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Low fee private schooling in India – More questions than answers? Observations from the Young Lives longitudinal research in Andhra Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to draw attention to two important, but less researched, areas regarding low fee private school provision in India. Firstly, the paper evaluates the impact of fees on household debt burden and decision-making, and secondly highlights the dynamic interplay between the private and government sub-sectors and the potential consequences this may have for educational delivery. The paper attempts to provide an overview of the historic growth, extent and performance of low fee private schools and private tutoring. Consistent with others, the paper finds that private provision is not currently accessible to the poorest and thus potentially deleterious to equity both within schools and within families. While drawing on existing research and particularly the longitudinal Young Lives data sets in Andhra Pradesh – findings are largely exploratory. The paper concludes that there is a need for further research on both household and school effects related to increasing privatisation in education. In particular there is a focus on how emerging inequalities emanating from school choice and private tuitions can be addressed. This is urgently needed to inform policy and investment decisions that maximise the contribution of both sectors and mitigate against inequality.

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1. Introduction

In the last decade, India has made dramatic progress in school enrolment. According to the Global Monitoring Report 2012, India is one of the top performers – with 18 million fewer children out of school in 2008 than in 2001 (UNESCO, 2012). Initiatives such as the governments' national programme Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the school meal programme and as of 2010 the Right to Education Act (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2013; Noronha and Srivastava, 2012) have put India on track to achieve the second Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of *enrolment* (Little, 2010) and the third MDG of *gender equity* (De, 2011; UNICEF, 2011). Despite this impressive expansion, worryingly low levels of learning are causing major concern (Chavan and Bannerji, 2012; Pritchett and Beatty, 2012). Data suggest that growing numbers of parents are turning from free government provision and sending their children to low fee private schools.[1] Estimates of the balance in provision between sub-sectors and speed of change vary. While official data suggest some 20% of enrolment in private schools (NUEPA, 2011), on the other hand ASER reports that since 2009, private school enrolment in rural areas has been rising at an annual rate of about 10%. ASER (2012) projects that if this trend continues, India will have 50% children in rural areas enrolled in private schools by 2018. While in a country as large and diverse as India it would be expected that the scale, speed and nature of changes in provision between government and private will vary both within and across states – this paper is premised on an acceptance that substantive movement of students into private schooling is occurring. On this basis this paper sets out to review two questions. Firstly, what are the implications of the movement of children to private schools on household expenditure, debt burden and family decision-making? Secondly, what may be the effects

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[1] These are different from the elite private schools and are mainly located in slums and small habitations. The fee can be in the range of Rs 50 per month (less than $1) to Rs 600/- per month ($10 approximately).

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and implications of this migration on how government schools operate? In doing this we draw on evidence and in particular the data and work of the Young Lives[2] team in Andhra Pradesh (now bifurcated into two states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh), India. Our findings suggest that a better understanding of household expenditure on education and the dynamic between private and government schooling (i.e. the influence they have on each other) to be critically important for future policy development. In writing this paper, we caution that we are working with a limited evidence base. As such the paper concludes with some recommendations for future research and how Young Lives seeks to pursue this critical but unexplored area in the near future.

2. Part one: Private schooling in India – the existing literature

2.1. Private schooling: definition, reporting and distribution

The challenge of defining what constitutes a private school (as opposed to a non-state school) has till date depended on rather blurred descriptors. Typically these have relied on locating schools within a matrix defined by two common characteristics namely the degree of government influence/control and financing approach (Bangay, 2007). While it is clear that there is diversity in the nature of 'private schools' in India (as elsewhere) – it is possible to apply a definitive criteria – i.e. that a private school is one that is reliant on a user fees element for its financial sustainability. In discussing low fee private schools (LFPS) in this paper we are referring to small often family run enterprises which cater for the poor and are dependent on fees for their operation (Srivastava, 2007). By official Indian categorisation these equate to private, unaided, and in some cases unrecognised schools.

Indian official statistics delineate three main types of schools: government, government aided and private unaided schools (either recognised or unrecognised). Official government statistics report that 20% of all schools are under private management (DISE, 2010–11), while the latest national household survey data report that 7% of India's students attend private aided and 20% private unaided at primary level (grades I–V/ages 6–11), and 12% and 17% respectively at elementary level (grades VI–VIII/ages 12–14) (National Sample Survey, 2003). Government data are likely to be under-reporting the real extent of private school enrolment, for two-fold reasons. Firstly, hand government enumerators do not collect data on unrecognised private provision and this is further combined with the fact that unrecognised private school owners wish to remain 'off radar', thereby avoiding unwanted attention from rapacious officials (Tooley and Dixon, 2003). By way of illustration, Kingdon (2007) found 20% of children in rural areas attending private schools, three times higher than the official government statistics. Further, a large-scale survey of 20 Indian states revealed that 51% of all private rural primary schools were unrecognised (Muralidharan and Kremer, 2006). Notwithstanding the caveat of official figures only registering recognised private schools, official data clearly show the growth of the private sector enrolment both in absolute numbers and as a proportion of total enrolments (Figs. 1 and 2).

2.2. Learning performance

The majority of studies that have compared student-learning performance in Indian government and private schools do show a 'private school premium' even after accounting for student effects. A range of econometric techniques have been applied to correct for possible biases: by controlling for observed background characteristics of children (Muralidharan and Kremer, 2006; Wadhwa, 2009; Goyal, 2009; Goyal and Pandey, 2009; Govinda and Varghese, 1993; Kingdon, 1996; French and Kingdon, 2010; Desai et al., 2008); using lagged test scores and community fixed effects (Singh and Sarkar, 2012); by running models with village fixed effects to isolate village level confounders; through household fixed effects (e.g. French and Kingdon, 2010); through propensity score matching (Chudgar and Quin, 2012); and finally, through the use of Heckman selection models (Kingdon, 1996; Desai et al., 2008). It is however important to note that these studies only highlight relative performance – with low fee private schools frequently only being marginally better than what are often poorly performing government schools. Overall the levels of learning reached in both school types are worryingly low (ASER, 2010, 2011, 2012). The poor levels of reading are a concern (Fig. 3), while even some of India's 'high end' private schools struggle to establish foundational mathematical concepts and are dominated by rote learning (Education Initiatives, 2006, 2010).

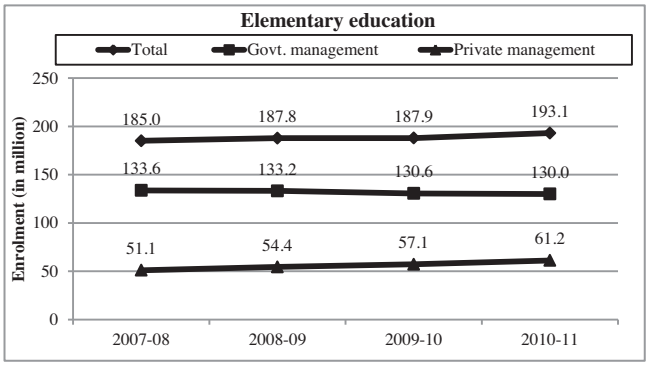

Fig. 1. Enrolment in private and public schools in India.

2.3. Parental decision-making and the choice of schools

Stern and Heyneman (2012) suggest that non-government schools have proliferated developing countries, in order to meet excess demand resulting from an insufficient supply of public school spaces and/or to provide alternatives to a failing public education system. The movement of students into private schools in India appears driven by both push and pull factors. Key elements seem to be *firstly* dissatisfaction with the government school – particularly in relation to teacher attendance and behaviours (Harma, 2011) – *and secondly* a preference for English medium instruction (often government schooling is delivered in the official

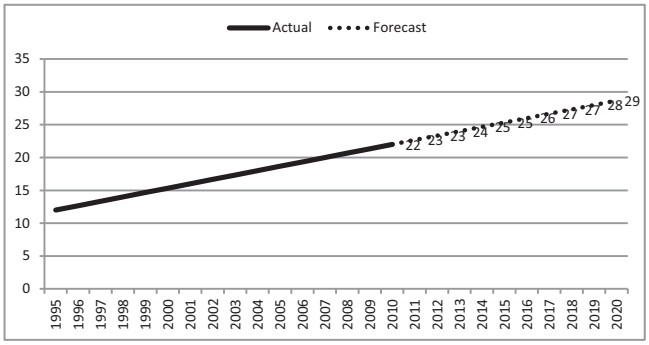

Fig. 2. Percentage of children attending private school (primary level) with projections based on current trends.

[2] Young Lives is a longitudinal study of child poverty which follows cohorts of children in four countries: Ethiopia, Andhra Pradesh state (India), Peru and Vietnam. It is funded by the UK and Netherlands government and executed through collaboration between Oxford University and Save the Children. For details, please visit www.younglives.org.uk.

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