A Comparative Study of Indian Government, Private-Aided and Private-Unaided Primary Low-Fee Educational Institutions

India, currently the world’s youngest country with one of the fastest growing economies, is sitting in a crucial position. With a population of nearly 1.2 billion people of which 65 per cent are in the age group of 15-64 and 29 per cent are less than 15 years old, nearly one quarter of the children in our world are currently living in India. Along with the energy and spirit of such a young country, however, comes the responsibility of educating, supplying jobs to, and building the infrastructure to support such a lively population. With 27.8 per cent of Indians living below the poverty line according to the 2006 economic survey, it is clear that this plethora of children are not being adequately supported, this waist of human capital tinting India’s potentially bright future. In order to correct this path of human waist and poverty, something drastic must be done, one enormous step lying within the grounds of improving primary low-income education. Within India, three types of low-income institutions exist. The first, government schools, have among the lowest success rates. These institutions, both funded and run by the government, are responsible for educating 86% of all Indian children. The second type of low-fee institution, private-aided facilities, are run privately with government supervision and financial support. Although slightly more successful than government schools, these institutions never the less struggle to retain, engage and support children. The last form of school system, private-unaided institutions, have

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3 Ibid
by far surpassed both government and aided educational institutions all around academically. With significantly less funding the question is then posed as to what unaided institutions are doing to surpass their aided counterparts and how this can ultimately be applied to aided institutions to increase their performance. With an examination into the success of students, funding, all around efficiency and parental feedback, the mystery of the success behind unaided institutions can be uncovered and ultimately applied to all school systems to increase low-fee Indian primary education.

Having had no compulsory primary education until its independence from the British in 1947, India has already taken some crucial steps towards attaining its goal of education for all, but still in its primary years, has a long way to go. In one study conducted by James Tooley, professor of education policy at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 3,500 children in government and private unaided schools in North Shahadara were tested in both Mathematics and English to compare the educational quality of each type of institution. With landslide results, children in unrecognized private schools on an average scored 72 percent higher in mathematics, 83 per cent higher in Hindi and 246 per cent higher in English than government school students. In a later study comparing recognized and unrecognized schools of Punjab in 2005, examination results of terminal grades 5 and 7 were analyzed which similarly to the results of Shahadara, revealed that private unaided school children were surpassing the percentage of Private aided school children by a significant amount. Finally, in a study conducted by Geeta Kingdon, Professor of Policy and Society at the Institute of Education University of London, all three types of schools-government, private-aided and private-unaided schools, were examined through a collection of data from 902 students of grade 8 (13 to 14-years-old) in 30 schools from the three

school categories in urban Lucknow, located in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Taking measures to control for social and personal factors, the results were, nevertheless, revealing, with private-unaided students scoring almost twice as highly as the government and private-aided schools in both mathematics and reading\(^7\). With scores additionally corrected to account for social and personal factors, private-unaided schools still triumphed with a 27 per cent higher teaching success rate in mathematics than government and private-aided schools.\(^8\) With these surprisingly higher success rates in private-unaided institutions, the question is then posed as to where government and private-aided schools are failing. With an examination into each institution’s funding methods, insight can be gained.

Despite the significantly higher test results at private-unaided schools throughout India, when compared to government and private-aided facilities, they remain the most poorly funded. Generating their own revenue through fees collected from students, unaided schools receive zero support from the government. By using outside resources, these unaided institutions rely most heavily upon student tuition, an average fee of Rs.241 per month, in addition to any funds raised through the help of NGO’s, businesses and private donations. Government schools on the other hand, costing tax payers on a conservative estimate approximately Rs. 800 a month per child, are conversely both the most heavily funded and lowest achieving educational institutions within India. When surveyed as to how much individuals were willing to pay for government school education based on the quality of education, infrastructure and facilities available, on average parents offered no more than Rs. 66 per month, one fourth of the average low fee private school tuition and one twelfth of the actual government school cost. An attempt to reach out for help, the Indian government began extending support to private

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\(^8\) Lbid
recognized schools starting in 1970 through grant-in-aid, explicit and implicit subsidies.\(^9\) Although managed by private bodies, these private-aided institutions are forced to comply with all government school regulations. In addition, the government must select and appoint all teachers, thus turning these schools into a virtual extension of the government school system.

This partnership between private and government schools is, however, possibly hurting low fee education more than it is helping it. Due to the fact that more than one fifth of government expenditure on elementary education (primary and upper primary) goes in the form of subsidies to private schools at elementary level, very little is left for government education institutions. Therefore, private schools “prosper” at the cost of government schools, a phenomenon described as “private enrichment and public pauperization.”\(^10\) As this private depletion to government funds continues, those who can afford to do so tend to pull away from the government school systems, reducing their dependence on the public system. In turn, only the most disadvantaged groups, perceived by teachers and officials as the most powerless, are left in public schools, giving teachers the impression that education is a favor-rather than a public service- being provided to the poor. With this attitude of, “having never had access to education, they should be grateful that they are getting at least this”\(^11\) inequity is greatly increased as the system’s performance decreases. Although the basics behind the funding of these three types of institutions begins to explain why privately-aided schools are pulling ahead, with a look into the efficiency of each type of institution, a much better understanding can be gained.

In her study of aided, un-aided and government high schools of Mysore, Dr. Yazali Josephine, Associate Professor at National University of Educational Planning and Administration, compared the

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efficiency of schools running under the three different types of management by focusing on the cost of education, examination results, quality of input and several non-school factors. Throughout her study, Josephine noted how despite higher unit costs, government schools had lower outputs, which she associated with greater wastage and stagnation. One observation which Josephine strongly reiterated throughout her report was how prevalent government school flaws are in respect to inadequate use of physical and academic resources. “In Government and most Government aided schools,” Josephine noted, “it is common sight that available funds and physical resources are not used and where facilities are not properly looked after. The use of libraries and auditorium in Government schools presents an utter contrast to private schools.” In addition to this poor use of resources, Josephine noted how government schools generally misused funds as well, such as with delayed purchases of lab equipment leading to cost escalation and the school being deprived of the resources for the duration, thus failing to get “optimum return for the money spent.” One of the largest flaws that she saw in government schools, besides the deficiency of basic infrastructure facilities, was the lack of or improper conduct of Human Resources. “The optimum utilization of principals, teachers, aids and karamchairs can lead to a significant increase in productivity. One of the potent tools in the hands of the principal, in this regard, is the proper rapport and communication, through delegation and decentralization, by identifying the right match between people and the jobs and a concern for balanced workload. Investment on Human Resource in Government schools is extremely urgent.”

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In regards to private-unaided institutions, Josephine noted the lower unit costs when compared to government schools, saying, “They pay less to teachers, may operate make-shift systems, use teaching-aids, laboratories and libraries more efficiently.” One large push for such strategic management, Josephine noted, was the healthy growing competition amongst private schools. Competing for student tuition, private schools are not given the comfort of a steady endowment which government schools are, keeping the faculty and staff on their toes and leading to a much higher interactive and creative teaching environment. In addition to this hanging pressure, teachers of unaided-private schools are given the additional strain of being appointed on a short term basis. Without the assurance of a steady job, teachers are more likely to show up to class each day and engage their children. Once more, by being so tight with their budget, private schools on average have twice the amount of teachers in their institutions than government schools, a shocking statistic seeing as how private school teachers are on average paid one eight of what government school teachers make. A key ingredient to the success of a school, Josephine did make clear the fact that parental and community involvement plays a major role in the success of students, private schools generally having much higher attendance and retention rates due to a heighten of parental concern. With a look at various interviews conducted with groups of low income families, an insider’s perspective on the state of government, aided, and unaided schools can be gained while the phenomenon of parental involvement inducing student success rates is examined.

In hopes of examining the situation of a small set of low-fee private and government schools, author of *Low-cost Private Education*, Bob Phillipson, selected clusters of low-fee private schools located

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16 Ibid
17 Ibid
largely in two areas of Uttar Pradesh to conduct in depth studies and family interviews. One of such interviews, which focused on the parents of two enrolled children in a privately government recognized school in the village of Aggapur, gave an insider’s opinion on the reality of both public and private schools. Both parents’ illiterates, having never attended a day of school, had surprisingly strong opinions on the quality of education within India telling the interviewer that in government schools children, “only sit around and no studies take place.” Refusing to enroll any of his three children within government schools, the father originally enrolled his eldest daughter in a religious organization school due to the free uniform, books and food which were provided. In his opinion, the studies were not as good in the religious organizations school, however, “the child learns to go to school, gets used to the routine, and learns how to sit in the class.” Later, when the child is according to him, ready to learn, then the private school fee (Rs. 170) is worthwhile. Overall, when asked how he perceived the quality of the private school in Aggapur, the father replied positively saying that he felt the school was doing well. “All subjects are taught, the school is full, and his daughter comes home and works on her own. With this positive outlook and support, just as Josephine noted, this father’s children successfully continue to make their way through school.

A similar interview conducted with a mother of four in the village of Surajpur was then performed, both parents also illiterate and the family income around Rs. 4,000 per month. In this family, representing the typical situation of those Indians who send their children to low-fee private schools in terms of occupation, income, and social background, the two eldest daughters had dropped out of school to help support their family and the two younger siblings were in the process of moving from private low-fee schools to government schools due to the families inability to keep up with monthly

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school fees\textsuperscript{20}. When asked about her experience with both public and private school teachers, the mother of four replied;

“\textit{The quality of teaching of how well teachers teach depends on whose child it is. Teachers pay attention to those who are better off or whose father has some power or if the person is socially known to them. When it comes to our children, they don’t bother.....}”

Unable to support her children through school due to financial struggles, as Josephine noted, the children of this family have begun to drop out of school and are headed towards a dim future. Sadly, with her negative perspective on education, this mother of four has completely lost all trust and respect for the Indian education system and most likely, has instilled this distaste into her children as well, accounting for their high dropout rate. The fact that, \textit{Teachers pay attention to those who are better off}, is however, a reality within India, reiterating the powerlessness of the lower classes and the pressing need to give the poor a voice.

After having examined the test rates, funding methods, overall efficiency and parental perspectives of government, private-aided and unaided educational institutions, it is clear why even the most impoverished families are choosing to send their children to private low-fee schools. Left feeling powerless, defeated, disrespected and invisible, as the mother in the interview above explained, something drastic must be done to give the poor a voice and push government schools, as well as private schools, in a more positive direction. After having compared these three types of institutions with the questions posed as to why private, specifically unaided, institutions are surpassing government and government funded institutions, it is clear that the competition and unease of relying upon students for funding is the key factor. With the comfort of being funded regardless of student progress, government schools have become lazy and class discrimination has quickly begun to rise.

\textsuperscript{20} Lbid
One solution which immediately could pull the comfort of steady funding from government schools, by redirecting government money to a more reliable market, is that of educational vouchers. Educational vouchers, coupons given by the government which cover total to partial costs of education at any school of a parent’s choice\textsuperscript{21}, are increasingly popular solutions to supporting impoverished families educate their children. By funding individual students rather than unreliable school systems, the poor are given a voice through purchase power while government schools are simultaneously introduced to a competitive spirit and urged to excel. Under such a system, schools become accountable to parents rather than education officials due to the fact that dissatisfied parents can withdraw their children from schools, rather than being forced to settle. When surveyed to test the acceptability of vouchers amongst parents, nearly all (98%) were in favor of the concept, 79% of illiterate parents finding the concept personally relevant to them\textsuperscript{22}. When asked what they considered the optimal amount for a voucher, parents requested on average a mere Rs. 5232 annual voucher, nearly half of what the Delhi government is currently spending on government secondary schools\textsuperscript{23}.

Unfortunately, however, educational vouchers have been mooted out by the Ministry of Human Resources and Development from the Approach Paper on the five year plan on the premise that there is very little evidence to prove their success, despite the fact that vouch systems have already been successfully established within eleven countries across the world as diverse as Chile, The Ivory Coast, Sweden, The USA, Denmark, The Czech Republic and The UK\textsuperscript{24}. In some countries, such as the Netherlands, these have been universal voucher programs where irrespective of their parents’ income every child receives a voucher in the mailbox on their fifth birthday. Other countries have had targeted


\textsuperscript{22} Ibid

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid
vouchers restricted to special disadvantaged groups like the African Americans in Milwaukee, USA or low-income parents in other countries. Regardless of how these vouch systems have been set up, in all cases a higher level of satisfaction among children, parents and teachers in schools have been met.\(^25\) Despite this success, the Ministry of India is never the less unwilling to test the feasibility of the concept even as a pilot due to the fact that it would direct public money to private schools\(^26\). Although government schools are necessary for achieving universal education because they cater to the poorest children, a voucher system benefits the poorest and expands their set of choices, thus straying from the philosophical issue of public versus private forms of provision and focusing instead on working towards efficient policies which can benefit the weakest sections of society.

Regardless of the voucher system, however, more than 3/4\(^{th}\) of the government school teachers and parents and 82% of the private school managers and principals agreed within James Tooley’s study that parents must have a say in the management of government schools in order to improve the state of education, reinforcing the claim for a decentralized education system where teachers and schools are accountable to parents as opposed to education officers\(^27\). Although the Indian government has tried to facilitate this in the Right to Education Bill through forming Village Education Committees which give equal representation to parents, this is only a voice entitled to them by the government and not necessarily a voice that will be acted upon. Education Vouchers on the other hand, ensure parents the opportunity to assert themselves in the management of the school through exit, choosing a better school over the badly performing one and voice, having a say in the improvement of the school. Due to


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the fact that schools would receive funds through the number of students they can retain, the schools would have to ensure that their students are learning and performing well. If the school fails in this objective, the parent may choose to send their child to a better one. This would act as an incentive for the school to keep a check on the dropout rates by increasing teacher attendance, overall performance, and superior material management, thus ultimately funding students as apposed to schools in such a way that money would follow the student to whichever school he or she ultimately chooses.

Throughout the studies of James Tooley, Geeta Kingdon, Dr. Yazali Josephine and Bob Phillipson, the one united goal of understanding the reality of low-income primary education in order to best help the situation shines through, informing and inspiring millions to take action. It is however, not until the knowledge and perspective of these four educational specialists, in combination with a mixed variety of other articles and opinions, are combined that a true comprehension of the flaws and successes of low-income institutions can be reached. By first examining the testing results of these three distinct institutions, it became clear that unaided schools were pulling ahead. In order to better understand this, one of the most crucial aspects of any school was then examined, it’s funding. Realizing that unaided institutions are the most poorly funded among the three types of school systems however, it became apparent that this was not the key to their student’s higher success rates, turning the examination of low-fee schools over to their efficiency. With this study, it became clear that unaided institutions were using their funds in by far more creative and efficient ways, the majority of their accomplishments credible to successful management and a more highly motivated student and teacher body. Realizing that motivation is the key to success, the question of where this motivation is cultivated was then posed, of which market pressure and community engagement answered. Through finally taking the perspectives of actual families attending these low income facilities into consideration, the fact that community involvement plays a major role in the success of students was reiterated while the tragedy that the poor have little to no voice to get involved with was brought to the surface. Taking all of these
uncovered pieces of information into consideration, it became clear that the best schools systems are those with decentralized authority and good community relations. In order to achieve this, while simultaneously increasing the voice of the poor, the educational voucher system, of which students rather than schools are sponsored, answered all three requirements. In conclusion, in order to give the poor a voice, create and support successful schools and above all supply needy children with the best education possible, it is time to focus on the student rather than the schools.