional, academic and personal mentoring programme for bright students, who scored above 60 per cent, and whose monthly family income was below rupees twenty thousand, who were tracked, and were given help in accessing higher education;

c. a programme that sought to incentivise parents to save for their children’s higher education, by setting up a recurring deposit towards which parents contributed rupees one hundred every month, and to which VBY added a sum of rupees fifty monthly. (This initiative has been supported by McAfee); and

d. a LSP, based on WHO’s model, to develop confidence and self-esteem in children, and train them to adapt positively to their environment.

In its everyday functioning, in contrast with IP, the Inspire project (and VYB) was marked by a traditional organisational structure,

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appearing like a public sector firm. Organisational culture was made up of strict formality, bureaucracy, authoritarian relations, hierarchical division of labour, and top-down planning and management.

Different sections of the organisation (both vertical, and horizontal) appeared to work in silos, with a complete lack of transparency or accountability across the organisation as the whole. Accountability, largely, seemed to be maintained only in the form of a one-way reporting to one’s senior, about the goals and targets met.

In fact, this complete absence of transparency and accountability became vividly apparent, and created a big problem for the organisation, towards the middle of my fieldwork, when Rajesh, the project director, suddenly took seriously ill. With Rajesh away, some members of the other divisions of the larger organisation were brought to manage the project. At this point, financial embezzlement, by some managerial level staff of Inspire that had been going on for some time came to light.

This discovery led to the Inspire project being more tightly integrated with the main organisation, for the first time since its inception, and its vision was sought to be aligned more along the lines of the main organisation, based on its values of truth, non-violence, service and sacrifice. Thus, for the first time, even lower-level staff, such as the facilitators and teachers of the remedial training programmes, were introduced to the main organisation and its head, and were also made to undergo an induction programme at the organisation’s headquarters in Mysore.

Further, a new manager was appointed, and sent from the headquarters in Mysore, to look after the project in Bangalore, replacing some of the older staff. This new manager, Ranjit Kumar also sought to
bring a change to the culture of work at Inspire, insisting on greater accountability, work commitment and goal orientation on the part of the teachers and life skills facilitators, and other lower-rung staff. (This new work ethic, with emphasis on self-responsibility to reach targets, was, however, not well-appreciated by the facilitators and other staff, who had been used to the largely loose structure of Inspire).

While this was largely the nature of the work culture at Inspire, its organisational structure was also stratified by class (caste), gender, and age. As mentioned earlier, while the Director, Rajesh was a middle-aged, upper caste professional belonging to the ‘new middle class’, other managerial segment employees at VYB appeared to belong to more conservative middle class, backgrounds, some of whom had previously worked in the public sector or small private companies.

Unlike IP, the management here was also largely middle-aged. Only the lowest rung of field workers (i.e., those who conducted the programmes in schools), and the technical team in charge of producing the audio-visual aids, were in their mid-to-late twenties, and early thirties. This group was also predominantly female, from lower middle class backgrounds, many even having come from smaller towns or rural districts of Karnataka, with education in government schools and second tier colleges.

‘School managers’ who oversaw the implementation of the programme at schools, reporting on attendance, schedule completion and conduct of the field staff, formed a cadre between the field staff and managers. They were mostly male, in their early or mid-thirties, and also belonged to lower middle class, rural backgrounds, and were, mostly, Kannada-medium educated. Thus, in this organisation too, it seemed that field-based managerial posts and monitoring jobs were
reserved for male, lower middle class employees, while those who delivered the curriculum in government schools, created teaching videos, and managed data about the projects, such as its statistics and impact, (i.e., jobs which were mostly routinized) were largely dominated by young, lower middle class women.

Similarly, the life skills facilitators, who were among the highest qualified members of the organisation (with a masters training in psychology), came from small towns, and rural or government, Kannada-medium colleges, and occupied one of the lowest rungs in the organisation. Despite being trained in a ‘modern’ discipline such as Psychology, their exposure was extremely limited, and they had, in fact, no knowledge of LSE itself, before joining VYB.

The Inspire project, observed in Bangalore, was conducted for high school students, and used an in-school model, wherein teaching assistants (with Bachelor of Education degrees) and life skills facilitators were assigned full-time to a particular school, and conducted their classes during the regular school day. That is, the life skills (and academic tutoring) classes, for each class of the school, was scheduled into the regular time-table of the school itself.

Thus, the teaching assistants and life skills facilitators came to be seen as regular staff members of the school, and were also expected by the school to participate in its various daily routines (from regular classroom teaching and examination invigilation, to disciplining children, participating in events such as sports day and Teachers’ Day, Saraswati puja, and other such functions celebrated in school). Students,

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27 I use the term ‘modern’ to describe the discipline of Psychology, not only due to its late origins as an academic discipline, in the 19th century, but also to refer to the post-enlightenment principles of individual autonomy and rationality, upon which it is based.
too, oriented to the VYB staff as they did to regular school teachers, paying equal respect and importance to their authority, and knowledge. Similarly, the facilitators and teaching assistants from VYB, also took their roles as teachers within these schools seriously, involving themselves in the day-to-day affairs of the school, while simultaneously respecting and upholding the implicit hierarchy between them and the regular teachers, who held a higher status within the school, because of the nature of their appointments and years of experience.

The LSP was planned as a three-year intervention, to be carried out over the entire academic year, with a specific set of skills planned to be taught for each year. Thus, in the first year (eighth standard), children were taught skills of emotional management, self-awareness, empathy, concentration, reading and sequencing. An additional, unique component of the VYB LSP was the teaching of basic academic concepts in the first year (i.e., letters, numbers, strengthening basic mathematics operations, Kannada letters, and so on).

In the second year (ninth standard) children were introduced to cognitive skills such as critical and creative thinking, problem solving, stress management, time management, study habits and handling failure. In the final year (tenth standard), the focus was on exam preparation, peer pressure, goal setting and decision making, accepting the self, and preparing for the transition to college.

Thus planned, over 60 hours of training were assured to each child. Sessions used stories, and topics for group discussions around the above-mentioned skill areas, and when games were used, they were mainly to develop skills of attention and concentration.

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28 Pavan Raghunath (personal communication, February 8, 2012)
What appeared to be most prominent about VYB’s LSP was how it was understood, within the organisation, as an add-on programme, meant to supplement the academic learning programme. As a result this component of the programme had also been outsourced (before the beginning of my fieldwork in 2011) to a private psychological consultancy firm.

Even during the period of my field work, what could largely be observed was that the LSP was mostly managed and organised by the facilitators themselves, many of whom were fresh graduates with a cursory understanding of the subject, and little experience with children. Thus, with this inadequate training, what became another prominent feature of the programme was the excessive ‘psychologisation’ of students by these novice facilitators; and the use of inappropriate psychological terminologies and techniques to address behaviour.

To give just a few examples of this, terms such as ‘ADHD’, were used to describe entire classrooms. On other occasions, senior facilitators such as Nayanika, could be heard explaining the post-intervention results they had received, on some tests of critical thinking, to the team in the following manner: stating that categories such as critical thinking must not show much improvement, she explained that too much improvement would mean that “Either you have manipulated the data, either you are God, or either you are psychotic” (personal communication, March 17, 2012). Such inappropriate usage of clinically-significant conditions (such as ADHD and psychoses), and inappropriate explanations for human behaviour, clearly showed how

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29 Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, a clinically significant condition that has specific symptoms and treatment protocols.
the facilitators had little understanding of psychological development and LSE.

With this inadequate knowledge and understanding of children’s psychological development, team meetings (called debriefs) were mainly spent discussing various psychological strategies to manage children at school, to ensure the academic goals desired by the organisations. Thus, children would be discussed as ‘cases’, and psychological explanations and labels were provided for them. There would be a discussion of the type of intervention (e.g., Cognitive behaviour therapy, Mindfulness training, Group counselling, etc.) that had to be undertaken to address these problems, without an acknowledgement of the fact that each of these methods were long-term therapeutic solutions to be undertaken by trained professionals.

With most other members of the organisation unfamiliar with these psychological practices (including those in managerial roles), this form of ‘psychologisation’ continued unchecked, throughout the period of my field work. Even those who were appointed to supervise the life skills team, such as Pavan (with a Masters in Public Governance, and experience with communication management for NGOs), and Ranjit Kumar (an engineer by training), had no experience or knowledge of the field of LSE. Thus, what was mainly seen missing, with respect to the LSP deployed by this organisation, was adequate supervision and planning of this component of the programme by the larger organisation, thus, suggesting the little importance paid to it.

As many of the facilitators pointed out to me, in personal interviews, they had been provided little training on joining the organisation, and had been directly inducted into school. They had also received little support in handling the challenges faced at school.
Nayanika, the senior facilitator, also pointed out to me she had only discovered, later (after she had started delivering classes in school) that what they were expected to do in a life skills class, was to introduce ‘behavioural reinforcement techniques’. This, she pointed out, had become known to her through independent reading (personal communication, March 29, 2012).

However, while it seemed that the organisation gave little importance to the investments that had to be made into the programme, expectations from it were high. Thus, there was a great pressure placed by the organisation, on the life skills facilitators, to meet multiple objectives: reducing student drop-out rates by identifying the ‘at-risk’ children, tracking them, and increasing their attendance and motivation for school by providing them personal counselling; improving academic results by ensuring that the basic concepts were well-laid; and taking on responsibility of ensuring tangible, measurable results, for tacit qualities such as creativity and critical thinking.

In fact, the quantification of these skills as measurable outcomes was a goal that the organisation itself was struggling with (Ranjit Kumar, personal communication, December 13, 2012). Yet, there was constant pressure on the facilitators to perform and prove themselves on these targets (since, they were seen as the specialists with psychological knowledge, who were failing in their commitments to the organisation, in bringing about behavioural change).

With their psychology backgrounds, facilitators were expected to take on the emotional burdens of the children, and handle serious problems such as suicide, domestic or sexual abuse, broken families or alcoholism, that they encountered in the schools. However, as the facilitators constantly told me, they were both untrained and unprepared
to handle these large challenges that were personally draining on them, and for which they too needed constant emotional support. Yet, this form of support and hand-holding was largely unavailable to them, both within the organisation, as well as in the form of professional counselling and mentoring services that they requested for, and that could be externally provided.

In addition to these challenges, facilitators faced other challenges at school that made it difficult for them to reach the targets set for them. For example, they had to constantly negotiate for additional classes (since their assigned periods would often be taken to complete the regular academic syllabus, or for other activities at school). Thus, completion of planned activities, such as the designated number of sessions, evaluations, etc. itself became difficult.

Thus too, there appeared to be a constant on-going conflict between the management and the facilitators at VYB, leading to a low morale and lack of esteem among the facilitators. Facilitators, were constantly pulled up within the organisation for not producing ‘tangible’ outcomes, and not taking ownership of the programme.

This orientation towards a concrete measurable outcome (such as scores on paper and pencil tests) itself was indicative of the instrumental approach in which LSE was understood within the organisation. In fact, in order to provide these results, Nayanika, the senior facilitator, who also managed the team (in the absence of a full-time team manager), constantly urged her to team to ‘revise’ the skills with the children, set up a competitive spirit in the class, which would urge the children to provide more answers, and to provide children with the right cues, on the paper-and-pencil tests. This instrumental approach was also visible from the other target that the facilitators were responsible for – such as
drop-out prevention. While facilitators were expected to make a note of children ‘at-risk’ of dropping out, at the beginning of the academic year, and for tracking these children and ensuring their retention, they noted how children they had identified would often not be the ones who dropped out at the end of the year. This resulted in a situation wherein they were always able to present a result of 100 per cent retention of children at-risk of dropping out.

Instances such as these, and the others recounted above provided examples of how VYBs LSP was poorly thought out and managed. Unlike, IP’s programme, dominated by modern practices self-making, VYB’s programme largely seemed to be treated as an unreliable and incalculable psychological intervention that could not be budgeted in economic terms. Thus too, the component seemed to receive little visibility and resources within the larger organisational set-up.

3.2.c. Media for Change Limited (MFCL)

Unlike the other two organisations, the last organisation, MFCL, was not an NGO, but a private limited firm providing different forms of media solutions within the education sector. They offered educational programmes to both children in private, elite schools (for a fee), and also free services to children in government schools.

This was also, perhaps, a reason for the restricted access they offered me to their programmes, as much of their content was copyrighted and ‘productised’ (by which I mean, sold as ‘packages’ to schools for a cost). Consequently, there was a tight regulation of the aspects of the programme that I could access.

Thus, right from the beginning, MFCL appeared to me as a ‘closed’ organisation, (unlike the other two organisations at which I had
free access to the office space, staff and programmes). This was, perhaps, best epitomised in the design of their office space itself, which was, again, stratified along the lines of occupational roles and class. Spread across three floors, the office space was designed in a manner to prevent easy accessibility to those in charge of content management, and in decision making roles.

Thus, on my first visit to the office (which was strictly ‘by appointment’ only), I encountered a small front office, on the ground floor, blocked by a tinted glass door. This space (of about fifteen feet) housed a reception desk that covered most of the area, and blocked a view of the space behind. After being made to wait in this space for a considerable time (even after having arrived on time for my appointment), I was led through a small passage, that ran by the side of the desk. Passing a set of small rooms, I was led to the back office, where my key informant, Sukumar G. (the manager of the LSPs for government schools), sat. What I could gather from this visit was that the ground floor was mainly occupied by those who worked on the more routine, clerical tasks within the organisation, such as dispatch, courier, and front desk services. In addition, the back rooms (having the least amount of visibility to those who entered the office) were occupied by the life skills team that conducted the free programmes in government schools (which, perhaps, did not use proprietary content).³⁰

On a following visit, again based on prior request and appointment with the Managing Director (MD), Aamir Raza, I was once again made to wait at the front office on the ground floor, for a considerable period of time. Finally, after my arrival was announced

³⁰I make this assumption, since unlike the programmes for elite, private schools, these programmes did not seem to be accompanied by any curricula, videos, workbooks, etc., that had been developed internally within the organisation.
through the intercom to him, I was led up to the second floor on which his office was located. The floor had a distinctively different structure, when compared with the ground floor. I was greeted by the sight of a large glass panelled office (the MD’s office), which occupied most of the floor, in front of which was an open-terrace that was used as a discussion-cum-waiting space. In between the MD’s office, and the terrace, there was a long hall that was occupied by a set of young, middle class, content development personnel and managers, who worked on MFCL’s private school programmes. What seemed most remarkable to me at that time was how this floor had been designed to allow the MD to observe every entry and exit made, and supervise every employee on the floor, who was visible through the glass walls of his office.

Thus, this structure of the organisational space itself provided clues to the tight central control, and confidentiality that formed the prime features of the organisational culture of MFCL. That the organisation’s space and activities were strictly regulated, and kept closed from outsiders, became more evident to me through the course of my field work, particularly through the interactions with various team members and their behaviour.

To give a few illustrations of what I mean by this, I present two specific cases when I was explicitly dissuaded from getting to know more about the organisation. On one occasion, having heard from one of the facilitators (during a field visit) that MFCL was having an education conference the next day, at the Indian Institute of Science campus (which was also the campus I studied on), I had decided to drop by at the event, hoping to understand more about their activities, and meet some more members. The facilitator, Vrinda, who had informed me
about this event had also told me that I could come by. However, on arriving at the venue, I was immediately intercepted by Sukumar, the manager, who informed me that I could attend the event only if the MD gave me permission. He then went up to the MD to check if I could attend the event, and only on receiving a confirmation from him, did he allow me to attend the programme.

On another occasion, following a field visit with Vrinda and her team, I had casually mentioned to Vrinda about accompanying them back to their office, to meet other members of the team. Vrinda, immediately dissuaded me from coming, stating that they would all be busy. When I persisted, stating that I had an open invitation from one of the other members, Tanya Lewis (a manager with the research, training and content development team), who had asked me to drop by her office whenever I had time, Vrinda immediately called her manager, Sukumar, and informed him of my plans. I, then, received a call from Sukumar, who also dissuaded me from coming that day, and thus I had to drop the visit.

Thus, finding little access this way, and having to work hard at obtaining permission, or information about the programme, the details gathered about the organisation and their programmes are mainly based on three meetings with the manager, Sukumar; one meeting with the research, training and content development team manager (who was in charge of the programmes provided to the private schools); two meetings with the MD, of which one took place along with his delivery team (consisting of Sukumar, another senior manager of training, and the former assistant director).

Further, it also includes observations made during three field visits with the life skills facilitators, wherein I got an opportunity to observe
them deliver the life skills classes, and also conduct interviews with some of them. (Of the three visits, one was to a private school at which MFCL was providing their paid service; and the other two were to government schools.) In addition, it also includes data from one other, unexpected encounter with the team at a government school that I had been following, as part of one of the other organisations. (Here again, I had an opportunity to observe the classes being conducted, and have a discussion about the programmes with the facilitators). Finally, it includes information got through one other event attended – the education conference mentioned above.

Apart from this, access to their curriculum and other written documents was restricted. Some information could be gathered from their websites, but mostly, information about the programme given here is as it was reported by Sukumar, with whom I was able to have the most detailed interview. However, more details, follow-ups, and clarifications that were required could not be obtained, as despite repeated phone calls and emails, he would remain unreachable.

Based on these interactions, observations, what could be gathered about MFCL’s programmes was that it was divided into four verticals:

a. An event management programme for youth and children (mainly from elite, private schools) covering schools across 85 cities and 20,000 schools in India, as well as in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal.

b. A film-based learning programme that used the impact of film to promote life-skills, values & attitudes. This was again targeted at elite, private schools, and this content and training was provided for a fee.
c. An English magazine aimed at principals and educationists focusing on educational issues, learning and school experiences. Contributors to the magazine included educational experts, principals and others successful in various walks of life. The magazine is circulated across 11,000 schools in India and has a readership of 1,50,000; and

d. Project Leap, a LSP based on the WHO model that was started in 1999. There are two sets of programmes offered under this vertical – one that catered to private schools,\(^{31}\) and the other supported by various donors, such as Akshaya Patra, Manipal Foundation, and Bangalore Electricity Supply Company Ltd (BESCOM) that catered to children from government schools.

Again, what could be observed about the organisational structure was how these different programmes were managed by individuals belonging to different classes. For example, the programmes that were offered to the private schools were managed by a group of young, ‘new middle class’ (Fernandes, 2006) individuals, with good English medium education, global exposure and conspicuous consumptive practices. They were mostly involved in content development and research.

On the other hand, those who managed the LSPs for the government schools, such as Sukumar and Vrinda, belonged to the lower middle class, came from small towns and colleges, and agricultural or petty trader households. These differences in class positions and organisational roles also translated into tacit codes for interpersonal relationships and status within the organisation. Thus, for

\(^{31}\) This component of Project Leap was mostly defunct, with this having been replaced by the film-based learning programme. Thus, for my research, I mainly focused on the LSP conducted within government schools.
example, while those who managed the government school programmes showed ‘fear’ of transgressing organisational codes, and would be afraid of taking even simple decisions, such as inviting me to the organisation, independently, the members of the other team appeared to enjoy more freedom on these matters, and also shared a more casual relationship with the MD.

However, since my interest was in LSE, I again, mainly, followed MFCL’s government school programmes. The programmes was described on their website as “Enabling children from weaker economic background to develop into responsible social beings with a sense of community and competence to respond to their personal, social and cultural needs”

This was in stark contrast with the description of the (previously operational) LSP for private schools that was said to have helped children deal positively with stress and emotions arising from our current “fragmented value system, too antiquated to suit the needs of children in the Information Age”.

A comparison of the rationales offered for the two programmes showed how, while the former had a remedial intent, and saw the child as having certain deficits, the latter was largely envisaged as a support system for the environment, which was found to be the cause of problems. Supporting this difference in the orientation of the programmes, Sukumar also pointed out that the problems among the two kinds of schools were different. He argued that while, in the private schools, the generation gap had led to the lack of transfer of values to students, in government schools, competency levels and confidence of children had to be improved. Further, he argued that LSE was required in this latter context to build a competitive spirit and improve students’
motivation towards education (personal communication, March 6, 2012).

The government school LSP, which catered to 1, 30,000 children across four states in India, was developed as part of MFCL’s Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) plan. Started as a pilot programme in 2006, with 2000 children from corporation schools, the aim was to use these life skills to increase the percentage of children scoring 90-93 per cent. Arguing that children in government schools had ‘talent’ and ‘capacity’, Sukumar pointed out that they lacked confidence, and a long-term vision about the future. Providing an example of this, he explained that the students in these schools would choose work over education, in order to buy a pair of jeans with the money earned; but they would not think about the future. Further, he argued that since their parents, too, had limited exposure, they too, only prepared these students to set their sights low, and follow along their lines. Thus, to overcome these conditions, he argued that children within these schools required LSE and counselling “to dream big”.

Sukumar also pointed out that their LSPs was focused on bringing about a process of three-stage change. Starting with developing self-esteem, it further sought to ‘develop the inner world of the child’, and finally, his/her relations to the outer world.

The programme was supposedly modelled along the lines of the WHO, with training starting from the fifth grade, and going on till the tenth grade. Students between the fifth to seventh grades formed the Junior Division, and those between the eighth to tenth grades formed the Senior Division.
In addition to the 10 life skills, the programme, according to Sukumar, also provided modules on topics such as ‘Know my rights’, and ‘Communicating with parents’. Each class received 12 sessions, of which 10 focused on the WHO-listed skills, and two were used for ‘talent development’. ‘Talent development’ referred to classes on art or public speaking that gave children an opportunity to participate in these novel activities and gain confidence. (Sukumar explained that this was a unique component of the programme for government schools, and was not included in the programmes given to private schools, since it was understood that children within these schools already had access to these opportunities).

Some sessions were also organised to develop community awareness, and leadership in children. Explaining to me that children within urban communities did not know about their neighbours and the neighbourhood, Sukumar explained that awareness campaigns and road shows were organised as part of the government school LSPs to inculcate a sense of social responsibility, and a sense of community (i.e., to promote a sense of ‘my people, my country’) in children. (This did not form a part of their private school programmes, though). As a part of this, children were helped to identify topics relevant to their communities – for example, topics such as cleanliness, for the Muslim community of D.J.Halli; or, smoking for children from Jogupalya, since they were influenced by the IT companies nearby, according to him.

As part of the leadership programme, children were encouraged to take up community initiatives, such as taking care of cleanliness in the

32 This stereotype about a lack of cleanliness among the Muslim community was given by Sukumar.
neighbourhood. Leadership roles were encouraged by encouraging ‘good’ students to help ‘dull’ students with their work.

In addition to these various components of the programme, Sukumar also pointed out that counselling support was provided to children for issues related to marriage, love, alcoholic parents, support for education and so on. MFCL set-up ‘help centres’ in schools (avoiding the term ‘counselling’, as it had a negative connotation), to develop self-esteem and career awareness in students. Workshop for principals and teachers were also organised, in order to give ‘tips’ and teach them life skills.

Classes were conducted fortnightly. Unlike the other two organisations, these classes were neither pre-scheduled (through inclusion into the school time-table), nor conducted as regular after-school sessions. Instead, MFCL contacted the various schools that they worked with, once in 15 days, and would be given one class in between the rest of the school day. (This meant that sometime, other regular classes would be disrupted, as was observed at one school, AGS, where I unexpectedly encountered the MFCL facilitators, while I was attending the programme by VYB).

According to Sukumar, sessions were planned after an initial survey of the school, since it was understood that the requirements might be different among the different populations of students. The assessment was based on inputs from students, teachers, and ‘experts’, as well as by taking into account the education department’s needs.

Modules were prepared in-house, and then shared with experts. The format used for training was supposed to include group discussions, theatre, role play, brain storming, use of stories and live examples.
However, within the sessions that I had a chance to attend, this could not be seen. Programmes mainly took on a didactic approach. While MFCL was reluctant to share their curriculum, observations of classes across three schools, by three different facilitators, all seemed to show the same thing: the programme, mostly, seemed to be more explicitly about disciplining children in a fashion very similar to the government school. Much of the sessions observed were spent on pointing out children’s unruly behaviours, reprimanding them, advising them; chiding them, and correcting their behaviours, thus reproducing the mainstream disciplining practices of the school themselves. Activities such as games, when they were used, appeared to be incidental to the main task of advising and reprimanding children for their conduct. Other activities such as stories were used to convey specific messages about duty and responsibility.

Further, the classes appeared to begin and end with a kind of drill, with facilitators insisting that the children undertake a particular kind of clapping to indicate the opening and closing of a session. (This was taken very seriously by the facilitators, and children were strongly reprimanded for failing to remember this, or for asynchronous performance). Classes also ended with children being made to recite a list of self-affirmations about behaviour and duties that were associated to the 10 life skills (e.g., being polite, showing care and concern for others, and accepting responsibility for oneself and one’s goals) in the form of an oath.33

Thus, observing these practices, it seemed that the programme had a strong flavour of other kinds of disciplinarian training (such as that of

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33 The full list of self-affirmations about behaviour that children were made to recite is presented in the appendix 4.
a religious or military order) that worked upon individuals through shared routines, symbolic performances (such as oath-taking) and codes, in order to discipline them according to its ideology.

Training to life skills facilitators was supposedly provided using a cascade ‘trainer the trainer’ model. Life skills facilitators, who already had a master’s degree in Social Work or Psychology, were further provided need-based training, and an annual three-day training at which they interacted with experts and master trainers. (While, Sukumar gave me this information, from the facilitators I got to know that the annual training was, mostly, only conducted by the MD, Aamir Raza, who is reputed to be a powerful motivational speaker, and another member of the advisory team of the organisation). The facilitators were also supposedly monitored and evaluated closely, through weekly reports, monthly reports, appraisals, through observations within classrooms, and through demonstrations classes that they were asked to provide on certain new topics (again providing a sense of the strong culture of control within the organisation).

Put together, the primary impression that I was able to obtain about the LSPs for government schools was of how it was differently positioned when compared with the programmes offered to the private schools. While an observation at a session at a private school in Bangalore, also, revealed how the main focus of the programme appeared to be one of developing socially desirable behaviours (e.g., listening to one’s parents, appreciating their contributions and sacrifices, learning to be disciplined from them), what was specific to the programmes for government schools was how these children and their communities were constructed as socially irresponsible, and behaviourally deficient. Thus, both at the conceptual level of planning
and designing programmes, as well as at the practical level of classroom sessions, there was a constant articulation of the lack of discipline, culture, cleanliness and responsibility in them. It, then, appeared to be seeking to train children to be ‘disciplined’ as desired by the middle class.

Having presented an in depth description of the field, particularly, with the intention of laying out the cultural contexts and values that influenced the programmes, I now turn, in the next few chapters, to a discussion of certain empirical observations made on field. Presenting these, I attempt to theorise LSE as a socially-situated practice, and explain its impact on the local contexts of the schools.