

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP IN PRIMARY EDUCATION IN INDIA

A study of unrecognised schools in Haryana

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The Indian education system is facing serious challenges especially at the elementary education level. These include universal access to an infrastructure of comparable quality, improving retention, efficiency and effectiveness of the schools. While in the recent years, there has been a considerable emphasis on decentralised management and involvement of community in micro planning; the outcome is quite mixed one. This is partly due to the inadequate planning and lack of managerial and professional competencies at various levels. At the national level, broad perspective on various sub-sectors is developed. The management, professional and financial support is provided to the state governments and the districts for implementation of various reform programs in the form of centrally sponsored schemes. Among other things, their successful implementation is contingent upon the availability of timely, comprehensive and up-to-date educational statistics on key performance indicators.

2. The review of official educational statistics reveals serious gaps in terms of coverage, quality of data, comprehensiveness and their availability in the desired form at the appropriate time. For example, the educational statistics published by the MHRD do not include complete information on the number of children attending various types of institutions and program funded by the government. These include Non-Formal Education Centres, Alternative Schools and other such facilities. Similarly, a large number of unrecognised schools have come up in various parts of the country and no data is available on their number and enrolment. Similar concerns prevail for the database on educational financing, institutional infrastructure, mobility and estimation of unit costs. The published educational statistics released by the MHRD do not even recognise these limitations. Therefore, the planning and management of education at the national and state level suffers from many limitations and inadequacies and does not fully reflect the ground level

reality. Weak monitoring and evaluation systems are also the consequence of lop sided approach to planning and management of education. The norm based educational planning thus faces an uncertain future.

3. Past few years have also witnessed a significant expansion of the alternative modes of education including the proliferation of unrecognised schools even at the primary stage. Between 1986 and 1993, the enrolment in private aided schools (primary classes) increased at a compound growth rate of 9.5% per annum. The corresponding increase in government/local body schools was merely 1.4% per annum. As a result, the share of enrolment of private unaided schools in primary classes increased from 5.1% in 1986 and 8.6% in 1993. The pyramid of coverage of private education is narrow at the bottom and wide at the apex. Due to the lack of serious policy imperatives, the elementary education system shows the signs of a dual system - one set of schools meant for the poor and those who are unable to pay for quality education, the other catering to the requirements for quality education involving high user costs. The former is especially government supported and the latter is in the form of private initiatives. Despite the positive impact of private schools, the government policy for their regulation/control is not clearly spelt out. Historically, successive phases of regulation and deregulation of private sector were attempted with mixed outcomes. Recently conducted achievements studies reinforce the perpetuation of differential access to quality schooling and persistence of gender and social gaps in the levels of achievement.

4. Focus on equity and social justice is important for developing country like India, where nearly 40% of its population still continues to live below the poverty line. The proportion of poor living in some educationally backward states is even higher than the national average. The real challenge to the success of educational reforms lies in these areas. The vicious circle of underdevelopment comprises of lack of access to basic services like health, nutrition, education and employment. Where and how to break this vicious cycle is an issue for the development planners. A new path for the development trajectory has to be chartered.

5. The recent evidence from NSSO and other studies demonstrates that a large proportion of children are attending private unrecognised primary schools. This proportion is highest in Haryana (18.7%) and is followed by Punjab (15.5%), Uttar Pradesh (10%) and Bihar (9.2%). The all India average share of children enrolled in unrecognised schools at primary stage was 4.8% as compared to 2.6% for upper primary classes. The rural urban differentials were striking in almost all the states. At the national level, some decline in Class I enrolment was observed in the last 3-5 years. This could be due to the shift of children from formal to non-formal or to other modes of education including unrecognised schools. It is paradoxical that the states with high proportion of children attending unrecognised schools are from both the economically advanced regions of Punjab and Haryana as well as from the economically poor regions of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Some states like Maharashtra have exercised strict controls on the functioning of unrecognised institutions.

6. Persons in 5-24 years age group belonging to relatively poor families have high proportion of non-attendance and low participation as compared to those belonging to the top 20% fractile group. The children belonging to high-income families stay longer in the educational system whereas the children from low income brackets dropout early. Therefore, the chances are that few children belonging to poor families would be enrolled and those enrolled are likely to exit early as compared to the children belonging to the upper strata of the society.

7. For the purpose of the present study, a special survey of the unrecognised primary schools was conducted in four districts of Haryana to investigate their enrolment profile, teacher characteristics and availability of infrastructure and other facilities. The survey covered 878 unrecognised schools in 13 blocks of the selected districts. The fieldwork was conducted with the help of BRC and CRC coordinators during early 1999. Data for the recognised schools in the same blocks was obtained from DISE. There were 1242 recognised schools in the sample study area. The unrecognised schools are smaller in size but have a lower PTR and perhaps a lower per unit institutional cost as compared to the government schools. This is possible due to the recruitment of large number of teachers at very low wages. Many teachers were even unqualified and untrained. In terms of the availability of infrastructure facilities, the unrecognised schools are better as far as student classroom ratio, availability of drinking water and toilet facilities is concerned. The private schools were found to be ill equipped as far as the availability of library book, reference book, charts teaching-learning materials were concerned. There is no system of periodic teacher training for the teachers working in these schools.

8. Although primary education is free in all government and local body schools, not many parents opt to send their children to the schools. The NSS data showed that only 54.1% of children attending primary classes received free education in Haryana. The proportion of children receiving free education was lowest in the urban areas (13.6%). Unrecognised schools charge fee ranging from Rs. 30 per month to Rs. 60 per month. A few schools charged exorbitant fee, ranging from Rs. 1500-2500 per month. The other household costs were also substantial even for the poor people.

9. A shift away from the government schools is discernible as the intake at Grade I has shown declining trends in the recent years. This can happen only due to two reasons. First, due to decline in the birth rate and secondly as a consequence of the structural shift in enrolment share of various modes of education. The latter is likely to be the major factor contributing to the decline of Grade I enrolment in the recent years. Considerable duplication/overlapping in enrolment among the government, NFE and the private unrecognised schools was also identified. It was not possible to estimate the proportion of overlapping enrolment from the school records. A household survey would be required to estimate the fictitious/duplicate and overlapping enrolment.

10. It is estimated that in the study area, the number of unrecognised schools is doubling every five years. If the trend continues, the number of unrecognised schools would be roughly 1.5-2.5 times the number of government/local body primary schools. The rapid increase in the demand for private education is the result of a number of factors. While quality can be defined in different ways, at the primary stage it is related to achievement in the public examination. The most important among these are the demand for quality education, dissatisfaction with the performance of government schools and the ability of the parents to pay for the cost of quality education, especially when the average household income tends to rise. Some teachers mentioned that many parents do not want to tell others that their children study in government schools.

11. The household expenditure on primary education based on the NSS survey was also analysed. A negative association was observed between the poverty ratio and the average per student expenditure at primary stage. Wide variations in per student expenditure were observed between rural and urban areas. The study did not collect any data on the levels of achievements and learning outcomes of the learners in unrecognised schools. However, with few exceptions, the achievement studies conducted under DPEP show that the achievement levels of learners from private schools are generally higher than those from the government schools. In terms of attendance and school functioning, both the teachers and the students regularly attend the unrecognised schools. The attendance rates in unrecognised schools were much higher as compared to the government schools.

12. The study has many implications for the policy towards the role of private sectors in the development of elementary education. So far, the government has controlled the entry/exist points for this sector and other options remain unexplored particularly with a view to develop partnership and not to promote the perpetuation of a dual system. This calls for a perceptible change in the attitude and policy towards private education. While it is recognised that commercialisation of education should be discouraged, but at the same time, these institutions should be able to generate some surplus which can be further invested to provide support to the deserving learners. It is also important that the role of private sector should be seen as a supplementary to that of the government and not as a substitute. There are many options for the involvement of private sector, especially if the focus shift to performance and output related indicators. Quality assurance is an important dimension of primary education and is significant not only for the private but also for the government schools. The dividing line should not be drawn on the basis of school management but related to the school performance, efficiency and effectiveness. The recent initiative in the form of SSA of the central government must be based on the above considerations, otherwise institutional reforms will not be able to achieve much. If the real school choice is to be provided to be parents/learners, it must be a choice that can be exercised effectively.

Copies of the full report are available from the author.

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