

# Need for Systemic Reform in Education: Ensuring Poorest Children Are Not Short-changed!

While India has seen a rapid expansion in both elementary and secondary education, there has indisputably been a shift towards private schooling with a large number of families choosing this in preference to government schools. The recent growth in the private sector has resulted in boys and children from wealthier and more socially advantaged households being more likely than others to attend private schools. Young Lives research highlights serious equity concerns with children having very different opportunities because of their household wealth level, location or gender, with government schools often the only option available to the poorest households. We also see that, within the Young Lives sample, children in private schools seem to perform better academically, despite better-qualified and more experienced teachers working in government schools. In this context it is critical that education policies at macro and micro level serve to promote inclusion, not exclusion, for children from lower castes or poorer areas. For education to become an equaliser, systemic reform is required to safeguard against the stratification of schools. Regulatory mechanisms must be introduced at the state, district and sub-district levels, to promote school effectiveness. There is a strong case for an autonomous department of Standards and Evaluation to be set up and quality standards developed and implemented across all schools. A 'common school system' may be the best way forward to ensure that the education system is able to promote equity and social justice.

India boasts one of the largest school systems in the world with 1,362,324 elementary schools and 195,000 secondary and higher secondary sections (DISE 2011). The Government of India has stated its commitment to provide free and compulsory education at the elementary level (Grades 1 to 8) with the introduction of the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 (RTE Act) and the setting up of Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), to achieve increased and more equitable access to secondary education.

India has made tremendous strides and can now boast almost universal enrolment at elementary levels with a Net Enrolment Ratio of 99.8% at primary level (Grades 1 to 5) and 61.8% at upper primary level (Grades 6 to 8) (DISE 2010-11). Enrolment in secondary education is much lower, and the Gross Enrolment Ratio in 2007-08 was 58.2% for Grades 9 and 10 and 33.4% for Grades 11 and 12 (Planning Commission 2012).

At the same time, there is indisputably a growing shift towards private schooling, not only in urban areas but also across rural India, where low-fee private schools have mushroomed, carrying the fashionable tag of 'English-medium'. National statistics reveal that in 2010-11, 67.4% of children were enrolled in government or public schools and just over 30% students attended schools that were private, aided or unaided (DISE 2010-11).

It has increasingly become clear that Education For All (EFA) Goals cannot be achieved merely by achieving universal enrolment. Quality education must become an inherent right for every child irrespective of gender, caste, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic background, ability, or location. Trends in Andhra Pradesh mirror the national picture of a shift towards the private sector. This policy brief draws on data

from Young Lives India which has been following the lives of 3,000 children in Andhra Pradesh since 2002. A household survey of all 3,000 children and their families combined with a school survey conducted in 2010-11 enable us to understand whether there are hidden inequities in enrolment as well as achievement levels across public and private schools.

## Key facts:

- Data from the Young Lives household survey highlighted that private school enrolment of the Younger Cohort children (aged 8 in 2009) was double (44%) that of the Older Cohort children at the same age in 2002 (23%).
- Comparing the Older Cohort children at age 8 (in 2002) with the Younger Cohort (age 8 in 2009) shows that private school enrolment has gone up for every group – boys, girls, rural or urban children, as well as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.
- However, inequalities prevail with 70% of more advantaged Other Castes children enrolled in private schools.
- Gender gaps are widening: in 2002 boys were 4 percentage points more likely to be enrolled in private schools than girls but this had increased to 13 percentage points by 2009.
- Between 2006 and 2009 the number of children in private primary schools increased by 8% and by 7% for older children in private secondary schools.

## Increasing disparities in school choice

Parents' aspirations, dissatisfaction with the quality of education in government schools and the popular 'English-medium' label attached to low-fee private schools have resulted in private school enrolment increasing across all groups. However, serious equity concerns exist, with enrolment far from evenly distributed and gender-based school choices becoming more prevalent (Woodhead et al. 2013). By 2009-10, socially advantaged groups were more than three times as likely to be attending private schools as disadvantaged groups: 70% of more socially advantaged (Other Caste) 8-year-olds were enrolled in private schools, compared to 21% Scheduled Caste, 29% Scheduled Tribe and 44% Backward Class children.

**Table 1. Changes in enrolment and private schooling between 2002 and 2009 (%)**

	Children age 8 in 2002		Children age 8 in 2009	
	Enrolled in school	Of whom, in private school	Enrolled in school	Of whom, in private school
Boys	98.2	25.1	99.2	50.4
Girls	97.0	21.4	99.1	37.1
Urban	97.9	62.3	99.8	80.3
Rural	97.5	10.6	98.9	31.3
Scheduled Castes	98.6	11.6	98.9	29.3
Scheduled Tribes	95.3	12.7	98.4	21.7
Backward Classes	97.6	20.4	99.2	44.2
Other Castes	97.7	45.7	99.8	70.4
Total	97.6	23.2	99.2	44.1

Source: Young Lives Round 1 (Older Cohort children) and Round 3 (Younger Cohort)

These differences persist in secondary school. At age 15 in 2009, 77% of the older cohort of Young Lives children were still in school, a quarter of them (24.5%) in private schools.

**Location:** The phenomenon of parents opting for private schools is seen across both rural and urban areas in Andhra Pradesh. By 2009-10, a third of children in rural areas aged 8, and a quarter of those aged 15, were attending private schools. In urban areas this reaches 80% of primary school children and about two-thirds at secondary level.

**Gender:** There is clearly a boy-bias in private school enrolment and this inequality has grown. In 2002 25.1% of boys and 21.4% of girls aged 8 were attending private schools. In 2009-10 this had changed to 50.4% of boys and 37.1% of girls, showing an increased disparity of 13 percentage points.

**Household wealth:** Private school enrolment is higher for children from better-off households for both the age groups. In 2009-10, 86% of the 8-year-olds and 71% of the 15-year-olds from better-off households were attending private schools, five times more than children from the poorest households at primary level and ten times more at secondary level (Table 2).

## The cost of schooling

While fees vary across private schools, books, transport, uniform and tuition all form another major expense. Analysis of the average household expenditure on school and tuition fees highlights the disparities that exist even within the private or public school categories. Families of children enrolled in private primary schools paid an average of Rs3,357 per annum for school and extra tuition compared to only Rs87 per annum spent by families of children in government schools.

The difference in expenses becomes even more significant for older children private secondary schools, with an average expenditure of Rs6,902 per annum compared to Rs375 in public schools (Singh and Bangay 2013 forthcoming). The proportion of yearly per capita household expenditure (food and non-food) on education for families who send their children to private schools was 7.5%, compared with 2.7% of total household expenditure for those sending their children to public schools (Singh and Bangay 2013 forthcoming). In short, households opting for private schooling are spending two-and-a-half times more on education than those choosing government schools. The added financial burden and its direct impact on household expenses is evident. This huge differential in education expenditure between households opting for government or private schools may well be one of the reasons that 17.6% of the Younger Cohort children had already changed school once or more since Grade 1, often moving from one private school to another. In urban areas this is even more pronounced, with 81% of the students changing one private school for another by the age of 8.

### Understanding the impact of school choice on households

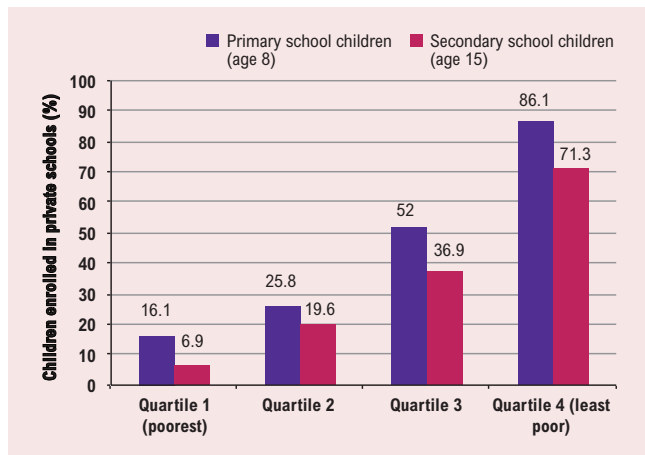
Supraja, a 10-year-old Other Caste girl from an urban area is in Grade 5 of a private school and has already changed school three times. An only child, her father is a stonemason and her mother is a housewife. They live in a house belonging to Supraja's grandmother. When her mother was young, she attended a government school, but she did not pass the Grade 10 exam. She says:

*"People are not worried about their economic background or financial position now. They are only bothered about their children's education. They are prepared to do anything for the sake of their children's education. They want to give their children whatever they weren't able to have in their own childhood, and they want their children to achieve the position they couldn't. That is what parents think now – and it's what we think too."*

Supraja's mother pays Rs15,000 each year for her daughter's school fees and expects that this will increase to Rs20,000 this year:

*"Somehow we beg and borrow and manage to pay her school fees on time, and later on we try to sort out the finances... this is a great burden. We don't have any savings as we spend everything on her education. Strictly speaking, even people like us can't afford these schools, and now we have to send our child to even lower-rank schools."*

**Figure 1. Percentage of children attending private schools (by household wealth, 2009)**



## The private school premium

When we asked all 3,000 Young Lives children and their parents about their schools, we saw that not only parents but also children believe that government schools are not providing a 'quality' education, and this explains why some families opt for private schools. However, there is some evidence that this 'private school premium' is not just based on perception alone. To explore this further, Young Lives carried out a school survey of 227 schools attended by the children at age 9 to 10. This shows that children in private schools had better mathematics scores than children in government schools, which is perhaps not surprising since the private system caters to more advantaged children. However, we continue to see this difference in maths scores when we control for children's previous achievement and several household-, child-, class- and school-level characteristics (Singh and Sarkar 2012).

If this relationship holds up this is a matter of serious concern, since the government teachers were better qualified, had on average three years' more experience than private school teachers, displayed better mathematical subject knowledge and were paid four times the salary drawn by private school teachers, yet have poorer student outcomes in mathematics. We also found that only 40% of teachers in government schools had regularly corrected the exercises they gave to the children, compared with 82% of teachers in private schools, higher absenteeism in government schools with no repercussions for the teacher, and only half of government teachers displaying a positive belief in their school – all of which highlights the current situation of governance and practices in government schools. Furthermore, 82% of the government education officers interviewed held the view that they do not have sufficient support staff to discharge their duties regularly, including school inspections.

We also found that secondary level children in private schools (age 15) significantly outperformed children in government schools in Mathematics, receptive vocabulary and tests in Telugu. Children in private schools also made much more positive assessments of their school experience (Singh 2011). In the Board exams, there was a 6.4 percentage point difference in average scores of children in favour of private schools.

## Policy implications

Delivering the quality education required under Education For All commitments and managing the equity implications of a rapidly growing private school system raises some important challenges:

- Raising quality across the board – including ensuring common quality standards within government and private schools.
- Greater accountability mechanisms enabling government schools to meet the aspirations and educational needs of the children and their families that they are meant to serve.
- Ensuring different children are not segregated by sector depending on their location, ethnicity, gender or family wealth, so that education fulfils the potential to become equalising, not reinforcing, of existing divisions.

Increasingly commentators argue that the government school system is failing to impart even minimum basic education to students. We find some evidence in the Young Lives data that children in private schools may be performing better than children in government schools in Andhra Pradesh, even having controlled for the background characteristics which might affect how children do. We also see evidence of increasing demand for private schools. However, private school enrolment is ridden with socio-economic, gender and caste gaps. It is also apparent that while the rapidly growing private sector is labelled 'low-fee', these costs can be very significant and a barrier for many poorer families. We also see that quality and governance standards are variable in the private sector.

A clear stratification seems to be developing of 'free schools for the poor' and 'better schools for the better-off'. If education is meant to be an equaliser, opening doors for the poorest children, social mix is relevant and it is important to remove the barriers to education they face. The government school system needs to be refreshed and reinvigorated in order to meet the challenge of the private schools that are mushrooming across the country.

Age-old challenges such as lack of accountability in the education system need to be addressed immediately and investments made for leadership development, better incentives for teachers, and a robust regulatory mechanism, including strengthening of School Management Committees. In an attempt to meet the demand for 'English-medium' education the government of Andhra Pradesh has introduced English in all public schools recently. However, it is important to ensure that teachers are equipped to teach the subject effectively and the huge deficit in teacher availability in public schools is met.

It is the responsibility of the state to give every child access to free quality education. Increasingly, it seems, government schools are catering only for the 'poorest of the poor', with over 70% of the Young Lives students attending government schools belonging to the poorest households. Currently the numbers of children per school in government school is much smaller than in the private sector, particularly in rural areas. With the RTE Act's reservation of 25% of private school places for the economically weaker sectors, it is quite conceivable that government school numbers will shrink even further to a

point where some schools, particularly in rural areas, become unsustainable. One option for how to deliver good education for all children may be the 'common school system' (proposed by the Kothari Commission in 1964-66), based on quality benchmarks and regulatory frameworks cutting across all types of schools. This would minimise stratification of schools and ensure that all schools adhere to minimum standards for teaching and learning. The 'common school system' could be a means of ensuring that children are not segregated into distinct types of schools based on gender or socio-economic status.

Urgent reform is needed to address the formidable challenges which exist in management and governance, quality and equity within the school system. As pointed out in the PROBE Report (2006), government schools set the benchmark against which private schools must compete for students. Unless the government system undergoes a paradigm shift to provide quality education that translates into better learning for the poorest children, schools will slowly lose their student population to private schools. Public schools are financed by taxpayers' money and it is time that schools focussed on restoring the faith of parents and children. Building on the current provisions of School Development Plans under the RTE Act, 2010, school-based management needs to become a vehicle for ensuring every child's learning and emotional needs are catered for by involving communities and school personnel. Each school should have a School Development Plans, with key indicators for reforms set out, which should be made a public document.

Delivering these necessary changes will require investment and enhancement of the capacities of key education administrators. The education supervisory cadre at the Block, Cluster and District Education Officer level as well as the District Institutes of Education and Training must be strengthened through adequate financial and human resource provision. School leadership needs to be strengthened and institutions dedicated to leadership development must be started.

Benchmarks and regulatory mechanisms need to be developed and implemented for quality assurance – in both government and private schools. One way to achieve this would be to create an autonomous body for assessment of schools and learning levels of children in every state. This information should be in the public domain to foster greater accountability of all schools.

Equity and social justice must remain the focus of education services in a country where nearly 37% continue to live below the poverty line (Planning Commission 2009). Schooling is a key part of any long-term poverty reduction policy. The stratification of schools must be avoided at all costs, or else the poorest and most socially disadvantaged children, particularly girls, will continue to be short-changed and not be able to access to the skills they require that will enable them to escape from the poverty cycle of deprivation.

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