

Underage Children in Class I: Implications for Educational Planning in India

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Abstract

This article is aimed at flagging two inter-related issues that are significant in the context of defining appropriate entry age for primary education. The first one is about the need for stabilization of school entry age at primary stage in the country in accordance with Article 21A on right to education (86th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002) that assumes class I age as 6 years. Second issue pertains to the State's responsibility for provision of ECCE in the country.

Using DISE data on underage children enrolled in class I, this paper discusses the said issues for planning of primary and pre-primary education in the country. The author argues for a need to have a standard primary entry age in the country which will not only give rise to homogenous age cohorts and facilitate evolving of age-grade correspondence at primary and beyond, is also likely to boost planning of ECCE by fixing the exit age.

The term 'under-age' has an implicit connotation to some age that is deemed as 'the right age' for children to be in class I. Children below *that right age* in class I are to be termed as underage. The pertinent question therefore is to define that 'right age' for children to start formal schooling. Ideally, children should start school at a stage when they are emotionally and cognitively 'ready' for formal schooling, irrespective of the fact that they are somewhat older or younger than the defined age. This however is difficult to determine and would vary a great deal as each child develops at his or her own pace. Defining a chronological age for school entry is therefore an imperative in educational planning.

The issue of entry age for primary education obviously has a bearing on the exit and entry age for education both, prior to and beyond primary. In other words, the exit age for pre-primary becomes the entry age for primary and exit age of primary will determine the age of entry to upper primary which in turn will affect the age in all subsequent stages. In the other direction, the entry age for primary also impacts on the length of pre-primary education. Incidentally in Delhi, the issue of entry age to pre-primary as well as primary has been a subject of considerable debate in recent times when the confusion prevalent on this aspect in schools in the city came to the fore.

This paper is set out in three parts with a main focus on presenting the segment of underage children in class I in primary school, an issue that has received a scant attention in the past. Part A provides the conceptual backdrop of what is considered as the right entry age for primary stage based on research evidence and current practice in different countries and States within India. Part B gives a detailed picture of underage children in class I in the country as seen from DISE data. In part C, implications of enrolling underage children in primary school for planning of both pre-primary and primary stage are briefly discussed.

A. What is the right entry age for primary education?

While the question of school starting age is debated among educational planners, researchers and parents, both sides of arguments are offered. Those who are in favour of an early start aver that children are quite capable of learning skills at an early stage and starting formal school early gives them an advantage which is particularly useful for children from less advantaged home backgrounds. This kind of an early introduction, they argue, serves as an opportunity for these children to make up for the deficit in their academic skills. On the other hand, child development specialists have reservations on whether teaching of 3 Rs at an early stage really gives the child any long-term advantage? On the contrary, they caution about the dangers that such an early introduction of formal learning may entail.

Early vs. delayed school entry

In recent years, a large body of research evidence has been accumulating on the merits and demerits of starting school early. Infact the topic of school entry age has fascinated researchers in several fields of study such as Education, Developmental Psychology, Early Childhood Education/ Child Development and Special Education. Several investigators have assessed the effect of school entrance age on acquisition of quantitative skills, social behaviour, intelligence, reading achievement and academic achievement in elementary school.

Studies that compared children in the same class with different birth dates (assuming that the age spread is randomly distributed over 12 months), provide useful insight into whether older children in the same class perform better than younger children. This difference in favour of older children was reported by some investigators in the initial classes (Cameron & Wilson, 1990; Crosser, 1991). Such a gain in children was also observed in later stage of elementary (Crosser, 1991; Breznitz & Teltsch, 1989). Some of the earlier researches though, had reported no difference in some or all achievement tests (Dietz & Wilson, 1985; Kinard & Reinhertz, 1986).

Further, significant age differences that were seen in early stages were indicated to be weak (Langer, Kalk and Searls, 1984; Sweetland and De Simone, 1987; Jones and Mandeville, 1990) or these differences disappeared altogether by upper primary stage (Kinard and Reinhertz, 1986; May and Welch, 1986; Bickel, Zigmond and Strayhorn, 1991; McClelland, Morrison and Holmes, 2000; Stipek and Byler, 2001). Although findings of these studies vary somewhat, yet a clear cut trend discernible from these investigations was that the age difference of less than a year did not make a significant difference in achievement of children. A small advantage in being older seemed to disappear with age.

Apart from comparing children in the same class, a more powerful strategy that has been employed in some studies includes comparison of children of the same age in different classes and children in the same class but approximately one year apart (Deborah, 2003).

While the first comparison gives information on the effect of a year of schooling, holding age constant, the second one provides information on the effect of chronological age, holding the number of years of schooling constant. Results of these studies suggest that schooling was a strong variable for cognitive skills that were tested. For example, children who were in school for a year gained more in mathematics, reading and literacy in most studies than the children of same age who were not in school (Cahen & Cohen, 1989; Ferreira and Morrison, 1994; Bisanz, Morrison & Dunn, 1995).

Evidence from the above-referred studies points out that within the five-to six-year-old range in which most children began school in the U. S. where these studies were conducted, age was not a significant predictor of academic success (Morrison, Smith & Dow-Ehrensberger, 1995; Morrison, Alberts & Griffith, 1997). In other words, available empirical evidence of studying the effect of entry age of 5 versus 6 is not categorical about any gain for a particular age group over the other in an absolute way.

School entry age in other countries

In practice we find, the entry age to the first level of education varies between the ages of four to eight across countries. But a major trend in majority of the countries in the world across countries has been to define the age of entry as six. Information brought out by UNESCO on the entrance age to first level of formal education confirms this trend as 134 of the 217 countries in the world follow 6 years as the norm. Twenty-eight countries, 12 from North America have fixed the entry age as 5. Many African and European countries also start a year later than 6. In Asia, Mangolia starts formal schooling as late as eight, while in Gibraltar (Europe) children start formal schooling at the age of four (UNESCO, 1999).

Table 1: Age of Admission in Class I in India

State	Entry Age		State	Entry Age	
	5	6		5	6
Andhra Pradesh	√		Nagaland		√
Arunachal Pradesh		√	Orissa	√	
Assam		√	Punjab	√	
Bihar		√	Rajasthan	√	
Goa	√		Sikkim	√	
Gujarat	√		Tamil Nadu	√	
Haryana		√	Tripura		√
Himachal Pradesh	√		Uttar Pradesh	√	
J& K	√		West Bengal	√	
Karnataka	√		A& N Islands	√	
Kerala	√		Chandigarh	√	
Madhya Pradesh		√	D& N Haveli	√	
Maharashtra	√		Daman & Diu	√	
Manipur	√		Delhi	√	
Maghalaya		√	Lakshadweep	√	
Mizoram		√	Pondicherry	√	

Source: *Selected Information on School Education*.
Ministry of Human Resource Development - 2003

Current practice in India

In India, we do not have a standard age for primary school entrance. While in a large number of States and Union Territories (Table1), age of admission to class I in primary school is set as 5 years, in remaining States/UTs which comprise Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana and some of the North-eastern States, children start the first level of formal education at the age of 6 years.

Uttanchal, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand have also defined the school entry age for primary as six years. Altogether, primary school entry age is stipulated as 6 in twelve States, whereas in the remaining twenty-three States/ UTs, the same is fixed as 5. It is desirable to define one standard age for school entry at the primary stage in the country for reasons outlined earlier.

B. Underage children as seen from DISE data

In the District Information System of Education of the National University of Educational Planning and Administration, statistics are collected on various indicators for elementary education in India. This data-base updated every year also includes information on the number of children enrolled in initial grades of primary at an age when they are less than 5 or 6 years. From this data-source, number of children enrolled in class I at an age when they were less than the school entry age (as defined by that state) were obtained for both sets of States (DISE, 2006). In other words, children have been defined as underage for one category of States, where school entry age is 6 years as those who are enrolled in class I at *less than 6 years* of age. Similarly, for the other category of States, DISE data were used to assess the number of children enrolled in class I at an age *less than 5 years*.

As the data on actual age of children is not available, it was not possible to determine by what age were these children short of the prescribed school entry age. Two categories of States with stipulated School Entry Age (SEA) as 6 and 5 are referred to as SEA 6 and SEA 5 respectively in the subsequent part of the paper.

Using DISE data on enrolment and underage children in class I for the year 2005-06, the proportion of underage children have been assessed for SEA 6 and SEA 5 categories of States and inter- state variations have been examined. Further the distribution of underage children across three school management types i. e. government, private-aided and private schools has been depicted. Rural-urban and gender differences among underage children have also been highlighted.

The primary purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the segment of underage children enrolled in primary schools in the country based on an assessment made from DISE data and highlight the implications of this issue both for primary and pre-primary education planning in the country.

Proportion of Underage Children

In case of SEA 6 States, assessment made from available statistics indicates that 25.2 per cent of the children enrolled in class I are less than 6 years. The corresponding proportion for SEA 5 category of States was found to be 4.9 per cent. It may be noted here that SEA 6 category includes 12 States, some of these being large States while SEA 5 set comprises 23 States/ UTs in the country. The proportion of underage children enrolled in class I in SEA 6, as would normally be expected, is larger than the other category. What these proportions suggest, in other words is that, on an average, one in every four children enrolled in class I in twelve States is less than 6 years of age and almost one in every twenty children enrolled in class I in twenty-three States is less than 5 years of age.

In the country, altogether 11.5 per cent of the children in class I are enrolled at a younger age than the prescribed age of school entry in their State. It is not known whether these children are on the rolls only in primary school or are also enrolled in any pre-primary centres in the vicinity. Their pattern of attendance is also not known.

Owing to the overlap in eligible entry age for school (5-6 years) and ICDS (3-6 years), probability of duplication in enrolment, can not be ruled out. Clearly if children under 6 years are participating in primary school, they are not receiving any form of early childhood education.

Table 2: Underage Children in Class I

Entry Age 6			Entry Age 5					
State	Number	Per Cent	State	Number	Per Cent	State	Number	Per Cent
Arunachal Pradesh	29466	42.5	A & N Islands	46	0.8	Maharashtra	55218	2.5
Assam	208432	28.3	Andhra Pradesh	128645	7.9	Manipur	12076	10.4
Bihar	494218	14.5	Chandigarh	813	5.3	Orissa	6272	0.6
Chhattisgarh	83490	9.2	D & N Haveli	145	2.2	Pondicherry	258	1.3
Haryana	93775	31.1	Daman & Diu	39	1.3	Punjab	21152	6.8
Jharkhand	299910	21.0	Delhi	7410	2.3	Rajasthan	553020	21.9
Madhya Pradesh	1117922	45.4	Goa	156	0.7	Sikkim	325	1.6
Meghalaya	49059	40.7	Gujarat	7802	0.6	Tamil Nadu	42241	3.3
Mizoram	12562	29.3	Himachal Pradesh	7182	5.6	Uttar Pradesh	91791	1.5
Nagaland	17425	22.7	J & K	20833	9.1	West Bengal	56680	2.6
Tripura	1284	1.1	Karnataka	0	0.0	-	-	-
Uttaranchal	91719	39.0	Kerala	10261	2.7	-	-	-
All India Total	2499262	25.2	Lakshadweep	96	6.2	All India	1022461	4.9

Data Source: DISE 2005-06

State-wise variations

The overall percentages presented as all India total in table 2, it must be noted, tend to hide inter-state variations that are fairly large in both categories. Madhya Pradesh, for example, tops the list in SEA 6 category as the State has 45.4 per cent children enrolled in class I at less than 6 years of age implying that almost every second child enrolled in class I is not six years yet. Similarly in Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Uttranchal, Haryana, Mizoram, and Assam, more than 25 per cent children enrolled in class I are underage. Jharkhand and Bihar although lower in terms of percentage, have close to 3 lakh and 5 lakh underage children in class I respectively.

School entry age in Rajasthan was 6 years up to 1998 and thereafter the same was reduced to 5 years. These statistics suggest that despite school entry age being low in the the State, 21.9 per cent of the children enrolled in class I are underage. In other words, every fifth child enrolled in primary schools in Rajasthan is less than 5 years of age. In Manipur, Jammu and Kashmir, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab and Lakshadweep, 6 – 10 per cent children enrolled in class I are underage. Being large States, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh have high number of underage children (Table 2). As a category of SEA-5, these twenty-threes States altogether have 4.9 per cent (10.2 lakh) children enrolled in class I at less than 5 years of age.

Difference by school-management type

Are these underage children enrolled in greater numbers in government schools or is there a tendency on the part of parents to enroll children early in private schools? DISE data were analyzed by school type to find an answer to this question.

Table 3: Underage Children by School Management Type (States with Entry Age 6)

Entry Age 6			
State	Government	Private-Aided	Private
ARUNACHAL PRADESH	42.6	42.4	33.1
ASSAM	28.4	21.3	28.1
BIHAR	14.4	31.1	24.2
CHHATTISGARH	7.3	27.6	21.6
HARYANA	32.3	15.0	26.4
JHARKHAND	21.2	13.5	11.1
MADHYA PRADESH	44.3	50.9	53.9
MEGHALAYA	51.0	36.0	25.7
MIZORAM	30.5	25.2	26.4
NAGALAND	22.8	22.6	0.0
TRIPURA	1.1	1.0	0.4
UTTARANCHAL	38.2	40.5	55.6
All	24.1	41.7	32.5

Data Source: DISE 2005-06

Three States in SEA 6 category that had the largest proportion of underage children in government schools include Madhya Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya (Table 3). Two of these States i. e. Madhya Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh also had the largest share of underage children in private aided schools. Next highest share of underage children in private-aided schools was found in Uttaranchal where 40.5 per cent of those enrolled in class I enrolment were less than 6 years. In private-unaided too, Uttaranchal had a large share of underage, with 55.6 per cent of class I enrolment being less than 6 years. Also in Madhya Pradesh, 53.9 per cent of children in class I in private unaided schools were enrolled at less than 6 years. However, altogether the category of SEA-6 States, proportion of underage children out of total enrolled is the highest in private-aided (41.7 %), followed by private (32.5 %) and government (24.7%) schools.

In SEA 5 category, Rajasthan, Manipur and Jammu and Kashmir had the largest proportion of underage children in government schools (Table 4). In private aided schools, Punjab and Chandigarh, besides Rajasthan (that tops the list) have a high proportion of underage children. Three States/ UTs where 20- 40 per cent of children enrolled in private schools are less than 5 years of age include Rajasthan, Jammu and Kashmir and Dadar & Nagar Haveli. In SEA 5 category as a whole, again the same trend was observed. The largest proportion of underage children was seen in private-aided schools (11%) followed by private (4.8 %) and government schools (3.6%).

Table 4: Underage Children by School Management Type (States with Entry Age 5)

Entry Age 5							
State	Government	Private Aided	Private	State	Government	Private Aided	Private
A & N Islands	0.8	0.0	0.0	Maharashtra	1.6	6.6	3.7
Andhra Pradesh	6.4	11.6	9.2	Manipur	10.1	10.6	12.7
Chandigarh	1.8	13.8	6.1	Orissa	0.5	3.3	1.3
D & N Haveli	0.3	0.0	25.8	Pondicherry	1.4	0.5	2.6
Daman & Diu	1.9	0.0	0.2	Punjab	5.4	14.4	9.9
Delhi	2.2	2.3	2.5	Rajasthan	16.6	38.5	39.1
Goa	0.9	0.0	0.5	Sikkim	1.1	3.2	5.8
Gujarat	0.4	1.8	3.5	Tamil Nadu	2.1	4.9	4.1
Himachal Pradesh	4.7	9.1	1.3	Uttar Pradesh	0.7	4.0	6.0
Jammu & Kashmir	8.2	10.7	22.2	West Bengal	2.6	0.0	3.9
Karnataka	0.0	0.0	0.0	----	----	----	----
Kerala	2.5	5.6	2.6	----	----	----	----
Lakshadweep	6.2	0.0	0.0	All	3.6	11.0	4.8

Data Source: DISE 2005-06

Larger proportion of underage children in private schools in Jammu and Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab and Dadra & Nagar Haveli may have to be viewed in relation to the availability of government schools and their effectiveness as perceived by parents and a host of other factors. Most of the States in SEA 5 category have a higher percentage of underage children in private and private-aided schools as compared to government

schools. Some of the small States/ UTs such as Goa, A & N islands, Lakshadweep and Daman Diu are seen to be exceptions to this trend.

Rural- Urban difference

Comparison of children across rural urban areas shows that a greater proportion of children are enrolled in school at an early age in urban areas when they are yet ineligible. In terms of percentage, States in the category of SEA 6 had 34.2 per cent underage children as compared to 24.1 per cent in rural areas (Table 5). In the SEA 5 set of States underage children were higher in urban areas (6.8 %) when compared to rural areas where 4.5 per cent children were found to be underage.

Three States with the highest percentage of underage children in urban areas included Uttaranchal, Madhya Pradesh, and Meghalaya in SEA 6 category, while three toppers in SEA 5 category included Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Manipur.

Table 5: Underage Children by Residence

Entry Age 6			Entry Age 5					
State	Rural	Urban	State	Rural	Urban	State	Rural	Urban
Arunachal Pradesh	43.5	31.4	A & N Islands	1.1	0.1	Maharashtra	1.6	4.2
Assam	27.8	34.8	Andhra Pradesh	6.5	11.8	Manipur	10.2	11.7
Bihar	13.9	25.3	Chandigarh	0.5	6.3	Orissa	0.5	1.4
Chhattisgarh	7.3	23.1	D & N Haveli	2.6	1.0	Pondichery	1.0	1.6
Haryana	32.8	19.9	Daman & Diu	1.8	0.9	Punjab	6.0	10.1
Jharkhand	20.7	26.1	Delhi	1.8	2.4	Rajasthan	20.9	27.8
Madhya Pradesh	45.5	44.9	Goa	0.8	0.5	Sikkim	1.8	0.0
Meghalaya	40.4	44.4	Gujarat	0.5	1.1	Tamil Nadu	2.2	5.9
Mizoram	32.8	24.2	Himachal Pradesh	5.4	7.6	Uttar Pradesh	1.2	4.5
Nagaland	22.9	21.8	J & K	8.9	10.1	West Bengal	2.2	4.8
Tripura	1.2	0.3	Karnataka	0.0	0.0	-		
Uttaranchal	37.8	48.4	Kerala	2.8	2.5	-		
All India Total	24.3	34.2	Lakshadweep	6.2	0.0	All India	4.5	6.8

Data Source: DISE 2005-06

States with the highest proportion of underage children in rural areas in SEA 6 group included Madhya Pradesh, Arunachal and Meghalaya whereas three States with the highest underage proportion in SEA 5 category were Rajasthan, Manipur, and Jammu & Kashmir (Table 5).

The above findings again need to be interpreted in a broad framework of availability and quality of facilities for both primary and pre-primary education and the parental perceptions about usefulness of these services for their children. Several factors, including the costs involved in schooling, incentives offered at these institutions may have an influence on choices made by parents.

While issues such as these need further investigation, the core concern here revolves around the fact these large numbers of under 6 children are missing out on ECCE at this critical age. With expansion of ICDS facilities particularly in rural areas and growth of pre-primary facilities in urban areas, what drives parents to enroll their children in school at an age when they are still unprepared for formal learning, remains to be seen. What, in their perception, are the advantages of attending school vs. early childhood education centres when they are less than 5 or 6 years of age. *Gender differences*

Percentage of underage girls seen as a proportion of class I enrolment was marginally higher (25.5) than that of boys (25.0) in the category SEA 6 States (Table 6). This difference was found to be much higher in SEA 5 States. In the latter category, the difference was in favor of boys, as 5.1 per cent of boys and 4.7 per cent of girls enrolled in class I were less than 5 years of age. This implies that among children under five, more boys were enrolled in school but the preference almost disappeared in case of under 6 children.

Table 6: Gender Difference

Entry Age 6			Entry Age 5					
State	Boys	Girls	State	Boys	Girls	State	Boys	Girls
Arunachal Pradesh	42.3	42.6	A & N Islands	0.7	1.0	Maharashtra	2.6	2.5
Assam	28.4	28.2	Andhra Pradesh	7.9	7.9	Manipur	10.5	10.4
Bihar	14.6	14.4	Chandigarh	3.6	7.2	Orissa	0.6	0.6
Chhattisgarh	9.3	9.1	D & N Haveli	1.8	2.5	Pondicherry	1.4	1.2
Haryana	31.4	30.8	Daman & Diu	1.1	1.6	Punjab	6.9	6.7
Jharkhand	20.9	21.1	Delhi	2.5	2.0	Rajasthan	23.1	20.5
Madhya Pradesh	45.5	45.4	Goa	0.9	0.5	Sikkim	1.5	1.7
Meghalaya	40.7	40.8	Gujarat	0.6	0.6	Tamil Nadu	3.3	3.3
Mizoram	28.8	30.0	Himachal Pradesh	5.6	5.5	Uttar Pradesh	1.6	1.4
Nagaland	23.2	22.1	J & K	9.0	9.2	West Bengal	2.5	2.6
Tripura	1.1	1.1	Karnataka	0.0	0.0	-		
Uttaranchal	39.6	38.4	Kerala	2.7	2.7	-		
All India Total	25.0	25.5	Lakshadweep	6.1	6.2	All India	5.1	4.7

Data Source: DISE 2005-06

Among most of the SEA 6 States, there was a negligible difference between underage boys and girls. Nagaland and Uttaranchal had more underage boys as compared to girls while the converse was true for Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. In SEA 5 category of States, Rajasthan stands out once again with a much higher sex difference in underage children in favor of boys. Another instance where sex difference in proportion of underage children was seen to be high was the case of Union Territory of Chandigarh. Interestingly, here the proportion of girls enrolled underage were twice as much as that of boys.

Major Observations

Major indications that emerged from analysis of DISE data on underage children seen as a percentage of class I enrolment in both SEA 6 and SEA 5 categories are summarized as follows:

- Larger percentage of underage children in States with school entry age as 6.

In States with school entry age of 6 years, 25.2 per cent of children enrolled in class I are under 6 as compared to 4.9 per cent in States with entry age as 5. Thus it is seen that a much higher percentage of children are enrolled in school before the age of 6 as compared to those enrolled under five years. Madhya Pradesh has the highest (45.4 %) percentage of underage children among twelve States in SEA 6 category. Other States with high proportion of underage enrolment in this category include Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Uttranchal, Haryana, Mizoram and Assam. Rajasthan tops the list with 21.9 per cent of class I enrolled at less than 5 years. Next in order are Manipur, Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab and Lakshadweep.

- Larger percentage of underage children in private-aided schools.

Underage children constitute a larger percentage of total enrolment in private-aided schools, followed by private and government schools in both categories of States i.e. with 6 and 5 years as school entry age. Three large States with a chunk of underage enrolment namely Madhya Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh and Rajasthan have a high proportion of underage children in government, private-aided and unaided schools

Meghalaya and Manipur have a high proportion of underage children in government schools whereas in Uttranchal, proportion of underage children was high in private-aided and unaided schools. In Jammu and Kashmir, the proportion of underage children is high in government and private schools while Punjab has a high percentage in private-aided schools.

- Larger percentage of underage enrolment in urban areas in both categories of SEA 6 and SEA 5 States.

Rajasthan and Manipur have a high percentage share of underage children in both rural and urban areas. Uttranchal, Madhya Pradesh, Meghalaya and Andhra Pradesh have a high percentage in urban areas; Jammu and Kashmir has a high share in rural areas

- More boys enrolled as underage in SEA 5 States

In majority of States, boys outnumber girls among underage children in class I, though the difference between the two is only minimal in terms of percentage. In SEA 5 category of States, underage boys' proportion is much larger. Mizoram and

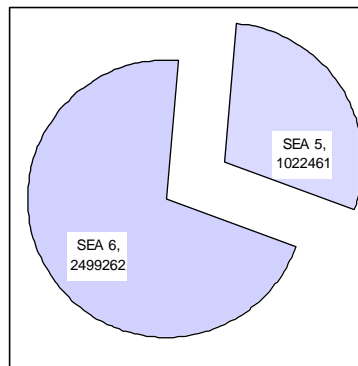
Chandigarh have more underage girls than boys; in latter case, proportion of girls enrolled underage is twice as much as that of boys.

It may be re-iterated here that these indications have emerged from the data as available under DISE (2005-06).

Underage Children in Absolute Numbers

Cursory glance at the proportion of underage children in class I presented earlier in Table 1 seems to project the enrolment of underage in class I as a ‘small’ problem in most of the States. Except for a few major States, the proportions seem insignificant as these flit around 2-7 per cent, particularly in States with school entry age as 5. But the magnitude of the problem can be gauged by looking at the *actual number* of underage children in the country. A total of 11.5 per cent underage children in class I in the country translate into 35.2 lakh children enrolled in school before they are eligible by chronological age and ready in terms of mental age. Of these, 24.9 lakh are in twelve States where school entry age is 6 years and 10.2 lakh are in the remaining 23 States/ UTs where they are enrolled in school at less than 5 years of age. Moreover, the total number of underage children in primary school is likely to be much *higher than 35.2 lakh* when the proportion of underage children in other classes is added.

Figure 1: Number of Underage Children in Class I



Data Source: DISE 2005-06

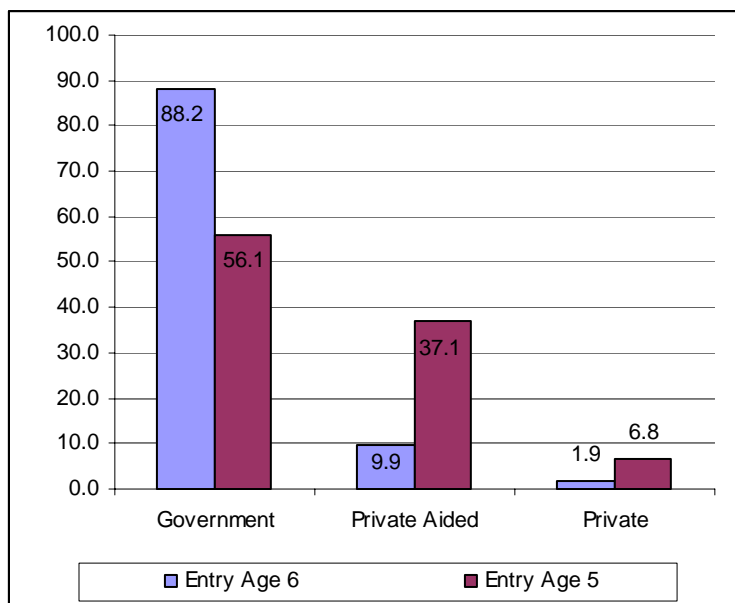
In Madhya Pradesh alone, 11.1 lakh children are enrolled in class I at less than 6 years of age. Similarly, a large number of children in Bihar (4.9 lakh) Jharkhand (2.9 lakh) and Assam (2.0 lakh) start school at less than 6 years. Rajasthan has 5.5 lakh who are admitted in school when they are less than 5 years and in Andhra Pradesh, 1.2 lakh begin school at less than 5 years of age as per the data available from DISE (2005-06).

Though, proportion of underage children, as a percentage of total class I enrolment was found to be the highest in private-aided schools for both categories of States, but seen in absolute numbers, underage children enrolled in class I in government schools, is much larger because the total enrolment in government schools in the country is many times

that of the private schools, aided as well as unaided. For instance, in SEA 5 States, the total class enrolment for all schools is numbered at 20701256 as per DISE 2006 data. Of these 207 lakh children, 158.2 lakh (76.4%) are enrolled in government schools. The enrolment in private-aided and private schools stands at 34.4 (16.6%) and 14.4 lakh (7%) respectively. In SEA 6 States, the total enrolment in class I in government schools is much higher in comparison to SEA 5 States. It is estimated as 9903547 children as per DISE 2006. Among these 99 lakh children, 91.6 lakh are enrolled in government schools, implying that 92.5 per cent enrolment is in the government system. Only 6 per cent enrolment is in private-aided schools and 1.5 per cent is seen in private unaided schools.

Among 35.2 lakh underage children, 27.7 lakh children are in government schools, 6.1 lakh in private-aided and 1.1 lakh in private schools. Among 27.7 lakh children in government schools, SEA 6 category of States have 22 lakh underage children and the remaining 5.73 lakh are seen in SEA 5 category of States. In private aided schools, a higher number of underage children are seen in SEA 5 States, where they are numbered at 3.7 lakh against 2.4 lakh found in SEA 6 category (Table 7). Clearly, children aged less than 5 years are enrolled in higher numbers in private-aided schools. Similar trend is observed for private unaided schools where 69.4 thousand children are enrolled at less than 5, whereas 48.2 thousand were enrolled at less than 6 years. Greater tendency to enroll early in private schools is thus evident.

Figure 2: Underage Children as part of Total Class 1 Enrolment by School Management Type



Data Source: DISE 2005-06

Distribution of underage children across government, private-aided and private schools depicted in figure 2 clearly shows that enrolment of ineligible children is far greater in government schools in those twelve States where school entry age is 6 years. Enrolment trend is seen to be different in SEA 5 States where greater number of children are

enrolled in private schools, aided and unaided. DISE statistics revealed that 37.1 per cent of underage children are enrolled in private-aided schools at less than 5 years of age as compared to 9.9 per cent enrolled at less than 6 years. This difference in favor of private unaided was also noted. Whether this is linked to the difficulty in completing admission-related formalities with regard to age-proof etc. in government schools or any other reason needs to be investigated. DISE data do clearly indicate that children are enrolled in private schools earlier than prescribed age. Nonetheless, preference for private schools in general is a much larger issue and warrants an in-depth understanding in terms of variation across socio-economic status of families and the situation in different States.

In both categories of States boys outnumbered the girls among underage children. In SEA 6 States, the number of underage boys was 1.28 lakh against 1.21 lakh for girls, whereas SEA 5 States had 55.4 thousand boys in comparison to 46.8 girls who were enrolled earlier than eligible age in school (Table 7).

Table 7: Number of Underage Children in Class I in India

		SEA 6			SEA 5			Total		
		Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban	Total
GOVT.	Boys	1036604 (51.2)	89424 (49.3)	1126028	253493 (51.2)	39625 (50.5)	293118	1290097	129049	1419146
	Girls	986171 (48.8)	92142 (50.7)	1078313	241624 (48.8)	38778 (49.5)	280402	1227795	130920	1358715
	Total	2022775 (100)	181566 (100)	2204341	495117 (100)	78403 (100)	573520	2517892	259969	2777861
PVT. AIDED	Boys	70788 (55.7)	64034 (53.6)	134822	140229 (61.4)	84210 (55.8)	224439	211017	148244	359261
	Girls	56401 (44.3)	55419 (46.4)	111820	88237 (38.6)	66767 (44.2)	155004	144638	122186	266824
	Total	127189 (100)	119453 (100)	246642	228466 (100)	150977 (100)	379443	355655	270430	626085
PRIVATE	Boys	15992 (52.8)	8753 (48.7)	24745	14832 (54.5)	21889 (51.8)	36721	30824	30642	61466
	Girls	14319 (47.2)	9215 (51.3)	23534	12405 (45.5)	20372 (48.2)	32777	26724	29587	56311
	Total	30311 (100)	17968 (100)	48279	27237 (100)	42261 (100)	69498	57548	60229	117777
TOTAL	Boys	1123384 (51.5)	162211 (50.9)	1285595	408554 (54.4)	145724 (53.6)	554278	1531938	307935	1839873
	Girls	1056891 (48.5)	156776 (49.1)	1213667	342266 (45.6)	125917 (46.4)	468183	1399157	282693	1681850
	Total	2180275 (100)	318987 (100)	2499262	750820 (100)	271641 (100)	1022461	2931095	590628	3521723

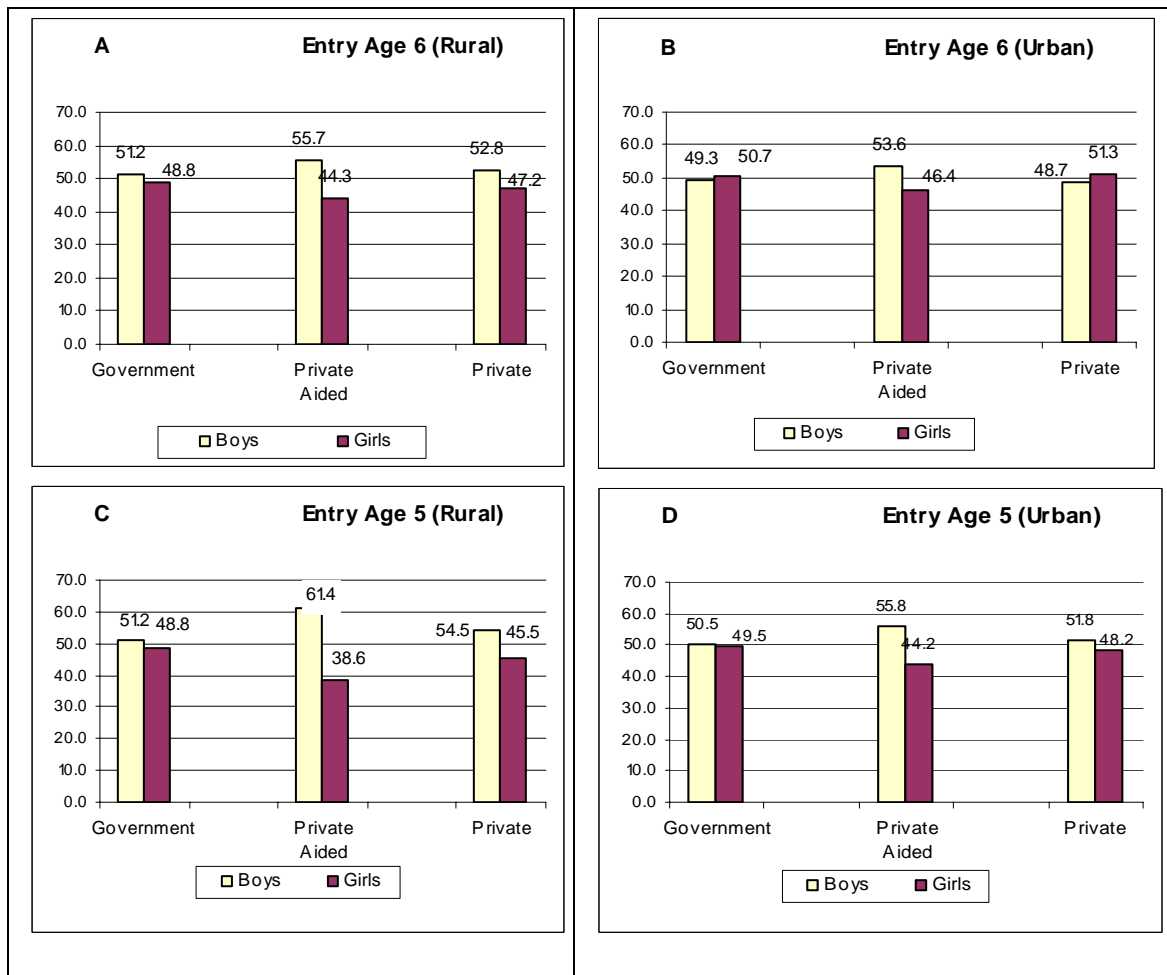
Data Source: DISE 2005-06

Looking at the rural-urban difference in the distribution of underage children, picture is again different from the trends that were seen earlier in terms of underage children as a proportion of class I enrolment. In absolute numbers, underage children are much larger in rural areas as compared to those in urban areas as the total enrolment in rural areas is higher than the urban. Among a total of 35.2 lakh children, 29.3 lakh are in rural areas and 5.9 lakh are seen in urban areas combined for both categories of States.

Further underage numbers seen by school type, gender and rural-urban residence for both sets of States (Table 7) hint at larger gender differences in enrolment in private-aided

schools in SEA 5 States. A total of 2.24 lakh boys, as against 1.55 lakh girls were enrolled in private-aided schools at less than 5 years. This gap was much larger in rural areas. As seen in figure 3a, the difference in enrolment of under 5 children was much larger in private-aided schools. It seems indicative of a preference in rural areas for enrolling boys in private schools at an early age.

Figure 3: Gender Difference in Rural - Urban Areas



Data Source: DISE 2005-06

To sum up, major indications seen from DISE data thus point out that a large number of children are enrolled *early* in school. Largest segment of underage children is actually present in government rural schools. A greater tendency to enroll in private schools, aided as well as un-aided in rural areas at an age less than 5 years was apparent particularly in case of boys.

This preliminary analysis that looks at the distribution of underage children across States, type of school- management, rural-urban residence and gender differences does not purport to be an in-depth analysis of the issue of underage enrolment in the country. It is

intended mainly to serve as a commentary based on DISE statistics on class I underage enrolment as seen from DISE and serves to highlight some of the issues connected with this for education planning. While it points towards the need to study various reasons in detail as obtaining in different States and rural urban areas, the aim of this exercise was to flag the issues of stabilizing school entry age (which will also define exit age for pre-primary) in the country and planning for provision for ECCE. These two major issues that have ramifications for children's development and progress through school education need to be seen in conjunction with in educational planning at the national level are discussed briefly in the following section.

C. Issues for Educational Planning

The assessment presented in the foregoing sections pitches the number of underage children in the country at 35.2 lakhs. However this constitutes only a partial estimate as it is restricted to underage enrolment in class I only. Actual number of underage children in primary schools in the country is likely to be larger when underage enrolment in other classes is added. While this large number of children enrolled in school before the eligible age has a reflection on inclination of parents to enroll their children in school *early*, the question here is whether these children should be in school at this age. By being in primary school at an age less than 5 or 6 years, they are missing out on the much needed exposure to ECCE in terms of inputs for good health, nutrition and psycho-social stimulation. If they are participating in school, how far they are able to benefit and what is the long-term impact on their school performance, also remains to be seen.

Given the overlap in eligible age for enrolment in ICDS (3-6 years) and primary school (5-6 years), do some of these children enroll in both places, is another question that needs to be examined. Linked to this issue are other concerns of access and quality of education facilities. For example, the availability of pre-primary versus primary school facilities in the areas where underage children are enrolled in school. As per ICDS norms, an anganwadi (child development centre) is opened for a population of 1000 in rural areas while the national norm for opening a primary school is a population size of 300. Apart from access and quality, other factors that can influence enrolment or participation of children in school vs. ECCE may include parental perception about significance of primary school education/ECCE, costs involved in attending, incentives offered at both places, admission formalities in case of primary school etc. While several such questions need to be understood at the micro level, two macro-level issues that this paper highlights in this context are as follows:

1. Need to Stabilize School Entry Age in India

Need to define one chronological age for school at primary stage in India can not be overstated as the same has implications for exit and entry age for stages before and beyond primary i. e. pre-primary and upper primary and thus affects the age-grade-correspondence throughout a child's education period, besides creating homogeneity in age cohorts. The question then is whether it should be defined as 5 years (as prevalent in

23 States) or 6 years (as being practiced in twelve States) in India. Perhaps this is not an open question anymore.

In India we have already taken a step towards setting 6 as entry age by defining compulsory education age group as 6 -14 for elementary education. Article 21 A added to the Constitution of India in 2003 directs the State to provide free and compulsory education for 6-14 year-old children. Thus it lays down the age for class I as 6 years when it states: 'The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years in such a manner as the States may, by law, determine'. This Article (awaiting notification) is inconsistent with the existing norms of school entry age in 23 States/ UTs with school entry age as 5. Education being a concurrent subject since 1976, although both Centre and States can legislate, it is stipulated that in case of an inconsistency between the law passed by the Parliament and laws made by the legislatures of the States, the former would prevail. At that stage therefore as per the 86th Constitutional Amendment which specifies 6 as the lower age for compulsory education, the Central legislation specifying 6 as the entry age for Class I will prevail. The discrepancy between the Central legislation and the States' legislation will then need to be addressed and the States may need to move towards adopting 6 years as school entry age.

Defining primary school entry age as 6, incidentally is in congruence with the current exit age of ICDS, a major programme for ECCE in the country. ICDS is implemented as Central programme and has a large presence all over the country wherein children aged 3-6 years are enrolled for pre-school education aimed at building school readiness in children. Research has indicated that high-quality ICDS has a positive impact on psychosocial development and school readiness of children (Chaturvedi 1987, NIPCCD 1992; NCERT 1993; Sood 1987, 1992).

Setting a standard school entry as 6 in the country is likely to facilitate a large number of children presently benefiting from ICDS in making a transition to primary school and start school in a better state of preparedness, which is a significant concern for school performance of children. Incidentally, majority of the countries in the world have defined 6 as school entry age as noted earlier from UNESCO statistics.

2. Planning for Provision of ECCE in the Country

As per the 86th Constitutional Amendment Act, the new Article 45 in the Directive Principles now reads as: "the State shall endeavour to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of six years". Thus provision of early childhood education for all children under 6 years is a Constitutional obligation that must be met.

The subject of women and child development is dealt with by the Ministry of Women and Child Development which deals with the ICDS programme. For reasons stated earlier in this paper, joint planning by the Department of Education and the Ministry of Women and Child Development for children aged 3 onwards will go a long way in streamlining

the provision of both pre-primary and primary education. The issue of entry age for primary has ramifications for provision of both ECCE and primary stage education as indicated earlier.

Presently the department of education is incurring a cost on education of children under the age of six years who may be accounted for in ICDS too. However, there is no mechanism of ascertaining the extent of this duplication. There is no system in place for collecting statistics on enrolment of 3-6 years olds that combines enrolment of these children across ICDS, ECCE centres by NGOs, private nursery schools, pre-primary sections attached to primary school and underage children (5-6 year olds) enrolled in primary school to facilitate educational planning for 3-6 age-group. These gaps in information are likely to influence the planning process. A national system for combining statistics on all kinds of provision of ECCE for children aged 3-6 years will go a long way in facilitating the planning for both pre-primary and primary stages. To conclude, it is desirable to set 6 years as a standard school entry age in the country. Defining a standard primary school entry age is likely to be a step in the direction of evolving age-grade structure from pre-primary to tertiary education. With improved age-grade correspondence, net enrolment ratios are also likely to improve in the country.
