

Family income and school outcomes: an innovative approach to equity

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Summary

In India, the school where children pursue their education is determined by parents' income. This means that children from wealthy families study together in private schools, while children from lower income families study in other schools. Section 12 (1) (c) of The Right to Education Act (2009) mandates every private school to admit 25 percent of children from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. The larger vision for the clause is to increase equity in society. This clause led to an uproar among parents and school administrators who claim that the admission of poor children will negatively affect the quality of education. This paper studies the validity of this claim, and finds that these worries are not substantiated by current academic research. Yet, creating social equity through school education will require a conscious effort from all stakeholders involved.

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Policy Recommendations

Based on our findings some of the recommendations we believe will enhance the impact of section 12 (1) (c) of RTE are:

- State governments need to pass the necessary statutes soon;
- Schools need to make a special effort to ensure that students feel included in their new environment;
- Communities will need to make an effort to integrate families of students from diverse backgrounds.



I. Introduction

The causal link between providing good quality education and achieving social and economic development has long been established. Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) of the United Nations, reiterate, "Quality education is the foundation to improving people's lives and sustainable development." In order to achieve this, goal 4.1 of the SDG aims to "ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes." In India, access to good quality education has traditionally been determined by the economic status of the parents. Schools with better infrastructure and learning outcomes tend to be more expensive, and, hence, accessible to children from wealthy families only. Public schools, which are accessible to everybody, have been deteriorating (Tooley2005), leading to a difference in the quality of education received by students because of the incomes of their parents.

To bridge the gap in the access to and quality of education, the Right to Education Act (RTE) was enacted in 2009. Under the provisions of the Act, every child is entitled to "free and compulsory education till the completion of elementary school." The Act sets norms and standards for teacher-pupil ratios, infrastructure in schools, working days and curriculum to be taught. To address the issue of social inclusion, Section 12(1)(c) of the Act stipulates that 25% of the positions in every private (unaided, non-minority) school need to be reserved for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) and Socially Disadvantaged (DG) Families. Different states have defined EWS and DG differently to capture the local needs of their state. For example, Maharashtra has emphasized the need for more girl children to be covered under EWS, as it was found that families sent sons to private schools but were not willing to send their daughters. Tamil Nadu has included HIV positive children, a group which has been severely stigmatized under EWS. Most states have included physically challenged children under their definition of DG (State of the Nation RTE, 2013). The cost of sending all these EWS and DG children

to private schools will be borne by the government. This includes tuition fees, text books and school uniforms

The provisions of this clause were criticized on many grounds. People have claimed that these provisions charge the government with additional financial burdens, together with the costs of running public schools. Many private school administrators and parents felt that, by integrating students of diverse backgrounds, the quality of the school would deteriorate. They felt that children from poor families would have a negative impact academically and behaviorally on the existing students in private schools. One school principal issued a circular urging parents to protest against the clause stating "admitting poor students may bring down discipline and the quality of education and also demoralize teachers" (Times of India 26th April 2011). The society of un-aided private schools in Rajasthan even moved the courts against this provision, claiming the clause was unconstitutional. (The Hindu, March 22nd 2010)

Even though the Act was passed in 2009, the implementation of the Act across states has been dismal. According to The State of the Nation: RTE section 12 (1) (c) report of the District Information System on Education, GOI, no state in India has provided complete information on the process of implementing the RTE 12 (1) (c) . A majority of states have classified what they mean by EWS students but most of them have not calculated the amounts they would spend on tuition and other amenities.

Opposition to implementing this clause has been on two major questions. 1) Is the quality of teaching in private schools better than the quality of teaching in public schools? 2) Does including children from different socio-economic backgrounds in the same classroom have a negative impact on students? These questions are addressed in this memo.

II. Types of Schools

Accredited schools are classified based on the type of management and source of funding by the National Council for Education Research and Training, Government of India into: 1. Government

schools which include schools run by the Central Government, State Government; and 2. Local Body (Local Government) schools; 3. Government-aided private schools; and 3. Unaided schools or private schools. Government schools are public schools and funded completely by the government. Teachers are employees of the government and chosen through a strict criteria of selection. Government aided schools, as the name suggests, get part of their funding from the government. They need to maintain certain prescribed standards relating to infrastructure, the student-teacher ratio, and the qualifications of the teacher to ensure that they receive this funding. Unaided schools are private schools which receive no funding from the government. Apart from these accredited schools, there are thousands of unaccredited private schools in India, which are not under the purview of any regulator. This means that in those cases education will not be recognized and considered valid for higher education. The exact number of these schools is not known.

Over the years, despite public schools being free and providing mid-day meals, books and uniforms for free, there has been a steady rise in the number of private schools and a decline in the number of public schools. This rise is clearly visible in Figure (1). The number of public schools as a percentage of total schools has decreased from about 80 percent in 2006-07 to 75 percent in 2014-15. In the same period, the number of private schools has gone up from 19 percent to 22 percent. Studies such as the ASER report 2014 found that even in rural India 31% of children attended private schools. The fall in enrollment in public schools has forced state governments to close some of them down. Rajasthan has closed 17,000 public schools, Maharashtra has closed 14,000 and Odisha has closed 195 low-enrolment-primary-schools because parents are moving their children to private schools (The Hindu on October 28, 2014). The New Indian Express on 1st April 2016 reported that 573 public high schools are going to be closed in Odisha. The exodus of students is not entirely into private schools with high-quality facilities and learning environments. The type of

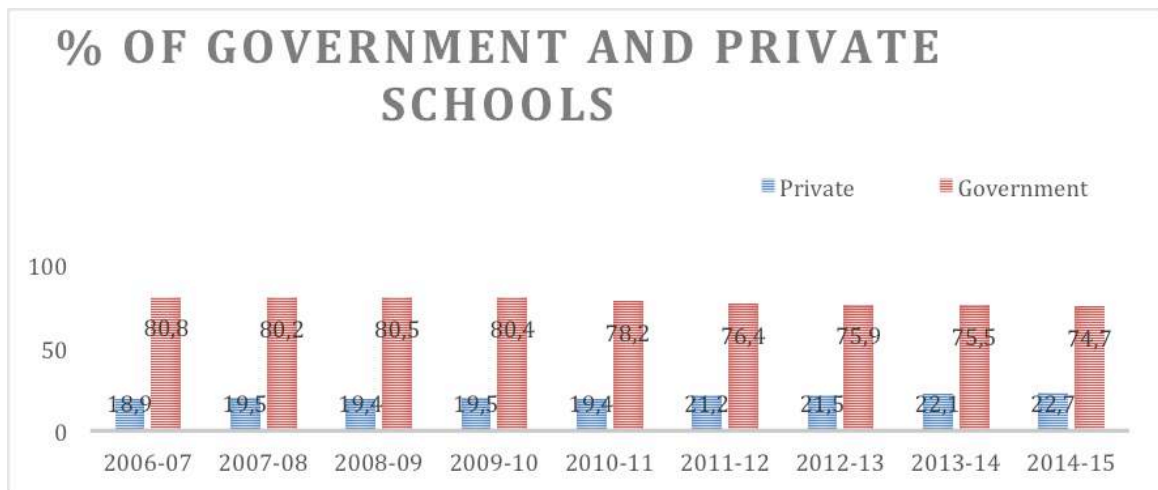
private schools which have mushroomed across India can best be described as 'Budget' private schools. These schools are run from small campuses, with tiny classrooms. Moreover, they employ underqualified teachers. As opposed to public schools that are free, the average fee is less than \$10 a month, plus the costs that need to be borne by the student.

The reason for the preference for private schools among parents is the belief that private institutions provide better quality education than government-run institutions. There has been a steady deterioration in the quality of public schools (Tooley 2005). Absenteeism among teachers in public schools is very high, Kremer et al (2005) found that 25% of teachers were absent when they went on a surprise visit to public schools. Here, students spend the entire day in school without learning anything (The Hindu 28th October 2014). Many private schools teach additional subjects like English, Hindi and Social Sciences along with the main curriculum. Private schools also cater to the special needs of minority groups; for instance, in Hyderabad, many Muslim families speak Urdu at home, but the medium of instruction in Government schools is Telugu. Hence, Muslim parents may prefer to send their children to private schools that teach Urdu (Ross, 2009).

(Figure 1)

Source: National University of Education Planning and Administration: School Education in India, Flash Statistics,(Sep 2014)

Test scores of students from private schools are higher than those of students from public institutions. However, external factors, such as the socio-economic background of families, influence this difference significantly (Desai. S et al 2008). Educated parents are able to provide their children with additional resources after school, which allow these students to perform better. If this can work as a partial explanation of the difference between the learning outcomes of conventional private and public schools, it does not account for the difference in learning outcomes between students in budget private schools and public schools.



Source: National University of Education Planning and Administration:
School Education in India, Flash Statistics,(Sep 2014)

Muralidharan et al. (2015) in their study on budget private schools found that the test scores of children in private schools were not statistically different from the test scores of students in public schools. The difference was the time they spent teaching these subjects. "Private schools spend significantly less instructional time on Telugu (40% less) and Math (32% less) than public schools, and instead spend more time on English, Science and Social studies (EVS). They also teach a third language, Hindi, which is not taught in public primary schools".

Private schools were able to achieve the same results by spending less time teaching each subject, which allowed them to include more subjects in the curriculum including Hindi. Private schools function in a competitive environment and are dependent on keeping parents happy for their spending. In order to convince parents, private schools may be friendlier and more welcoming.

All things considered, it appears that, for academic and non-academic reasons, parents prefer private schools to public schools. However, a long-term solution must improve the public schooling system first. In order to avoid damaging a generation of students, the Section 12 (1) (c) of the RTE Act provides a convenient solution.

III. Why Integration is Possible

Being allowed to study in a good quality school will provide disadvantaged students a chance to gain an excellent education and reap the benefits accruing from it. How will a scheme like this impact the students who are already studying in private schools? Will children from schools with lower standards have a negative impact on the learning outcomes of current students in private school? Will children from poorer families have behavioral problems that will hamper the learning of other students? In India, research on this subject is lacking, maybe due to the fact that the RTE has been passed relatively recently. Everything revolves around a RCT and a sociological experiment, which came together with a policy of the Delhi state government. Studies from the US have also been selected. They provide us with a sufficiently strong parallel between the two contexts. With all the available evidence in mind, one can optimistically claim that the concerns are not validated by empirical findings.

(A) Murlidharan et al. (2015) conducted a Randomized Control Trial in the state of Andhra Pradesh, where, through a system of lotteries, children from Government schools were provided vouchers to study in private schools. The randomization was done in two stages. In the first stage, villages that would participate in the program were chosen; in the second phase, the

children who got the vouchers were randomized. This provided two crucial comparison groups: one was students who were already studying in private schools without vouchers against children studying in private schools where vouchers were introduced. The second group were children from Government schools who received vouchers and the ones who were not provided vouchers. The study found “no evidence of spillovers on public school students who do not apply for the voucher, or on private school students, suggesting that the positive effects on voucher winners did not come at the expense of other students.” Therefore, there was no negative impact on the learning outcomes of the existing students within private schools when voucher students were included in their classrooms.

(B) The United States has a similar situation in its education system: the educational outcomes of students in high-poverty schools are worse than outcomes of students in low-poverty schools. Schools in which 75% or more of the students are eligible for the free lunch program are classified as high-poverty, as free lunches are provided to poor students. Educational outcomes such as test scores and graduation rates are much lower in high-poverty schools compared to low-poverty schools (Condition of Education 2010). In this vein, two examples encourage a comparison between the two countries. The Metropolitan Council for Education Opportunities (Metco) program in Boston allowed poor black students from the inner city of Boston to study in good quality schools in the suburbs. In their study of the Metco program, Angrist et al. (2004) found that inclusion of students from diverse backgrounds had no negative effect on the existing students. Their outcomes remained similar to the time before the classrooms were made inclusive. Moreover, in the state of Missouri, because of the poor standard of education, the Normandy district high school lost its accreditation and students from this school were given the option to study in another institution. The High school in Normandy consisted of mainly poor black students. The school chosen for these students was in a district more than 30 minutes away from Normandy – a

middle class, predominantly white school. In the year of integration, the outcomes showed that students from the poor school did very well. At the same time, there was no negative impact on the learning outcome of the existing students. Studies from India and the US demonstrate that having children of diverse backgrounds does not have a negative impact on the learning abilities of students. In some situations, it may have a positive impact on included students.

(C) Quality is not just about learning abilities. It includes behavior and socialization opportunities for students. A legal requirement in Delhi pushes elite private schools to admit 20% students from poor families through a random lottery process. This allowed Gautam Rao (2013), an economist, to study the behavioral influence of this experiment on students. In these schools, the average median income of parents of children was in the top quintile. The admitted students came from families with incomes in the bottom quintile. During his study, he conducted social experiments to assess the behavior of fee-paying students. His results found that fee-paying children tended to be more pro-social: they were willing to help their classmates more when they had children from poor families in their class. The findings of this study are very important. Students in these schools came from families whose income was significantly higher than the median income of the country. Yet, they were able to build friendships with students from much poorer families. In the budget private schools, where the income differences are not so stark, we can speculate, that inclusion may be easier.

IV. How it can work

First, it is fundamental to ensure that regulation related to the RTE clause 12 (1) (c) is formulated and passed as early as possible in every state. Clear deliberation on the structure of fees and the costs to cover is imperative. Moreover, State Govt. has to work closely with private schools in order to ensure that they adhere to the provisions of the clause.

It is also crucial that the government reimburse private schools regularly and on time.

At the recent conference on School Choice Participation organized by CCS in Delhi, one of the main complaints by private school and Government-aided schools was that the government did not release funds on time. The delay in funds could sometimes be a full year, which, in turn, delays payments to teachers and staff. Such issues demotivate teachers and school administration, which may result in the schools finding ways of avoiding taking poor students.

Advocacy is also a fundamental step towards more equality in schools. Awareness of the provisions of clause 12 (1) (c) needs to

be widespread. There need to be larger campaigns by the Govt. A positive step in this direction has been made by civil society organizations, such as Indus Action¹. It raises awareness about the provision of the clause 12 (1) (c), enrolment of poor and disadvantaged students into private schools in Delhi. In the post-enrollment phase, it also provides support during and after summer through its inclusion program.

Integration will not always be easy. There will be many issues of friction between students from such diverse backgrounds. A conscious effort needs to be made in order to build mutual understanding amongst students. Teachers in private schools will need to be sensitive to the needs of different students and will consciously have to make sure that all students are comfortable. Special training on socially and culturally responsive teaching will need to be provided for teachers. Students will need to be taught how to interact with their peers and be sensitive to each other's needs.²

Families play an important role in how children are brought up when children from diverse backgrounds start studying together, families will also need to interact with each other. Children emulate the behaviour of adults, if they get a chance to observe adults from different backgrounds interact with each other on equal footing, they will do the same. Getting adults to

socialize with adults from different backgrounds is an extremely difficult task. Parent Teacher Associations could provide the platform for such interactions hence parents of children from poorer families should be encouraged to join and participate in them.

Conclusion

The RTE Act brings many positive design changes to the school education system in India, in terms of quality, curriculum, and, through section 12(1) (c), it aims to create more equity in society. Section 12 (1) (c) mandates that every private unaided school needs to ensure that 25% of their students come from EWS and DG. This clause was also one of the most opposed sections of the Act. Parents and school administrators believed that students from EWS and DG families will dilute the quality of education in private schools and lead to behavioral problems among students.

When we look at the research done on this issue in both India and the U.S, we find that this is not necessarily the case. Having children from different backgrounds, research shows, makes students more socially sensitive. Integration of students from different backgrounds in a school is not an easy task, it requires a concentrated effort from all the parties involved, including the parents and the state governments.

Each state has the autonomy to incorporate aspects within their notifications that are relevant for their state. Most states have defined EWS and DG families to reflect their local conditions. On most regulations concerning the section within the Act, the implementation of the state governments has been poor. For the section to yield results, it is extremely necessary to correct this aspect and have the necessary regulations in place.

The process may be slow and may take a long time, but the policy itself should not be abandoned. Long-term benefits of the policy may not be apparent in the short term, but the benefits of the policy will be long-lasting.

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¹ <http://www.indusaction.org/>

² An initiative doing this is Patang, run by the Center for Civil Society (CCS). Patang aims to include students from economically backward backgrounds into private schools.<http://ccs.in/patang>

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