

Special Issue
Globalization, Privatization, Marginalization:
Assessing Connections in/through Education

education policy analysis
archives

A peer-reviewed, independent,
open access, multilingual journal



Arizona State University

Volume 27 Number 135

October 21, 2019

ISSN 1068-2341

**Children's Accounts of Labelling and Stigmatization in
Private Schools in Delhi, India and the Right to Education
Act¹**

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Citation: Lafleur, M., & Srivastava, P. (2019). Children's accounts of labelling and stigmatization in private schools in Delhi, India and the Right to Education Act. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 27(135). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.4377> This article is part of a special issue, *Globalization, Privatization, Marginalization: Assessing Connections in/through Education, Part 2*, guest edited by D. Brent Edwards and Alex Means.

Abstract: India's *Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009* compels private schools to reserve a proportion of their seats for free for disadvantaged children. Although controversial, it is idealized as an equity measure for inclusion in and through education. This small-scale study,

¹ This study feeds into a larger project on non-state actors and the right to education funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Principal Investigator, Srivastava).

feeding into a larger research project, details children's accounts of their everyday lived experiences at private schools in Delhi. Children reported labelling students by teachers as 'naughty' or academically 'weak' or 'incapable' as a pervasive practice. These 'designated identities' (Sfard & Prusak, 2005) were reinforced by teachers and through peer interactions. They were internalized by participants about their peers and affected how they interacted with them. Peers who were labelled were reported to be stigmatized. Surprisingly, neither caste nor gender were mentioned as explicitly marking participant experiences. The paper also discusses the participatory methods employed in the study as a further contribution to the literature on private schooling. Data are from participatory 'draw-and-talk' sessions conducted with 16 children in 2015-16 from marginalized backgrounds, accessing six different private schools in one catchment area, half of whom secured a free private school seat. Participants were from amongst the first cohorts eligible for the free seats provision.

Keywords Exclusion; private schools; India; children's experiences; participatory research

Relatos de los niños sobre *labelling* y estigmatización en escuelas privadas de Delhi, India y la Ley del Derecho a la Educación

Resumen: La Ley del Derecho de los Niños a la Educación Gratuita y Obligatoria de 2009 obliga a las escuelas privadas de la India a reservar una proporción de sus asientos de forma gratuita para los niños desfavorecidos. Aunque controvertido, está idealizado como una medida de equidad para la inclusión en la educación y a través de ella. Este estudio a pequeña escala (parte de un proyecto de investigación más amplio) detalla los relatos de los niños sobre sus experiencias cotidianas en las escuelas privadas de Delhi. Los niños informaron que *labelling* a los estudiantes por parte de los maestros como "traviesos" o académicamente "débiles" o "incapaces" como una práctica generalizada. Estas "identidades designadas" (Sfard & Prusak, 2005) fueron reforzadas por los maestros y a través de interacciones entre pares. Los participantes los internalizaron sobre sus compañeros y afectaron la forma en que interactuaron con ellos. Se informó que los compañeros que fueron *labelled* fueron estigmatizados. Sorprendentemente, ni la casta ni el género fueron mencionados explícitamente como experiencias de los participantes. El documento también discute los métodos participativos empleados en el estudio como una contribución adicional a la literatura sobre la educación privada. Los datos provienen de sesiones participativas de "dibujar y hablar" llevadas a cabo con 16 niños en 2015-16 de entornos marginados, accediendo a seis escuelas privadas diferentes en un área de influencia, la mitad de las cuales obtuvo un asiento escolar privado gratuito. Los participantes se encontraban entre las primeras cohortes elegibles para la provisión de asientos gratuitos.

Palabras-clave: Exclusión; escuelas privadas; India; experiencias de los niños; investigación participativa

Histórias infantis sobre *labelling* e estigmatização em escolas particulares em Delhi, Índia e a Lei sobre o Direito à Educação

Resumo: A Lei do Direito das Crianças à Educação Gratuita e Obrigatória de 2009 obriga as escolas particulares da Índia a reservar uma proporção de seus assentos de graça para crianças desfavorecidas. Embora controverso, é idealizado como uma medida de equidade para inclusão na e através da educação. Este estudo em pequena escala (parte de um projeto de pesquisa maior) detalha os relatos das crianças de suas experiências cotidianas nas escolas particulares de Delhi. As crianças relataram *labelling* os alunos pelos professores como "impertinentes" ou academicamente "fracos" ou "incapazes" como uma prática

difundida. Essas “identidades designadas” (Sfard & Prusak, 2005) foram reforçadas pelos professores e por meio de interações entre pares. Eles foram internalizados pelos participantes sobre seus pares e afetaram a forma como interagiram com eles. Os pares *labelled* foram relatados como estigmatizados. Surpreendentemente, nem a casta nem o gênero foram mencionados como marcando explicitamente as experiências dos participantes. O artigo também discute os métodos participativos empregados no estudo como uma contribuição adicional à literatura sobre ensino privado. Os dados são de sessões participativas de “*draw-and-talk*” realizadas com 16 crianças em 2015-16 de contextos marginalizados, acessando seis escolas particulares diferentes em uma área de influência, metade das quais garantiu uma vaga na escola particular gratuita. Os participantes foram das primeiras coortes elegíveis à provisão de assentos gratuitos.

Palavras-chave: Exclusão de palavras-chave; escolas particulares; Índia; experiências de crianças; pesquisa participativa

Introduction

In the academic literature on private schooling in the Global South, the case of India is now well-known. Despite the relative concentration of research on India across a range of relevant topics, such as ‘low-fee private’ schooling, school choice and household decision-making, patterns of access, and relative achievement (see reviews by Day Ashley et al., 2015; Srivastava 2013),² there is very little research on the everyday experiences of children accessing private schools, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. This is a significant gap on two counts.

Firstly, the sheer numbers of children accessing private schools in the country are staggering. According to the latest official data, while the government sectors claimed the large majority of children enrolled in elementary education, 39.7 million children in primary (Class 1-5) and 18.6 million children in upper primary (Class 6-8) accessed private unaided schools in 2016-17, representing 32% and 28% of all children in India enrolled in primary and upper primary, respectively (National University of Educational Planning and Administration [NUEPA], 2018).³

Secondly, and of direct relevance to children from marginalized backgrounds, the landscape for private schooling in India has changed substantially since the legislation of the *Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009* (RTE Act). Among its many provisions, the RTE Act compels all private unaided schools to reserve 25% of their seats in the year of entry (pre-primary or Class 1, depending on the structure of the school) for free for socially and economically disadvantaged children, to be retained until the completion of a full cycle of elementary education (Class 8) (Section 12[1][c], Government of India, 2009). Students who secure a seat under Section 12(1)(c) enter private schools via a ‘freeship’.⁴

² This is not to imply that the academic literature on private schooling in India is saturated. Rather, India captures a substantial amount of interest in the overall limited literature on private schooling in the Global South. A number of areas require further attention and research given the sheer size of the schooling sector.

³ Private unaided schools are independently owned, managed, and financed. The term ‘private schools’ in this paper is used to refer to the official distinction in India of private unaided schools. Elementary education in India encompasses primary and upper primary education (eight-year cycle).

⁴ The RTE Act defines a child belonging to a ‘disadvantaged group’ as a child belonging to the Scheduled Caste, the Scheduled Tribe, the socially and educationally backward class or a group disadvantaged by social, cultural, economical, geographical, gender, or linguistic factors (Section 2(d), RTE Act). A child belonging to a ‘weaker section’ is defined as a child of a parent or guardian whose annual income is lower than the

In Delhi, the location for this study, eligible children are meant to be randomly selected for a freeship by a draw. For each freeship student enrolled, schools are meant to be reimbursed by the state in the amount of the actual tuition fee or the per pupil state expenditure, whichever is lower (Section 12(2), Government of India, 2009). In practice, this amount is usually insufficient to cover tuition fees charged at most private schools, and certainly those of high-fee and elite schools in urban contexts, the most prized within the private sector. A spate of media reports and emerging evidence show bureaucratic delays for reimbursement across the country affecting private school compliance, including in Delhi (Dongre, 2016; Sarangapani et al., 2014; Sarin, Dongre & Wad, 2017; Srivastava & Noronha, 2014b). At the household level, initial evidence suggests there are many barriers for eligible households to access freeships, and further, that they incur substantial costs once enrolled in a 'free' private school seat (Sarangapani, Mehendale, Mukhopadhyay & Namala, 2014; Srivastava & Noronha, 2016).

While deeply controversial, the free seats provision was envisioned in the Act as emblematic of idealized principles of inclusion. In its purest form, the Act and the provision aimed to extend the right to education across all formal schooling spaces, encompassing private schools. 'The spirit of the Act', as it is often dubbed in public discourse, is also evident in provisions reorienting all schools towards a 'child-friendly and child-centered' pedagogic approach, and in the mandate to inculcate an environment 'free of fear, trauma, and anxiety' (Section 29, Government of India, 2009). Thus, in principle, the vision for inclusion rests on changing schooling practices and school environments and opening up school spaces to extend access to basic education beyond physical access, and to affect change in the *experiences of that access* particularly for the most marginalized.

There is widespread skepticism on the ability of the education system to respond. This is heightened regarding private schools, whose lobbies had taken legal action against the free seats provision in the early post RTE-period but failed. Given this context and the scale of the compulsions, both in magnitude and substance, the urgency of research in this area placing marginalized children at the center is crucial.

This small-scale study is linked to the larger *Insights into Education* research project conducted in India. This study intended to provide a micro-point of entry into the experiences of elementary school children accessing private schools, interrogating how, or whether, idealized principles of inclusion were felt by them. It sought to understand *children's lived experiences of private schooling*, asking the main questions, 'How do children attending private schools within the context of the RTE Act characterize their everyday experiences? Do children who enter private schools with a freeship frame their everyday experiences differently than those who enter on a full fee-paying basis?' The study was guided by the explicit aim to gather detailed insights from a group of children who are marginalized in large-scale research, and whose voices, despite the wide-sweeping changes affecting them, are rarely heard. Given the twin substantive and methodological aims, the article devotes substantive space to profiling the child participants and discussing the research techniques used. We see these as contributions to the research literature on privatization and private schooling generally and in the Global South.

This study included 16 children from marginalized backgrounds accessing six different private schools in one catchment area in Delhi in 2015-2016, half of whom had a private school freeship. Data were collected through 'draw-and-talk' activities with each child, and follow-up interviews with six children. The study was couched in the larger research project between the *Insights into Education Household Survey* on household schooling choice, access, and experiences

minimum limit specified by the appropriate government (Section 2(e), RTE Act). In Delhi, this amounted to Rs. 100,000/year during the data collection period.

conducted with 851 households in 2015; and follow-up semi-structured interviews in 2017 with a sub-sample of survey households from scheduled caste backgrounds who had been successful in securing private school freehips two years earlier.⁵ Given the age of the children and the timing of the study, participants would have been from amongst the first cohorts to be eligible to enter private schools in Delhi through the free seats provision.

This paper reports the overarching theme that emerged from the analysis of data from the focused study with children. Children characterized their experiences as being largely defined by the pervasive practice of teachers labelling students as 'naughty' or academically 'weak' or 'incapable' in the private schools they attended. These 'designated identities' (Sfard & Prusak, 2005), attributed and reinforced by teachers, were further reinforced in peer interactions and internalized by the children in this study, affecting how they viewed and interacted with their peers. For schoolmates who were labelled, the participants reported stigmatization and exclusion. While the findings are not intended to be generalized, they alert us to the need for a sustained and expanded research agenda in this area.

Given the theme of the Special Issue, this paper begins by framing the globalized discourse of privatization and private schooling in the domestic context. It highlights the persistence of arguments stressing scarce public resources and low-quality public provision, despite prolonged periods of significant economic growth in India and mounting evidence on the variable quality of private provision. It then details the significant changes envisioned in the underlying spirit of the RTE Act and analyzes public controversy on the free seats provision against idealized notions of achieving equity in and through education. Next, it demonstrates the need to connect children's lived experiences of schooling with macro-institutional initiatives to fully understand the contours of education inclusion and exclusion in India. Given the underuse of participatory drawing methods with children in private schooling research, the methodological section discusses the procedures in detail. This is followed by two substantive sections—the first situates the regulatory context applicable to children in this study and highlights children's profiles; the second details children's accounts of their experiences in their words with our analysis. The paper ends with concluding observations and implications for a potential research agenda.

Privatization and Private Schooling in India: Localized Manifestation of Globalized Discourse

Privatization and private schooling in India are contentious. Domestic discourse mirrors much of the now well-versed globalized discourse on scarce public resources for and low quality of government provision (MacPherson, 2014; Srivastava, 2010). Despite a body of research showing a number of concerns with the quality and learning outcomes in government and private sectors in India (Alcott & Rose, 2015; Chudgar & Quin, 2012; De, Khera, & Samson, 2011; Kremer, Chaudhury, Rogers, Muralidharan, & Hammer, 2005), the meta-narrative of low quality is attached primarily, if not exclusively, to the government sector. This has contributed to a general climate favoring privatization and private schooling and interventions by private sector actors, all seen as the harbingers of change and 'innovation'. These underlying discourses in India approximate globalized discourses on privatization and private schooling elsewhere in the Global South and in the 'North', as highlighted by critical scholars regarding a range of contexts (Ball, 1998; Verger, 2012; Verger, Novelli & Altinyelken, 2018). While not locally conceptualized as such, domestic discourses in India

⁵ Scheduled caste groups are constitutionally defined and amongst the most historically marginalized in India.

may be seen as feeding into the broader remit of the ‘global educational reform movement (GERM)’ (Sahlberg, 2016).

GERM is characterized by Sahlberg (2016) as the adoption of education policies based on a narrow interpretation of the impacts of globalization. This interpretation is fueled by the idea that increasing national economic competitiveness is achieved by raising education standards to gain tactical advantage in the global labor market. From this perspective, countries adopt education policies favoring market-based approaches and privatization, linked to such measures as school competition and school choice, global ranking systems, assessments and high-stakes testing, and skilling in areas of presumed labor market advantage, such as in STEM. Ball’s (1998) now seminal analysis goes further: ‘advocacy of the market or commercial form for educational reform as the “solution” to educational problems is a form of “policy magic”’ (p. 124), encapsulated in the simple formula: ‘social markets/institutional devolution = raising standards (of educational performance) = increased international competitiveness’ (Ball, 1998, p. 124).

However, Sahlberg’s conceptualization of GERM as a response to the pressures of globalization concedes a fundamental tension. If, as Verger et al. (2018) assert, we ‘take globalization seriously’ (p. 3) when assessing global education policy, then the compulsions on education systems to respond to the increased flow of people (Appadurai’s ‘ethnoscapes’) and the orientation of labor markets towards technology-driven economies (‘technoscapes’) (Appadurai, 1990) are heightened in many countries of the Global South, including in India, where education quality in mass systems is less than optimal. In short, raising standards, introducing relevant assessments, and skilling might not be ‘bad words’ for systems that have not met their potential to provide decent quality access for all at the most basic education levels.

The problem is that the ‘magic of the market’ (Ball, 1998, p. 125) and of privatization to meet these challenges is presented as the most viable (if only) solution. It is often incorporated alongside governance structures and frameworks aimed (at least outwardly) to universalize access and to redress inequities in learning and quality. This is despite mounting evidence that marketization and privatized schooling measures have serious equity concerns, most adversely felt by marginalized groups (Härmä, 2009; 2011; Woodhead, Frost & James, 2013). Despite this, the lure of the magic of the market and privatization persists and is localized in education policy action.

In India, localized expressions have further intensified due to two overarching developments — the expansion of private schooling, including the emergence and operation of ‘low-fee private schooling’ as a concerted sub-sector (Nambissan & Ball, 2010; Srivastava, 2008) and its later evolution as a distinct organizational field (Srivastava, 2016); and a regulatory context supportive of public-private partnerships (PPPs) that integrates a variety of private sector actors, some with commercial motives (Kumari, 2016; Srivastava, 2010; Verger & Vender Kaaij, 2018). These developments predate but persist within the post-RTE period, increasing tensions in public discourse on the potential impacts on equity and quality in education. While a compelling area of analysis, these developments and institutional arrangements fall outside the scope of this paper. Of relevance here is that localized expressions of private schooling and privatization in India are set against a backdrop of low public expenditure on education and serious concerns about quality, and on the appropriateness and ability of private schools to meet the twin objectives of expanding access and qualitatively changing the experience of schooling as envisioned in the Act.

Public expenditure for education has not met the Government of India’s 6% of GNP target, first set in the Education Commission of 1966 (Kothari Commission), and meant to be achieved by 1985 (Tilak, 2007). This is despite sustained periods of high economic growth over the last two decades and India’s emergence as a regional and global economic power. Additionally, the cost of fully implementing the provisions of the RTE Act were underestimated (Mehrotra, 2012). Research

investigation revealed that the decision to eschew more accurate (higher) technical financial estimates was a tactical move to ensure the Act would be adopted after a number of failed attempts, which spanned nearly a decade (Srivastava & Noronha, 2014a). Financing shortfalls have prompted the entry of private sector actors, both independently and through PPPs, including by corporations, the latter also fueled by India's legally-mandated corporate social responsibility clause (Government of India, 2010).

In public discourse, low quality is mostly attributed to government schools. There are acknowledged problems with learning outcomes generally. The *Annual Status of Education Reports* (ASER), the result of an expansive rural student assessment exercise conducted annually in India since 2005, consistently show that a substantial proportion of children do not master literacy and numeracy skills appropriate for their level. For example, of the children tested in 2016, only 42.5% in Class 3 could sufficiently read Class 1-level text (ASER, 2017). The same report showed that in the 2015-2016 school year, 'just about one in four children in Std [Standard/Class] III in an average rural school is at "grade" level in reading and in math' (ASER, 2017, p. 12). These figures refer to students in government and private schools combined. Results from studies that compare relative achievement of private and government-school students in India are mixed, showing that private-school gains are variable and diminish or disappear when controlling for student background characteristics, particularly for relative wealth (Alcott & Rose, 2015; Chudgar & Quin, 2012; Muralidharan & Sundaraman, 2015; Singh, 2015).

Teacher absenteeism and teaching and teacher quality are also areas of concern (De et al., 2011; Kremer et al., 2005; Singh & Sarkar, 2015). Teacher qualifications are generally shown to be higher in the government sector, although this may not translate to higher learning outcomes due to other factors (Singh & Sarkar, 2015). Notably, one study found that private school teachers with more qualifications also did not yield higher learning outcomes for their students compared with those of less qualified private school teachers (Kingdon, 2006). While Kremer et al.'s (2005) 25% teacher absenteeism rate in government schools is widely cited, newer work challenges some of the assumptions. That study did not compare rates for government with private schools. De et al.'s (2011) follow-up to the landmark PROBE Report showed low teaching activity and similar teacher absenteeism rates in government and private schools. One field study of 619 government schools in four states found that dissociating teacher delinquency (i.e., absence without reason) from teacher absenteeism (i.e., sanctioned leave on account of medical, official duties, study leave, etc.) provided a more accurate picture (Research Group, Azim Premji Foundation, 2017). In that study, the delinquency rate in government schools was only 2.5%

Despite the nuanced research on India and some recent 'good news' stories for government schools in Delhi, reporting higher public expenditure, improved infrastructure, and higher student achievement (Hindustan Times, 2019; Jeelani, 2019), the broader public discourse largely posits private schools as 'the poor's best chance' (Tooley, 2000, p. 24). This is not to say that this discourse is uncritically accepted. In fact, the debate intensified leading up to, and following, the ratification of the RTE Act.

During deliberations, some critics saw the free seats provision as symbolic of the State's propensity towards privatization and private schooling. They argued that the provision institutionalized and redirected resources to the private sector, which should be self-financed, while the State simultaneously maintained the rhetoric of scarce resources for education. Others took a more pragmatic view, conceptualizing the provision as a way of holding private schools accountable for the substantial direct and indirect subsidies they garnered, including tax exemptions and acquiring land at greatly reduced rates, or for free, in some cases (Juneja, 2005).

A segment of elite and privileged families publicly voiced concerns in the media that they *de facto* subsidized the 25% quota by paying higher fees for their children as private schools raised rates to cover the shortfall between state reimbursements and actual tuition. Others feared their children may be displaced from their schools to accommodate students from disadvantaged backgrounds, some displaying outright prejudice (Bajaj, 2014). The provision was most vigorously contested by private school networks and owners who initiated legal action. They opposed the free seats provision and the RTE Act on the grounds that private schools were subjected to undue interference in their operations. However, in April 2012, the Supreme Court upheld both the RTE Act and Section 12(1)(c) after a contentious hearing.

Combating Marginalization and Exclusion: The Spirit of the Act

Somewhere amidst the tussle lay the claim of marginalized groups to the fundamental right to education. The RTE Act was a significant shift in making access to education ‘an enforceable “fundamental right”...deepen[ing] the legal claims individuals and families can make on the government [...] drawing on human rights language to include a variety of measures’ (Bajaj, 2014, p. 63). Intertwined with rights claims institutionalized in the Act, is the underlying ‘spirit of the law’, commonly used to refer to social justice ideals enshrined in the RTE Act. From an idealized perspective, the free seats provision was seen as an equity measure to create inclusive spaces in an otherwise exclusive and exclusionary education system, and for the experience of that inclusion to be fruitful for all:

The larger objective is to provide a common place where children sit, eat and live together for at least eight years of their lives across caste, class and gender divides in order that it narrows down such divisions in our society. The other objective is that the 75% children who have been lucky to come from better endowed families, learn through their interaction with the children from families who haven’t had similar opportunities, but are rich in knowledge systems allied to trade, craft, farming and other services, and that the pedagogic enrichment of the 75% children is provided by such intermingling. (Personal communication, senior government official)

Idealized, the free seats provision and the Act are based on a desire to achieve some measure of equity and inclusion in and through education in a deeply stratified society. Simply put, the spirit of the RTE Act aims to guarantee ‘all children the right to go to school, the right to be treated with love and care, and most importantly, the right to be treated equally and with dignity’ (Ramachandran & Naorem, 2013, p. 43). This is a monumental task given the existing cadre of research documenting the extent of marginalization and exclusion in Indian schools (Balagopalan & Subrahmanian, 2000; Nambissan, 2009; PROBE, 1999; Ramachandran & Naorem, 2013).

A number of studies examine caste-based practices of exclusion, such as segregating children in classrooms; regressive teacher attitudes towards parents and students of lower-caste and -class backgrounds; and negative peer interactions. Studies have reported children from scheduled caste backgrounds to be made to sit or eat separately from others and forced to do menial chores (Hoff & Pandey, 2006; Nambissan, 2009; PROBE, 1999; Ramachandran & Naorem, 2013). Others found children and parents from scheduled caste or tribal backgrounds to be labelled as ‘stupid’ or academically incapable (Balagopalan & Subrahmanian, 2003; Hanna and Linden, 2012; Morrow & Singh, 2014). These have explicit effects on children’s schooling experiences, peer interactions, and on broader socialization processes and life opportunities.

Nambissan's (2009) study of 234 households in Rajasthan found that children from scheduled caste backgrounds were silenced out of fear. They strategized and sat quietly in the back rows, afraid of being scolded or insulted, and were socialized early on by identifying themselves in terms of caste: 'Integral to the socialization process is the learning of ones *jati*/caste identity – children learn who they are, whom they should interact with, and other social practices that are formed by hierarchical caste relations...A regular practice in school is that of teachers calling children by their "caste name" or "son of caste"' (Nambissan, 2009, p. 22).

The *Young Lives* household and school survey data from Andhra Pradesh found that teachers' discriminatory views on social positioning, caste, and/or class may affect regular attendance (Morrow & Singh, 2014). Hanna and Linden (2012) found teachers attributed perceived caste characteristics when grading exams, which would undoubtedly have negative consequences for opportunities of children from lower-caste groups. Similarly, Balagopalan and Subrahmanian (2003) found that teachers attributed negative traits to primary-school Dalit (scheduled caste) children, which framed not only their self-concepts as learners, but influenced their relationships with non-Dalit peers.

In a review of the literature on India, Nambissan (2008) found coded gender behavior and institutionalized rituals and practices were reinforced in the hidden curriculum, affecting expectations for boys and girls. Ramachandran and Naorem's (2013) qualitative study across six states found the intersection of gender and caste formed a clear hierarchy of tasks, from menial to educational. Students were assigned tasks based on perceived ability and appropriateness, influenced by class and caste biases. Those from upper-caste groups were seen as bright and worthy of more prestigious responsibilities, whereas students from lower-caste groups were assigned menial tasks, and in keeping with expected gender norms:

With the tasks that involved home like-chores such as filling water for teachers, making tea, washing teachers' lunchboxes, there was an overwhelming preference for girls especially from the forward castes or OBC [other backward classes]. In tribal areas where almost all the children belonged to the ST [scheduled tribe] category, teachers asked any girl to do the task. (Ramachandran & Naorem, 2013, p. 48)

The researchers also found that broadly, children sat and played with 'their own kind'. Such overt forms of discrimination also pointed to the social distance between children from marginalized backgrounds and teachers: 'Social attitudes and community prejudices play an important role in determining the ability and willingness of teachers to empathize with children' (Ramachandran, 2005, p. 2142).

Corporal punishment also characterizes the schooling experience of many children. An earlier survey of 18,000 children across 13 states found that 65% of school-going children experienced corporal punishment, with 15% of reported cases involving serious physical injury, bleeding, or swelling (Kacker, Varadan & Kumar, 2007). The most common forms were slapping, kicking, beating with a stick, and being pushed or shaken. In the *Young Lives* school survey in Andhra Pradesh, 63% of children aged 9-10 reported their teachers used corporal punishment (Morrow & Singh, 2017). Notably, the rate of incidence was higher in private schools. The researchers saw corporal punishment as an institutionalized extension of power and privilege: 'India is riddled by huge divisions based on caste, class, and socio-economic status, and violence against the powerless by those in power is rampant. This extends to schools where teachers in a position of power do not hesitate to "control" children' (Morrow & Singh, 2014, p. 1).

All the practices discussed above are banned in all schools, government and private, by the RTE Act. Although research in the post-RTE context is scarce, media reports still document their prevalence. Much of the initial research post-RTE has focused on the regulatory framework for inclusion and monitoring state processes and implications of the free seats provision (Bajaj, 2014; Dongre, 2016; Mehendale, 2015; Persaud, 2015; Sarangapani et al., 2014; Srivastava & Noronha, 2014a; Dongre et al., 2017). The second, much more limited area of analysis, is on implementation by private schools. An early post-RTE study examined the implementation of the free seats provision in Bengaluru and Delhi and found: '[T]eachers and schools were not supported to foster inclusion. Most schools considered their mandate was complete once admissions were given and hence they were not working towards bringing fundamental changes in attitudes or pedagogies that could foster inclusion' (Mehendale et al., 2015, p. 48). Similarly, some private schools, in an earlier study by Srivastava and Noronha (2014b) in Delhi, refused to implement the provision, while others taught children with freeseats in segregated shifts.

There is, however, virtually no research documenting *children's experiences from their perspectives* attending private schools within the idealized notions of inclusion framed by the RTE Act. We could not find empirical research connecting the experienced impact of everyday micro-processes of inclusion and exclusion on the lives of children within this new context. Rao (2019) conducted field experiments on the effects of integrating poor students on the behavior of wealthy students to test the outcomes of an earlier quota in Delhi that was mandated for private schools that were allotted land at concessional rates. While that policy predated the RTE Act, the study found that having poor classmates resulted in wealthy students being more likely to display generosity, 'prosocial' behavior, and egalitarianism, and less likely to discriminate against, and more willing to socialize with, poor students. While encouraging, the focus of that study was on the effects on wealthy students, and not on the experiences of marginalized children. Furthermore, the research design, while apt within the confines of that study, did not address children's perspectives per se. We contend the dearth in the private schooling literature on schooling experiences from children's perspectives in India and in the Global South, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, is reflective of the wider education literature. This study is an initial attempt towards addressing that gap.

Methods and Data: Gathering Children's Insights

Traditional social science research has rarely involved children as part of the research process (Yorke & Swords, 2012; Young & Barrett, 2001), particularly in the Global South. As Crivello, Vennam, and Komanduri (2012) state, children's 'knowledge and experience should... be considered a valuable source of information for the design and evaluation of policies and programs, aimed at improving their lives and the life chances of children marginalized by poverty' (p. 234) and other factors. This small-scale analysis, couched between a larger household survey in 2015 and semi-structured household interviews in 2017, takes its inspiration from the large-scale Oxford *Young Lives* research program. Shortly after the start of the longitudinal study tracking 12,000 children in Peru, Vietnam, India, and Ethiopia, it became apparent to the *Young Lives* team that situating children's experiences 'to the people around them, and the sociocultural context institutions, services, and policies that shape their lives and opportunities' (Brock & Knowles, 2012, p. 20), was critical. This study sought to do the same, in much more modest measure.

This study represents a key point of understanding as a complement to and *feeding from* the household survey and *feeding into* the household interview components of the larger *Insights into Education* research project. This study employed participatory drawing methods to capture the lived experiences and voices of a small number of elementary school children attending private schools.

Participatory drawing has been used with children in a variety of global contexts (De Lange et al., 2012; Veale, 2005; Woodhead, 1999; Young & Barrett, 2001). Wetton and McWhirter (1998), early proponents of participatory visual research methods with children, noted that the methods could help children convey emotions visually that would be difficult to express orally or through writing. Literat (2013) stresses:

Through the process of visual conceptualization and the reflective discussion of these images in the context of their production, participants are given an expressive channel to voice their inner stories, as well as an active empowering stake in the research study. Furthermore, because of its playful nature and its lack of dependency on linguistic proficiency, this research method is especially suitable for work with children and youth across a variety of backgrounds and cultural contexts. (p. 85)

Typically, participatory drawing entails participants 'drawing and talking' or 'drawing and writing' to explain embedded meanings. This paper draws on the analysis of 'draw-and-talk' sessions with 16 children, aged 8 to 10, with gender and freeship status parity. The children attended six different private schools, half of whom had freeships. They were selected at random from households who earlier participated in the survey. With the management assistance of Collaborative Research and Dissemination (CORD), the local research partner for the larger project, Lafleur collected data with a local field assistant who had the appropriate linguistic and cultural competencies, and experience of working with children. The field assistant was also earlier involved in collecting household survey data, and later with semi-structured interviews, and thus, had intimate knowledge of the broader research study, participating households, and the study site. Lafleur conducted a pilot phase to check the appropriateness of the activities with a similar group of children. Data were collected between December 2015 and February 2016.

The study adapted and integrated participatory drawing techniques based on the *Young Lives* research design and fieldwork guidelines (Boyden & James, 2014; Camfield, 2010; Crivello & Boyden, 2011; Crivello, Camfield, & Woodhead, 2009; Crivello, Morrow, & Streuli, 2013; Tekola, Griffin, & Camfield, 2009). Each child participated in one draw-and-talk session at their home with three research activities that integrated drawing activities with semi-structured interviews. The first drawing activity involved children drawing a picture of their favorite teacher. Children were not asked to draw a picture of a teacher they disliked; however, the draw-and-talk session provided an opening to probe further. In the second drawing activity, children were asked to draw happy moments at school, particularly activities they enjoyed with their friends. In the third drawing activity, children drew a picture of their classroom, to help gain some insight into their school environment and the different activities they may be engaged in.⁶

'Summative reflective discussions' (Banks, 2011) were integrated to allow children to explain the meanings behind their drawings. The drawing activities helped guide conversation and create openings for further discussion. For example, if a participant illustrated a picture of students playing in the playground, Lafleur could probe by asking if all the children participated in the activity, or if anyone may have felt left out. The interview portion of the draw-and-talk sessions followed a semi-structured format on a broad set of topics, including: the classroom environment, peer relations, and teacher interactions. The open-ended structure allowed children to respond more naturally, making the interview process less intimidating. Children were asked several questions such as:

⁶ Drawing Activity 1 was based on Tekola et al.'s (2009) analysis of the wellbeing of poor children in Urban Ethiopia; Activity 2 on Crivello and Boyden's (2011) study of Peruvian youth and associated risks of poverty; and Activity 3 on Crivello et al., 2013.

- a. What are some of your classes/subjects at school? What are some things you are learning about at school? What are some different activities you might do in class? What do you enjoy most about school? How do you feel about school overall?
- b. What are your teachers like? How does your teacher treat other students? How do you feel about asking for help? What kind of tasks does the teacher assign to students at school?
- c. Can you tell us about your friends at school? What are some activities that you like to do with your friends? Can you tell us about how your classmates treat each other at school?
- d. How does the teacher discipline the students? How do you feel when this happens?

Interviews also involved discussing ‘vignettes’ (Crivello et al., 2013), i.e., opening storylines and hypothetical scenarios, to elicit information about schooling experiences, such as:

- a. If a new student arrived at your school, how would the other students treat them?
- b. If you were the teacher, what would you do differently?
- c. If there was one thing you could do more of at school, what would that be?

Follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with six children deemed to be more vocal and receptive to further engagement. These helped in gaining further insight into such topics as: (a) classroom management and disciplinary strategies, (b) teacher-student relationships and teacher attitudes, and (c) student-student relationships and interactions with classroom monitors. The follow-up interviews were relatively short, lasting approximately 20 minutes.

Debriefing sessions with the field assistant after every research activity were essential to validating and consolidating insights. Audiotapes and fieldnotes were transcribed for data analysis. A preliminary exploratory analysis was conducted to obtain a general sense of the data, followed by Lafelur immersing himself into the data, memoing initial ideas and concepts. The final analysis was conducted manually, applying Attride-Stirling’s (2001) six stages of qualitative analysis, to identify relevant thematic networks.

The original study design had included school and classroom observations. However, consent to access schools was denied. Based on the larger project team’s fieldwork experience, accessing private schools was becoming a challenge during the time of the study, particularly in Delhi, where political issues around the RTE Act steadily contributed to a less welcoming research environment. Other researchers had similar issues at the time. For example, Mehendale et al. (2015) found: ‘Given the fact that Section 12(1)(c) has been a contentious provision and still a subject of litigation in the courts, accessing private schools for collection of data was not easy’ (p. 46).

Thus, this study and the findings are limited to the insights provided by the children without much further attribution made to the private schools they attended. Given the extreme lack of evidence on children’s experiences and their relative invisibility in the literature, the study proved to be valuable, nonetheless. The data revealed insights that have not received adequate attention in the literature on private schooling and are useful in intimating future areas of research.

Consent, Assent, and Rapport

All households that participated in the *Insights to Education Household Survey* had been informed that they may be contacted for future research activities. Following the approved ethics protocol for

this study, consent was sought afresh from among a small number of survey households with children in private schools. Consent for children's participation was obtained from households according to the usual procedures for informed consent. Assent from the children was gained after households agreed. Before the start of each draw-and-talk session, a simplified script was used to gain assent informing the child about the study, and to confirm their participation and answer any questions they may have. Children could refuse to participate in any activity. Parents and other family members were usually present during the draw-and-talk session. This is in line with CORD's and Srivastava's extensive fieldwork experience in similar studies with households in India.

Building trust and understanding was essential. In most cases, it took time for the children to feel at ease. Each session began with an icebreaker to help build rapport and was followed-up with debriefing sessions with the field assistant. Rapport is built over several stages: apprehension, exploration, cooperation, and participation (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Table 1 shows how Lafleur addressed this in the research practice.

Table 1
Building Rapport with Students

Stage	Goals	Research Practice
Apprehension	To ease the child into talking.	Initial questions designed to be simple and non-threatening. What school do you go to? What grade are you in? Do you have a favorite class? What are some things you like to draw? Do you have a favorite color? Can you tell us about a friend at school? What do you enjoy doing with your friends at school?
Exploration	To develop a sense of learning, listening, testing To bond and share	Mindful to gauge the child's sensitivity to different areas of schooling processes and experiences. Offer encouragement towards their drawings
Cooperation	To clarify understandings and return to more sensitive areas	Following up on more substantive or involved issues when the researcher felt the child was opening up e.g., corporal punishment; teachers' attitudes
Participation	To co-direct discussion and synthesize understanding	Drawing activities helped to facilitate the discussion.

Children's Profiles: Intersections with the RTE Act's Eligibility Criteria and Beyond

The *Delhi School Education (Free Seats for Students Belonging to Economically Weaker Sections and Disadvantage Group) Order, 2011* was the first government order to provide directives on implementing freeships in Delhi. It institutionalized economic and social criteria for freeship eligibility. Caste status and basic household income were the two overarching criteria:

2(c) 'Child belonging to weaker section' means a child whose parents have total annual income of less than one lakh rupees [Rs. 100,000] from all sources and who have been staying in Delhi for the last three years.⁷

2(d) 'Child belonging to disadvantaged group' means a child belonging to the Scheduled castes, the Schedule tribes, the Other Backward classes not falling in

⁷ Rao (2019) estimated the Rs. 100,000 income cut-off to be equivalent to the 45th percentile of household income distribution 'based on the household consumption distribution reported in NSS-2010 [National Sample Survey], with consumption amount converted to income levels using the ratio of household income to household consumption for urban Indian households reported in IHDS-2005 [India Human Development Survey]' (p. 30).

the creamy layer,⁸ child with special needs and suffering from disability as defined in the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection and Full Participation) Act, 1996 (Government of NCT Delhi, 2011).

Freeship eligibility and admission criteria in Delhi, as in other states and union territories, are continually evolving. The 2011 order served as the primary reference for revisions covering the period for this study. Given their age and year of initial school entry, the main criteria outlined in Clause 2(c) and 2(d) above, would be applicable to the child participants. The latest iteration for freeship entry at the time of writing (2018-2019 school year) has extended eligibility: 'Admissions of EWS [economically weaker sections] (annual income less than one lakh rupees)/DG category [disadvantaged group] (SC/ST/OBC Non-creamy layer/Physically Challenged/Orphan and Transgender and all children living with or affected by HIV)' (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2018). The minimum residency period of three years, which would have been applicable to the children in this study, was quashed in 2013 (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2013). This change is welcome given the large number of temporary migrant laborers Delhi attracts. Remarkably, girls were not identified as a distinct group in the initial government order and have not been specified since, even though with only 814 girls for 1000 boys, Delhi had the lowest urban child sex ratio in the country of all states and union territories (Census of India, 2011).

The profiles of the 16 children who participated in this study were: (a) four boys and four girls who were freeship students and (b) six boys and two girls who were non-freeship students (see Tables 2 and 3). We attempted to have gender parity between the freeship and non-freeship groups. Final numbers represent those who agreed to participate. Of the 16 children, 13 belonged to scheduled caste (SC) groups, traditionally the most marginalized, one to other backward class (OBC) groups, and two to general caste groups.⁹ In an effort to understand the children beyond generic labels, Tables 2 and 3 provide some detail on their personalities, their overall conceptualizations on their lives at school, and their interests. Combined, the children were enrolled in six different private schools. The schools were local to the catchment area and charged a mid-range of fees as reported by parents. We are unable to provide more detailed school descriptions, as first-hand data on/from the schools could not be collected for verification.

⁸ The 'creamy layer' refers individuals in the OBC category meeting a pre-determined income ceiling. This was raised to Rs. 600,000 in 2013 (Government of India, 2013). There is a further list of occupations that are exempted, including sons and daughters of: officers of India Central/State services; Supreme Court justices and any other constitutional posts; and professional classes, for example, doctors and engineers (Government of India, 2004).

⁹ Articles 341 and 342 of the Indian Constitution outlined the provision for determining SC and scheduled tribes (ST) groups, respectively. States and union territories further outline caste groupings specific to their contexts. Employment and education quotas are determined on the basis of these determinations. OBC groups were added as classes disadvantaged socially, educationally, or economically as a result of the Mandal Commission 1980 report, which was enacted only 10 years later.

Table 2

Freeship Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Caste	School	Observations/Insights of Note
Deepa	F	9	SC	School E	Math class was her favorite and said she got good marks. Liked to spend time at school helping her friend with her studies. Enjoyed parties at which students purchased treats at the school canteen and class trips. Spoke openly of other children at her school who were teased.
Naveen	M	10	GC	School A	Thoughtful and insightful. Spoke favorably of teachers who were encouraging and caring. Tragically lost his mother to illness during the study process.
Nikita	F	8	SC	School A	Class monitor. Highly confident and vocal. Described herself as one of the brighter students. Aunt described her as a fast learner. Mother described her as an extrovert. Wanted to be an actress or a teacher when she grows up. Played 'teacher' at home with her little brother.
Parth	M	8	SC	School D	Class monitor. Considered himself to be a good storyteller. Said his teacher praised his handwriting. At school, he enjoyed racing with his friends, playing hide-and-go-seek, and playing catch. Enjoyed dance, drawing, and music class.
Raj	M	8	OBC	School C	Class monitor. Yoga was one of his favorite activities at school. Demonstrated favorite yoga positions after interview. At school, he enjoyed playing 'dog and bone'. A lemonade-making competition organized by his science teacher stood out as favorite experience at school.
Rohit	M	8	GC	School B	Very shy. Lived in extended family with grandparents. Favorite moments at school included Diwali and Independence Day celebrations. Enjoyed playing football with his friends and counted on them for help if he had not finished his schoolwork.
Shreya	F	9	SC	School G	Enjoyed yoga and physical training, and learning to type using a computer at school. Enjoyed studying with her friends. All students reportedly ate by themselves at their own desks at lunch.
Tanvi	F	10	SC	School F	Outspoken about schooling experiences, particularly about class monitors exerting power. Very open in the initial interview with mother present. More hesitant in follow-up interview with father present.

Table 3

Non-Freeship Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Caste	School	Observations of Note
Anu	F	8	SC	School B	Learning to read and tell time using a clock. At school, enjoyed playing cricket and football with friends. Felt special in class when she was asked to distribute notebooks or other tasks.
Kartik	M	8	SC	School B	Quite shy. Stated he had nine different teachers at school. Enjoyed playing football, badminton, and cricket at school. Attended supplemental tutoring.
Kunal	M	10	SC	School B	Outspoken. Class monitor. Learning about electricity in science. Spoke proudly about the time he made a volcano and a model windmill. Liked to play <i>kabaddi</i> , a traditional sport. His younger brother with special needs did not attend school.
Rakesh	M	10	SC	School E	Well-spoken. Spoke proudly of school competitions. Loved chess. At school, he was learning about scientists like Thomas Edison and various animals.
Sai	M	9	SC	School D	Enjoyed playing football with friends. Took yoga and music classes. Parents were very engaged in the interview process, asking questions about the study. Seemed to be relatively better-off. Parents claimed to own several properties nearby and to have visited other parts of India. Had a younger sister. Parents stated they treated each child equally and requested that the younger sister recite a poem.
Shobhana	F	8	SC	School C	Soft-spoken, shy, and timid. Shobhana's mother had reportedly left the family. She lived with her grandmother, aunt, father, and extended family. Interactions between Shobhana and her aunt were directive, i.e., being told how to sit; to be well-mannered; asking her to speak up.
Sonny	M	8	SC	School C	Very empathetic. Expressed a lot of concern for a friend who was commonly teased as a 'slow learner'. Studied topics light, sound, and force in science. Enjoyed judo, dancing, and drawing.
Yash	M	8	SC	School F	Personable and outgoing. Enjoyed school. Was not a fan of drawing. Teacher once gave him a black star sticker indicating that his drawing was poor. Did not want to draw during the research activities but participated in interviews.

The freeship group was heterogenous in caste status compared to the non-freeship group, which was comprised exclusively of children from scheduled caste groups. This may seem surprising at first but is reflective of the attractiveness of private school freeships across a range of social groups. Emerging evidence from other studies suggests that some relatively 'better-off' households may take advantage of the free seats provision by under-reporting household income or by capitalizing on social networks (Sarangapani et al., 2014; Srivastava & Noronha, 2016). It would be premature to make such attributions here, as data for the larger project were being analyzed at the time of writing.

Preliminary analysis of household interview data from the larger project indicates that families underwent hardship to finance private school access, even at schools charging fees at the lower or mid-ranges or via freeships. These preliminary indications of financial constraint are similar to findings in existing research on the relative unaffordability of the private sector to groups outside of the privileged classes in India (Härmä, 2011; Woodhead et al., 2013). They also resonate with results of prior field research by Srivastava and CORD in similar communities in Delhi on private school and freeship access (Srivastava & Noronha, 2016).

Thus, while there was certainly some heterogeneity in household incomes amongst the freeship and non-freeship groups, including amongst some from scheduled caste backgrounds who were relatively better-off (i.e., Sai's family), we caution against attributing 'ease' of 'ability to pay' to all families of students in the non-freeship group. Pertinent here is that the range of characteristics amongst the freeship group is indicative of the interlocking subjectivities of class and caste in claiming freeships. Persaud's (2015) detailed analysis of the Delhi RTE freeship admission rules showed the complexities in applying categorical criteria to intersectional identities. This is exemplified in Naveen's life circumstances, showing the need to employ a multivalent approach to dissecting layers of disadvantage in explicating marginalized children's lived experiences and the terms of their access to (private) schooling.

Naveen, a 10-year-old freeship student, came from a family identifying as part of the general castes. Although from a caste perspective he would be considered amongst the most privileged in this study group, his family was severely economically disadvantaged and sustained multiple hardships. Naveen's family shared a room in a multi-family unit. His mother rested on a mattress on the floor. At the foot of the mattress was a two-burner stove next to a pile of dishes. A set of cooking utensils hung from the wall. Naveen suggested climbing a bamboo ladder to conduct the draw-and-talk session on the roof. Rather than risking a fall, the research activity was done sitting on the floor in the doorway. When Lafleur returned for a follow-up interview a few weeks later, Naveen's head was freshly shaven, a sign of respect indicating the passing of a close family member. Lafleur learned that Naveen had lost his mother who had been ill for some time.

This vignette illustrates the difficult life circumstances some of the children had in the study. The children were a diverse group with distinct personalities and broad interests. Some, like Shobhana and Rohit, were shy and timid, while others, like Nikita and Kunal, were outspoken and extroverted. There were girls like Deepa and Anu who loved math and sports, and boys like Raj and Sonny, who liked dancing and yoga. The children spoke about moments that stuck out for them at school, ranging from science experiments to school celebrations and extra-curricular activities. They spoke about their friendships and expressed empathy for schoolmates who were excluded. Kunal, Nikita, Parth, and Raj, who attended four different schools, served as class monitors. This conferred some authority to them in their classroom settings.

Family structures varied. Shobhana, and tragically, Naveen, did not have their mothers. Some children lived in extended families, a traditional family structure. Parents were generally welcoming. Some like Deepa's and Rakesh's, offered snacks and drinks to the researchers. Sai's

parents were particularly engaged during the research process, asking a number of follow-up questions. Family interactions were observed during research activities. Most child-family interactions were informal and easy, while some, like those between Tanvi and her father (in contrast to those between Tanvi and her mother) or between Shobhana and her aunt, were more formal. Before, during, and after interviews Lafleur and the field assistant observed the children interacting with family members or playing with their siblings and other children in the neighborhood. However brief, the research process provided entry into the worlds of the children, opening snippets of their rich and varied lives, in which schooling played one, albeit essential, part.

'Naughty by Nature': Designated Identities, Teacher Labelling, and Stigmatization

According to Lee and Anderson (2009), students interpret and develop identities based on self-perceptions as well as 'salient aspects of social context, such as social political ideologies, histories and structures that are often beyond the control of an individual' (p. 181). The products of collective storytelling, these become 'designated identities' (Sfard & Prusak, 2005) internalized by learners, which are mutually reinforcing and become part of their self-concepts. Designated identities can act as self-fulfilling prophecies. They can limit or expand learning opportunities: 'tales of one's repeated success are likely to reincarnate into stories of special "aptitude," "gift," or "talent," whereas those of repeated failure evolve into motifs of "slowness," "incapacity," or even "permanent disability"' (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 18).

Balagopalan and Subrahmanian (2003) found teachers' perceptions of children's identities as learners, particularly if attached to lower-caste affiliations, to hinder learning opportunities. Thus, students' self-perceptions and their ideas of others' perceptions about themselves and others can affect confidence and motivation to learn (Hoff & Pandey, 2006). Consequently, based on results of their study in rural India, Hoff and Pandey (2006) argue that students may internalize negatively framed social identities leading to persistent discriminatory effects over time.

The children in this study did not raise labelling by caste affiliation or gender as actively construed in their schools or classrooms or used by teachers or peers in how they or others were identified. Given the concentration of research in India showing otherwise (Balagopalan & Subrahmanian, 2003; Nambissan, 2009; Ramachandran & Naorem, 2013), and gender parity and over-representation of children from scheduled caste groups amongst participants, this is remarkable. This is not to deny that forms of caste and/or gender labelling may have occurred, however, these children did not report them as part of their explicit everyday experience. School and classroom observations, had they been allowed, would have provided additional data to interrogate this further. This points to a rich area of future potential research.

On the other hand, the children explicitly and widely reported labelling of their peers as 'naughty' and/or academically 'weak' or 'incapable' by teachers and classmates, resulting in those students being stigmatized. Findings further suggested that students labelled by teachers as 'naughty', were seen to be disruptive *by nature*. Reddy and Sinha (2010) argue that such normative practices potentially contribute to 'pushing children out of school', particularly those who are vulnerable and marginalized. Thus, stigmatization can lead to deleterious effects on children's well-being, self-concept, and future educational outcomes.

Participants characterized the following behaviors when describing peers who were labelled as 'naughty': fighting; hitting other students; talking aloud; blaming others; and preventing others from completing their work. The children did not report teachers addressing this behavior with the 'naughty' students. Research on the effect of classroom peer perceptions, beyond caste and gender

identities, in India is lacking. The existing body of work in other, primarily, Northern contexts, would characterize such observed behavior as aggressive (see review by Estell, Farmer, Pearl, Van Acker & Rodkin, 2008).¹⁰ Paradoxically, in those contexts, such behavior while it ‘is almost exclusively associated with low likeability...has often been associated with high levels of perceived popularity’ (Estell et al., 2008, p. 196). In this study, however, rather than viewing peers labelled ‘naughty’ as ‘cool’ or popular, most children negatively internalized these designated identities:

The ones who misbehave, they fight, they don’t study, and they hit each other....*I don’t like these kids...*They disturb the class and they disturb the teacher. (Anu, non-freeship student, School B, emphasis added)¹¹

The other kids don’t particularly like them. We find them strange because they don’t do their work and keep us from completing our own. So that’s why we don’t like them.(Parth, freeship student, School D)

Labelled peers were ostracized. Children in the study reported socially excluding some of their ‘naughty’ peers. This behavior was reported to be validated by their teachers who implicitly accepted the peer responses. A number of the participants claimed that ‘naughty’ students were regularly scolded or had been hit by teachers, although we could not objectively verify this. Such teacher behavior led to further stigmatization, resulting in isolation for some who reportedly ate lunch and played alone, while others formed sub-groups with other ‘naughty’ peers:

There’s one kid who’s always up to some mischief, or he’s always roaming around in class. He doesn’t sit in his chair properly, so he’s the one who gets picked on most by the teacher.

[...]

There are some kids that no one plays with...They bother the others. They don’t let us finish our work and they also take our things...They bother everybody. There are three kids who bother everyone. The three of them play together but not with anyone else. (Parth, freeship student, School D)

‘Naughty’ students were also described by participants as being disinterested in their studies, submitting their work late, working slowly, or refusing to listen in class and disobeying the teacher. While students labelled ‘naughty’ were often seen as academically ‘weak’, they were not necessarily seen as academically incapable. Rather, their disruptive behavior was seen as the culprit impeding school success.

The naughty ones — they don’t finish their work. Instead, they start fighting, or being naughty, or they get up to some mischief. So that’s why they’re [academically] weak. (Yash, non-freeship student, School F)

Some children indicated that teachers commonly singled out ‘bright’ and ‘weak’ students. Kunal, a non-freeship student at School B, reported that his teacher blamed parents for students who performed poorly or who were disruptive and were disparaging of their parents’ intelligence. Academic weakness for ‘naughty’ students was conceived as being linked to their unruly behavior. This was distinct from the narrative for others who were seen as academically ‘incapable’.

¹⁰ In this study, behaviors were reported not observed, owing to the limitations in accessing schools for direct observation.

¹¹ All quotes are translations from the original in Hindi.

Students seen as academically incapable were often described as 'slow learners' or having a 'mental disability' and were said to be the object of ridicule. Many participants internalized such perceptions of their classmates, highlighted by Kunal, who referred to them as 'duffers'. Rakesh, a non-freeship student at School E, described a classmate who 'was scared of a peacock feather...so the kids would take a feather and scare him'. Labelling students as academically incapable invited further social exclusion, as participants reported them to be hit or shamed by peers and/or teachers:

There's this one kid who's very [slow]...he can't even add or subtract basic things, so everybody, all the kids bug him, and they slap him and hit him. (Raj, Freeship student, School C)

Raj further stated that the teacher punished this classmate and threatened to expel him. Sonny, a non-freeship student at the same school, stated that teachers treated another student similarly because 'he's poor in his studies and he's also not very bright, not very smart'. Exemplifying how negatively framed identities may be internalized by peers, Sonny emphasized that this student was '*...not mentally fit* for studying' (emphasis added). Like the incident reported by Raj, Sonny also stated that his teacher did not intervene if the student was hit or teased.

While it was outside the scope of this study and could not be confirmed, these accounts indicate that this labelling may have masked undiagnosed special needs. This would be consistent with research findings based on census data that students displaying learning difficulties or other special needs, particularly cognitive, are stigmatized in the absence of integrated school-level diagnostic systems in India (Kalyanpur, 2008).

The collective narrative of labelling students as academically 'weak', 'incapable', or 'naughty' was further reinforced by classroom interactions with class monitors, who were peers with institutionalized authority. Of the 16 children in our study, four were class monitors at different schools — Nikita, Parth, and Raj, all freeship students, and Kunal, a non-freeship student. Kunal stated he was assigned the role on a rotational basis, while the other three cited specific academic abilities. Their responses indicated the role gave them confidence. Kunal and Nikita said they enjoyed their roles because they could exercise authority over other students. Kunal, Nikita, and Parth recounted specific instances of maintaining classroom discipline. Most children, including the four class monitors, stated that monitors' reports usually resulted in classmates being punished. Nikita stated that she consoled children if they cried afterwards.

Authority was conferred to class monitors by teachers in assigning roles and responsibilities that were extensions of their own. Participants reported that class monitors were asked to assist the 'weak' students and manage the 'naughty' ones. Tasks included addressing unruly behavior, handing out punishments, checking uniforms, and maintaining orderly lines during morning assembly. Monitors were also tasked with helping struggling students with classwork, which some undertook more faithfully than others. Maintaining discipline in accordance with accepted classroom/school practice seemed to be the classroom monitor's main role. Tanvi, a freeship student at School F, was openly critical claiming that certain class monitors took advantage of their status. She stated they would defer their responsibilities and 'show attitude to the other kids...to please their friends', sometimes hitting students who misbehaved. However, most children did not question the level of authority conferred to the monitors or the consequences on their classmates, internalizing these as part of the normal course of the 'way it worked' at their schools.

Conclusions and Potential Future Research Directions

Few studies explore the interface between national policies, political discourse, and the experienced reality for children of schooling on the 'ground' (e.g., Bitew, Ferguson, & Dixon, 2008; Griffiths, 2000; Rojas, 2011; Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012; Zhang & Luo, 2016) in India or internationally. One study on the schooling experiences of children in Mauritius examined the disjoint between the macro-policy ideal of 'learning for all' against the mass expansion of 'education for all' (Griffiths, 2000). It found limited experienced learning opportunities due to authoritarian teacher-centered practices. Zhang and Luo (2016) assessed the implementation of government policies for migrant children to attend urban schools in Beijing, and found the 'hidden curriculum embedded in the everyday school practice...reflects the power and hierarchies in the larger society and rationalizes exclusionary treatment' (p. 231) in class participation and peer interactions. A study on children's experience of school democracy envisioned in the Swedish Education Act, found schools suppressed children's voices and teachers inconsistently applied rules. Teachers made decisions and students were seldom given the opportunity to negotiate formal rules, leading the researchers to conclude: 'As long as such obstacles and limitations implicitly operate as a hidden curriculum in schools, pupil participation is unlikely to be successful even when national laws and school democracy are in place' (Thornberg and Elvstrand, 2012, p. 52).

These studies, although in different contexts, alert us to the way that universalizing institutional frameworks extending the right to education, like the RTE Act, may be mediated by everyday schooling practices and interactions. These patterns are likely to be more starkly revealed when privileging children's perspectives in research. This study, in some small measure, throws light on the experienced realities of a group of children accessing a set of private schools within the contours of a framework of inclusion implicating private schools in that context.

In the Indian context, in addition to extending the legal claims to the right to education, the spirit of the RTE Act attempts to realize the challenge of achieving inclusion in and through education. While deeply controversial, and some may argue, an example of a market-based solution based on the logic of 'policy magic' (Ball, 1998), the free seats provision was envisioned by drafters of the Act as an equity measure. It aimed to open access to private schools that would otherwise remain closed to the overwhelming majority of marginalized children. The Act further aimed to alter the experience of access to schooling for all children across all school types (Section 29, Government of India, 2009).

In drawing conclusions, it is important to clarify what this study is not. It is not a comparative analysis of the experiences of government and private school students. Nor is it intended to generalize student experiences across the extremely heterogeneous set of private-sector schools. It may be that children attending government or other private schools in the same catchment area had similar experiences (or not). This study, and the data it produced, were not designed to interrogate these points and should not be read as such.

This paper reports how a small group of children made sense of their everyday experiences at the private schools they accessed framed by the RTE Act, the majority of whom, either through their social or economic statuses, fell into marginalized groups. While the children were probed throughout the process, they were not second guessed. Thus, the paper presents the children's insights as they reported them. This is the first step to privileging insights from vulnerable and marginalized groups in research, which was one of the guiding principles behind this study.

Findings suggest that the role of the hidden curriculum, particularly in conferring disciplinary authority to certain students (i.e., class monitors) and in normalizing exclusionary interactions towards others, resulted in impeding spirit of the RTE Act in the private schools these children

accessed. A serious commitment to education inclusion requires an environment fostering self-worth and respect, further stressed in the child-centered principles envisioned in the Act (Section 29). However, the children overwhelmingly reported the pervasive labelling of students by teachers in their schools. For the participants, these experiences concretized their classmates' designated identities as 'naughty' or academically 'weak' or 'incapable'. Labelling and stigmatization were normalized and reinforced by teachers tacitly accepting exclusionary peer interactions. Given the general literature on education exclusion in India, these findings may not be surprising. However, three unexpected insights emerged, worthy of further research attention.

Firstly, despite these negative accounts, children in this study looked forward to going to school. They created strong friendships and were enthusiastic about a range of activities. They had strong feelings about their teachers, affected by the teachers' behavior towards them and their peers. Unsurprisingly, several children said they disliked teachers who displayed authoritarian, aggressive, or punitive attitudes. The children also described teachers who were encouraging and caring. They spoke favorably of teachers who they thought were loving, empathetic, and had a sense of humor.

Secondly, while the initial intent of the study was to compare experiences of freeship and non-freeship students, this distinction did not appear substantively relevant in children's reported experiences. One reason may have been the over-representation of children from scheduled caste groups (i.e., 13 out of 16). This might have muted perceived social difference between freeship and non-freeship groups. Plainly, coming from relatively lower-working class families, living in the same general neighborhoods, and with similar caste affiliations, the freeship and non-freeship children in this study may have been more alike than different. The contours of their insertion into the private schools they accessed, while slightly different because of their freeship status, may not have been distinctive enough to show differences in their experiences. Furthermore, the private schools were not part of the elite or highest-fee segment. We may expect starker differences between freeship and non-freeship students in private school contexts that cater for the most privileged.

Finally, despite their lower socio-economic statuses, and for some, very difficult life circumstances, the children in this study did not refer to themselves as marginalized. They also did not attribute caste or gender as explicitly marking their schooling experiences. This is remarkable and unexpected, given the overwhelming evidence on discursive caste-based and gendered schooling practices in India. The children's accounts on these points may have been influenced by a number of factors—the presence of family members during research activities, the inability to discern subtle forms of caste and gender-based practices in their schooling contexts, or an active attempt from the schools to minimize such practices. We cannot make further claims owing to the limits of the data, but these are certainly worthy areas of further research.

Ultimately, this study points to the need for broad-scale, long-term research on the normative interactions within schools and classrooms between teachers and students and amongst students if we are serious about addressing equity concerns in education for children from marginalized backgrounds. Future analyses should examine the prevalence of such experiences within and across a range of public and private schools. This need is further heightened in the case of children from marginalized backgrounds attending private schools where there is a large social distance between them and the majority of students. Such analyses would provide more grounded comparative insights on marginalization, access, and inclusion in private schools and privatized contexts.

Acknowledgements

Lafleur thanks CORD for management and supervision assistance in Delhi and Ashti Salman for field assistance. Above all, he thanks the child participants whose resilience serves as the driving force behind this work.

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education policy analysis archives

Volume 27 Number 135

October 21, 2019

ISSN 1068-2341



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