

RESEARCH WORK IN PROGRESS

Small Schools and Increasing Access to Education

Research Team: Dr Rashmi Diwan (NUEPA) and Dr. Nicole Blum (IOE)

Advisors to the Research: Professor Angela Little (IOE) and Professor R. Govinda (NUEPA)

Small government schools are a significant feature of the educational landscape in India. The term ‘small school’ can be defined in many ways, but common measures refer to pupil enrolment, the number of teachers and the number of classrooms. Preliminary exploration of available data reveals that almost 80% of primary schools in India have three or fewer teachers to attend to all grade levels, and more than 44% have fewer than 100 students. Although they may share these particular measurable characteristics, small schools are in fact incredibly diverse due to the very different geographical and social contexts in which they are located. As a result, they face a wide range of different issues and concerns. Urban schools located in slums, for instance, may face different issues than their rural counterparts. Similarly, schools located in agricultural communities will have different concerns to those where other kinds of labour are dominant. Small schools in the Indian context are, however, much more likely to be found in impoverished rural communities (and particularly areas populated by Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe groups) than they are in more affluent or urban areas. Indeed, the vast majority (86%) of the nation’s primary schools are located in rural areas populated by the most marginalized social groups. The present study therefore focuses on the policies and practices of small schools in rural India.

Although the presence of so many schools in rural areas may appear positive in terms of access and the quantity of available school places, teachers in most of these schools are under-trained and under-supported – a situation which poses a serious challenge to provision of quality education. For example, while schools are expected to meet the needs of the national curriculum, teachers often spend a significant amount of time on tasks other than teaching. So, in addition to the inherent difficulties of working in economically deprived areas, they may also be responsible for completing all of a school’s administrative tasks, arranging for the provision of midday meals (a policy intervention required by the government), maintaining records for attendance, periodic medical check-ups and mid-day meals, conducting household surveys for the national census, and administering preventative polio medication to each student, among other things. Unlike their counterparts in larger schools, teachers in small schools are also expected to teach more than one grade level at a time. The difficulties of multigrade classroom management – which could, it should be noted, be ameliorated with targeted training – tends to result in unmotivated teachers, a low standard of education, and high drop-out rates.

The present project will apply both qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the contemporary context of small schools in India. The research will include an extensive review of the relevant literature, quantitative analysis using educational data available from India’s District Information System for Education (DISE), and ethnographic fieldwork in rural small schools. Through these activities, the research will attempt to address elements of all four of the CREATE zones of exclusion. It will also assess the wider social and economic contexts which have led to the current situation for small schools in India, and propose policy options for improving transition, progression and completion rates.