

PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON QUALITY OF SCHOOLING IN ANDHRA PRADESH, INDIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Post-MDG development agenda recognises that simply getting children enrolled in school does not equate with better learning outcomes for children. Globally, there is an ‘education, learning and skills crisis’ with vast numbers of children unable to read or do basic maths after several years of schooling. A focus on improving the quality of schooling is essential, but little is known about what parents perceive as a good school. As they are the key decision-makers when selecting schools for their children, it is important to know what they define as quality in schools.

This paper is based on analysis of in-depth interviews with parents of children aged 9-10 years in the state of Andhra Pradesh (AP), India, as part of research for Young Lives, a fifteen-year study of childhood poverty being carried out with 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India (in the State of Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam (see www.younglives.org.uk). The study aims to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and the role of policies in improving children’s life chances, in the context of the Millennium Development Goals. Young Lives collects data from two cohorts of children in each country: 2,000 born in 2000–1 (the younger cohort) and 1,000 children born in 1994–5 (the older cohort). Interviews were conducted with 10 parents (total n=30) in three sites in mid- 2011. The intention was to explore in-depth parents’ perceptions of the changing education sector in AP, and the factors that affect their decision-making about school choice and change. The paper explores these questions through the lens of school choice (i.e. perceptions of state schools compared with private schools). This paper should not be considered as representative but is likely to resonate with parents in similar settings around the world.

Key findings

1. Parents have a broad understanding that good teaching involves ‘caring’ about children’s education, and ‘taking care’ of pupils. This includes some very basic points, from teachers being present in the classroom, being well qualified, making sure children are attending school, telling parents if they are not, being kind to children, and providing guidance to children in relation to manners. ‘Care’ may equate with teachers disciplining children, sometimes using corporal punishment, which is expected and considered acceptable by some parents so long as it does not constitute serious physical assault (and despite being illegal). The quality of infrastructure (that is, school buildings, toilets, playgrounds, and so on) was mentioned by some parents but was not an over-riding concern.

2. Parents were (mostly) dissatisfied with Government provision. Parents complained about Government school teachers not caring about children, being absent frequently, being distracted, not caring whether children attended school or not, not caring whether children were fed good food, and not communicating with parents. Some parents felt Government schools were getting worse. Some parents complained about very large class sizes in Government schools, especially when teachers were absent.

3. Some parents expressed concern about Private schools too, but feel they have the right to complain because they pay fees. Parents realised that private schools were not necessarily of high quality, and were resigned to having to overlook shortcomings in both systems. However, they did feel able to complain about quality of teaching in private schools in ways that parents of children in Government schools did not.

4. Parents want children to be taught English which means paying to go to private schools. English-medium instruction is highly desirable for children’s future prospects and an important marker of a good quality school, and a key reason why parents chose private schools. However, there was scepticism that English was really being taught effectively.

5. Quality is a central consideration when parents choose schools, but how parents determine quality differs greatly. Some parents rely on relatives’ opinions when finding out

about schools, some mentioned the importance of being able to call teachers to account, others mentioned assessing school quality by the marks their children received, and some (educated) parents may assess child's reading abilities independently.

6. Parents complained about lack of accountability of teachers in Government schools.

Parents felt able to complain about teachers in private schools because they pay fees, while they do not feel able to complain to teachers in Government schools. There was a difference between more affluent parents in the urban site, and poorer parents in rural areas – more affluent parents seemed more proactive and confident in engaging with teachers and headteachers.

7. Parents chose which child to send privately, depending not only on their perceptions of the quality of schooling on offer, but also on the characteristics of each child.

If there are several children in a household, poor parents may choose to send children they think will benefit from private school but won't waste money on children who they feel may not learn or study well. Gender may play a role here, as well as birth order, with an older son being felt to be 'worth' educating in a private school.

INTRODUCTION

Background

This paper was commissioned by Save the Children to inform their work engaging in the debates around the Post-2015 development framework. They support the need to focus more on the quality of schools and learning outcomes in any Post-2015 framework but also to better inform this work through listening to the voices of parents', children, teachers and communities. This background paper presents research into what parents in Andhra Pradesh in India think offering an authentic sense of the perspectives of parents, what they value, and how satisfied they are.

The evidence in this paper was used in Save the Children's recent report, 'The Right to Learn: community participation in improving learning'.¹ The report highlights approaches to empower parents and communities to demand change in the face of poor-quality schooling and poor learning outcomes. It calls for an ambitious equitable learning goal in the post-2015 development agenda that will provide a framework for national targets and minimum standards which governments and education providers should be held to account against. It develops a specific strand of work to bring perspectives from developing countries to bear on the global debate.

Definitions of quality

Defining quality in schooling/education is not straightforward and there is much research, mostly focussed on pupil achievements/outcomes, and inputs/teachers, infrastructure, books, curricula, and so on.² Surprisingly few studies in developing countries have explored parents' (and children's) views of school quality, what makes a good school, and what factors parents take into account when choosing schools for their children (for exceptions see Harma 2009, in Uttar Pradesh, Srivastava 2006, for Lucknow region/Uttar Pradesh, and Fennell 2013 for Pakistan). Sayed and Ahmed (2011) note that defining 'what constitutes quality is an intensely value-laden activity and involves both what is, but also what should be' (p105). Parents are key decision-makers in processes of choosing schools in India, so their subjective views about school quality matter greatly for the types of school their children attend.

Context: the rise of private schooling in AP, India

As Singh and Sarkar (2012) note, schools in India fall into three categories – 1. Government schools, run by state education departments, i.e. Government owned and controlled, and not charging fees; 2. Private-aided schools, i.e. schools managed by private organisations, but receiving Government funds to pay the salaries of teachers, also not charging fees; and 3. private unaided schools, which are privately run, and survive by charging fees. Private unaided schools set their own admission criteria and fees. These are often run by entrepreneurs such as young graduates, or someone with a spare room. Private unaided schools fall into two categories, recognised and unrecognised. The latter are unregulated, though regulation systems are weak in all schools, and there is a lack of teacher accountability (see Kingdon 2007, Kingdon and Muzammil 2009, Ramachandran and Pal, 2005, Singh and Sarkar 2012). Hostel schools for boys and girls are available across AP, and are provided by the Government and are targeted at disadvantaged groups, such as Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Backward Caste children, the aim being to encourage children to stay in school for longer (see James & Woodhead 2014).

¹ Available at <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/resources/online-library/right-learn>

² For example, UNICEF in a working paper (2000) include the following components in a definition of 'quality' in education: Learners who are healthy, well-nourished and ready to participate and learn, and supported in learning by their families and communities; Environments that are healthy, safe, protective and gender-sensitive, and provide adequate resources and facilities; Content that is reflected in relevant curricula and materials for the acquisition of basic skills; Processes through which trained teachers use child-centred teaching approaches in well-managed classrooms and schools and skilful assessment to facilitate learning and reduce disparities; Outcomes that encompass knowledge, skills and attitudes, and are linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society (UNICEF p4).

Andhra Pradesh has seen a huge rise in the private education system in recent years. Private schools typically have English as the official medium of instruction (this does not necessarily mean they teach in it), while Government schools tend to teach in Telugu or the local language (some schools also teach in Urdu). Private schools are often run by university graduates, who do not have teaching qualifications (Srivastava 2013), and while the fees are often low by international standards, they are still steep for many impoverished families, who often take on debt to pay them. Among the Young Lives sample (which is a pro-poor sample broadly representative of diverse groups and household circumstances, and excludes the very richest households – and therefore not nationally representative), private schooling of 8 year olds increased from 24% to 44% between 2002 and 2009 (see Woodhead et al 2013). In urban areas, the private sector is now a major provider of primary education, but even in rural areas, its growth has been considerable. There is also a growing gender divide, with more boys being overrepresented in the private sector (Woodhead et al 2013). Among the Young Lives older cohort, 50% of boys and 37% of girls have been moved to private school. Among the Younger Cohort, up to age 8, 14% of children had changed school once or more. Rates of change are higher in urban areas, and are slightly higher for boys than girls, though this is as much about supply as household circumstances – private schools are more numerous in towns and cities (James and Woodhead 2014). Children from tribal groups are also more likely to stay in Government schools, despite the fact that 25% of places in private schools are reserved for local children from poor and marginalised backgrounds, and subsidised by the Government (James and Woodhead 2014). Singh (2013) has found that children aged 8-10 in private schools in rural areas do better in English, but no significant difference in Maths; at age 15, there are significant but modest effects on Telugu, Maths and receptive vocabulary. In urban areas, Singh finds no evidence for private school students doing better than Government school students. Further, he finds that ‘teachers’ absence and effort, teaching practices and class size matter quite significantly for learning outcomes across subjects’, while teachers’ education, qualifications, tenure or experience do not appear to make a difference (Singh 2013 p1, see also Singh and Sarkar 2012).

Key questions asked in the study:

- What do parents view as good quality education?
- What aspects of a school do parents most worry about? – that is, what do they understand by “quality”? Learning outcomes? Exam results? Teacher presenteeism? Facilities? And so on.
- Do parents (and children) identify factors that would help improve school quality?
- To what extent are parents satisfied with public schools?
- What are parents’ views of state provision in the absence of the availability of private alternatives?
- Is the perception that public schools have worsened in recent years?

This paper explores these questions through the lens of school choice (i.e. perceptions of Government schools compared with private schools), by drawing on data from Young Lives, a fifteen-year study of childhood poverty being carried out with 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India (in the State of Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam (see www.younglives.org.uk). The study aims to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and the role of policies in improving children’s life chances, in the context of the Millennium Development Goals. Young Lives collects data from two cohorts of children in each country: 2,000 born in 2000–1 (the younger cohort) and 1,000 children born in 1994–5 (the older cohort).

METHODOLOGY

Young Lives School study

Evidence about children's schools from Young Lives' households surveys was extended in 2010, with a survey of the schools attended by a subsample of 950 Younger Cohort children, purposively sampled because of the frequency of changing schools during the early grades (see James and Woodhead 2014). The survey was complemented with qualitative data (collected in 2011) from three sites (two rural, one urban) that were purposively sampled because children were found to be moving between schools frequently. Interviews were conducted with 10 parents (total n=30) in each site in Summer 2011 to explore in depth parents' perceptions of the changing education sector in AP, and the factors that affect their decision-making about school choice and change. (Interviews were mostly with mothers; three joint interviews were conducted in Perambalur³ with mother and father, and one father by himself). The design for the School Study qualitative research drew upon Rolleston & Adefeso-Olatejo (2012), and adapted methods used in Young Lives qualitative research (see Crivello et al 2013), including 'school history' draw-and-tell method for use with children. Semi-structured interviews explored parents' perceptions, expectations and aspirations for their children, and the processes underlying their choice of school. Interviews were transcribed and translated, and analysed thematically (using Atlas-ti). Themes were initially derived from a reading of the literature on 'school quality', which provided the framework, then further subthemes were added. In terms of trustworthiness of findings, three researchers read the interview transcripts, and cross-checked their interpretations. Interpretations have been checked with the primary research team responsible for data collection, as well as some translations. The full range of experiences and views expressed by parents' in the data are reflected below (positive as well as negative accounts). The findings are based on interviews with a small sample of parents in Andhra Pradesh, India and are therefore not representative but instead are likely to resonate with families living in similar settings elsewhere in India and across the globe.

It is important to understand the differing contexts in which the research was undertaken (James and Woodhead 2014). It should be noted that the names of areas have been renamed in this paper for purposes of anonymity.

Sagar, an urban area in the coastal region of AP, with a population of 200,000. Households in Sagar are generally better off than other communities within the Young Lives study, although they would not be described as wealthy. Most of the households of younger cohort children (67.4%) were in the top wealth quintile (for Young Lives households) in 2009, and for most of them, Telugu is their mother tongue. Many private schools are available. By 2009, Younger Cohort children were still only aged 7-8, yet 32% had moved school once or more since they started Grade I, in the majority of cases between different private schools.

Perambalur is a poor, forested tribal area in Southern Telangana, with a population under 50,000. Parents typically have low levels of education, and there is less variety of provision. In 2009, the majority (63%) of younger cohort families were in the two poorest wealth quintiles⁴, and most (81%) children come from the traditionally disadvantaged Scheduled Tribe or Scheduled Caste backgrounds. Whilst half use Telugu as their first language, many also use a local dialect. Prevalence of school changes is high, with 27% (n=16) of younger cohort children having moved school more than once. Movements include from private to Government, Government to private, and also within the private sector, and children from all wealth quintiles had moved school

Kalahandi is a remote rural mandal in forested part of the Rayalaseema region, with a population just under 30,000. Parents typically have low levels of education and 46% come from a scheduled caste

³ All names of communities are pseudonyms.

⁴ The Young Lives sample is divided into quintiles (groups of equal size), where the lowest quintile (bottom 20 percent) of families are considered to be the 'poorest' and those in the highest quintile (top 20 percent) the 'least poor'. Young Lives uses a composite wealth index reflecting the quality of a household's dwelling, use of durable goods and access to basic services.

background. In 2009, 33% fell into the two poorest wealth quintiles. Nearly all children in this site use Telugu as their mother tongue. Prevalence of school changes is also high, with 36% of younger cohort children having moved school once by the age of 8, with 61% of these moves being from the government to the private sector.

The focus of this paper is on quality of schooling, from parents' points of view. The paper is divided into two sections: the first explores what constitutes good quality schooling as opposed to poor quality, from parents' viewpoints. The second explores the decisions that parents make, based on their judgements of quality.

THE FINDINGS

I. Good quality schooling as opposed to poor quality

Caregivers talked about the following aspects of quality: (a) teachers and teaching, (b) the importance of teachers 'taking care' of children, (c) the school infrastructure and environment, (d) accountability of teachers to parents.

(a) Teachers and teaching

One mother in Perambalur described how teachers teach better when they are 'friendly' to children:

"Only this year he was admitted in [school]...he left an established school in [town]...the boy is very young...how can we send him that far?...so, we enrolled him [in the Government school] here ...as [the teacher] teaches better...he behaves friendly with children, won't beat [them]...even with young children also he maintains the rapport... children also go to him...Children go without creating problem...so we admitted near him."

Parents were generally critical of the quality of teaching in Government schools, and linked this to teacher qualifications. One mother explained:

"The case of our village, all teachers are only Intermediate qualified...they teach...writing Aa, Aaas on the board...Children do not get knowledge...neither do they [the teachers] keep fear in them [discipline them]...children also do not have the fear of teachers...neither teachers have the fear to educate them"

A mother in Perambalur explained how if children attend the Government school, "certain subjects won't be taught". Further, "children will be going here and there – going into trees and fields" if they attend the Government school. The father explains: "In private schools, we pay the money so they take care...in Government schools, teaching one day then they take 10 days break...they don't take any care at all...but in private schools they take much care in everything".

Another mother in the same community said that at private school – "[my daughter] will not roam or come out [of school]...They [teachers] don't let them out – they will beat [the children] if they come out".

In Kalahandi, one mother described problems encountered with previous Government school:

"They never taught anything there...there was a [teacher who was a] drunkard and he used to come to the class drunk... he is not there anymore...the children used to shout and do mischief, and the other teachers used to take tuitions privately...so I thought that this place was useless. So I changed them to another school..."

A mother from Sagar, the urban site, explained that

"In Government schools they don't care about discipline or manners or education, even if children don't go in they will not bother, if they don't study well all so they will not care much, in Private [schools] it is not like that in all aspects. They take care even with the food also."

She said in the Government school, "the atmosphere also is not good... That is the toilets will not be clean, all the surroundings also". And another mother in urban site explained "nowadays the Government school children also prefer to go to Private schools. Not only that, the language, attitude and behaviour of them scares us. With that fear, we prefer private schools".

Teacher absenteeism from Government schools is a widely noted concern in India (see also Kingdon 2007, Ramachandran and Pal 2005). In Perambalur, a father described how:

Father: *"In Government school one teacher comes and one teacher doesn't turn up, it is their wish."*

Interviewer: *Do parents question the teachers about this?*

Father: *"Who will ask them? Everyone goes and does their work, they are busy with their work. The children go to school. One teacher comes, makes the children to sit there quietly and send them back...They don't come, one person comes, he teaches normally and go, he doesn't teach with much interest."*

Interviewer: *"How many teachers should be there in the school, actually?"*

Father: *"There should be 8 teachers; we have up to 7th class here in this school... the teachers, they come as they like, sometimes they come, sometimes they won't, it is their own wish and will'... 'what can we ask or do? We are small people. Those who are well off put their children in private school'. The school uses Vidya Volunteers [locally recruited contract]'para' teachers, not required to be professionally trained, paid lower salaries and on short term contracts]."*

Similarly, in Kalahandi, parents mentioned that teachers *"don't come on time, they start the school late in the morning and go home at 3 in the afternoon, and then the children will be jumping and running around here."* A mother said:

"The teachers teach, they come and go as they wish. Sometimes they won't come, that sir doesn't come daily, that madam she comes daily, when there is any holidays she declares holiday...they don't teach properly, they just come and go, the children will be playing on their own and quarrelling. The teacher will be sleeping, the children will be on their own."

One mother explained that she had visited the school-

"First I had been when other madam was there, now I don't know about the madam who has come now. That time the children used to fight, my co-sister's son also used to study there, he always used to get hurt and come [home], the other children use to beat him, when we ask 'what [did] the teacher do?'. He says they [the teachers] were inside, then when I asked him why didn't he inform them, he says they will be sleeping."

Another mother in Kalahandi said:

"Here the [teachers] do not come...if they come on one day they won't come on the next day...she comes from [place]...she arranged somebody [an alternative arrangement of an untrained volunteer from the village]...that girl tells [teaches] for two days and won't [teach] for two days."

Another mother describes how the teacher *"...comes on a day and won't come on the next day...children will be quarrelling and fighting with each other...these [teachers] don't come...so, why keep [the children] here when studies are not possible?"*

And another mother in Perambalur, who had no formal schooling herself, is from a Scheduled Tribe, and has four daughters, complained that in the Government school in the village:

"One teacher comes, he stays for an hour, then he says he has to apply for something [do some administrative work] and he goes off... [then he] comes and signs [takes the attendance register] and when the bus comes, he leaves... the other two or three teachers will be there, they will teach. They will appoint one elder student to take care of the children and they will not let the children come out. They [the children] go to school but they don't know how to read or write even a word. We see their slates, and they don't write anything at all."

Some parents described large numbers of children in classrooms in Government schools, and acknowledge the pressure teachers are under. In Perambalur, the father quoted above who

explained that one teacher comes when there should be eight teachers, said there are about 100 children in the school. In urban Sagar one mother complained: *“though we send [the children] to school, the teacher can’t take care of one or two children. There are 30 or more in a class. A single teacher can’t look after these many in one hour or one period.”*

(b) The importance of ‘taking care’

Many caregivers talked about wanting teachers and schools to ‘take care’⁵ of children. This seemed to be a broad umbrella term to mean at least ‘not being indifferent’, but also encompassed taking care about children attending school, children’s performance, monitoring children’s progress, being kind to children, teaching well, (however that may be determined), giving attention to the children, ensuring that they attend lessons and are not ‘roaming’ or misbehaving, that they are well fed and well-clothed, that teachers communicate with parents, sending marks and meeting with parents and talking about their children’s progress. One mother (from Perambalur) whose eldest son in ‘social welfare hostel’, and hopes to go to a Navodaya⁶ school (schools for gifted children from rural areas) explained that a range of factors make a good school:

“Generally, Navodaya means a better school...studies are going to be very good...people think in that way... still...why? because, studies are better there...they take care of children very nicely... any time... they help the children to play the games at play time... during study hours, help in studying... they conduct exams periodically...send the results...they also write letters indicating the performance/improvement between 1st test and 2nd test...if we go and meet them, they will tell ‘how your son is studying...whether studying well or not’...six children went there from our village.”

A further definition was provided by another mother in Perambalur:

Interviewer: *“What according to you is a good school? What all should a good school have?”*

Mother: *“It should have everything... It should give good food. They should teach properly and all the facilities should be good. Then it is a good school.”*

In the two rural sites, parents frequently mention food as an important aspect of the school ‘taking care’ of children – so there is an element of provision as well as learning to parents’ definition of good quality education. A father in Perambalur whose son attends a private Gurukul (ashram) school, explained that the residential school is good:

“There is everything there, they have every facility there even for girls if they get stomach pain or headache they take care, their clothes are clean and neat, the books and other things also will be within their reach, we also feel good, there is no chance for the children to come home also, only when we go they send them with us or else no. So I feel it is a good school.”

Another father in Perambalur simply said the only thing that matters was good teaching:

“...however the school may be, the teaching must be good...If education is there that is more than enough...For me, education is important, any one tells me [a school] is good I will join him there, for me his education is important, I will go anywhere to get him good education.”

Taking care includes **discipline**, and mothers in Sagar, the urban site, seemed to be concerned about learning, discipline, children’s behaviour, and values. A mother described the differences between Government and private schools:

⁵ The word used in Telugu is ‘pattinchukovadam’.

⁶ The National Policy on Education, 1986 envisaged the setting up of residential schools for talented children, to be called Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas that would select children from rural areas and place them in residential schools.

Mother: *“In Government schools, the teachers are not at all bothered whether the students turn up or not to school. However, here in this [private] school even if my daughter is absent even for a single day they send a message home. They ask us the reason why the child was absent to school. There are computers in this school and it is there only in private school but not in Government school. Every child has its own computer. They teach well and they take good care. In case if the child does not turn up to school, due to some reason, they phone us to find out the reason. Sometimes the rickshaw or the school van might not turn up then immediately we get a phone call from them asking us to send the child to school. Nobody bothers in the Government school...They are not at all bothered whether a child has done homework or not. They do not motivate the child to study well in the Government schools, whereas the private school teachers are scrupulously particular about all these things. In private schools, they give us progress report and conduct tests regularly.”*

Interviewer: *“What impression do you get...if you tell others that you have joined your child in a Government school?”*

Mother: *“Nowadays, nobody wants to join his or her children to a Government school. Even the poorest of the poor also want to send their children to a private school of their status. They want their children to go to any affordable private school. There is a strong feeling of aversion to Government school because here they care the least. They are not at all bothered.”*

However, she also expressed dissatisfaction with the private school explaining that some children in Government schools are performing better than children in private schools:

“I am not satisfied with RB [Private school]...When we go to join our child, they promise all the facilities but in reality, there is nothing there...Sometimes it is so regretting that some Government school children are far better than these children are. We are spending a lot of money on these children and there is no change in their behaviour. As these children spend most of their time with their teachers than with their parents, they will imbibe more from their teachers. Whatever the teacher tells them has its own impact than what we tell them...There is no change in the behaviour of most of the children irrespective of the schools to which they are going. Sometimes it is so depressing to observe that children going to Government schools are behaving better than these children.”

This perception is reinforced by recent evidence. Private primary schools only increase test scores marginally (Singh 2013) and ASER data for India show declining learning levels (ASER 2013). Whilst these are narrow metrics, the results underline the general crisis in education in India.

As noted, an important part of ‘taking care’ includes disciplining children and controlling their behaviour. In some cases corporal punishment (illegal in India) was acknowledged as extremely problematic. A mother in Kalahandi described one case of corporal punishment:

Mother: *“once they hit a girl with the slate on the head and she got a cut on the head...We had gone to tell her not to hit like that...Blood came...The slate was a metal one; it was sharp as a knife, with that she hit...The children were doing mischievous things so she hit...I went and told the teacher not to hit the children like that.”*

Interviewer: *“What did that madam tell you then?”*

Mother: *“The teacher said: “Why do we hit them? It is for their own good, and if we hit they study well”.*

As we explore in a separate paper (Morrow and Singh, forthcoming), parents are ambivalent about corporal punishment and want children to be disciplined. As a mother in Sagar said,

“Nowadays the teachers don’t beat the students... but it should be necessary sometimes to keep them in control. So we ourselves ask [the teachers] to be strict with the students in studies....” (She recounts how a student was so severely beaten, he died).”

A mother of a girl in Kalahandi said that her daughter (at Private English-medium school) *“says that the studies are good, but she has difficulties with English. And the teacher also hits her bad...she used to cry and always wanted to come home. She is trying hard and studying, but we didn’t bring her home.”*

A mother in Perambalur explained that ‘harsher’ teaching (which included beating) is acceptable for older children, but not acceptable for young children.

“In the case of elder children who are of higher age, harsher way can be useful...but in the case small children, who are still attached to parents; do they listen if you say harshly...they just weep, won’t go to school.”

(c) Facilities and the school environment

In general, parents seemed to feel that the most important marker of quality was good teaching, with some mentions of literacy/reading. Some parents mentioned aspects of schools such as the buildings. A father in Kalahandi described his vision of a good school and included facilities as well as teaching in his definition, but emphasised the most important thing was good teaching:

Father: *“The class room should have facility for the children to sit, with boards all around, and the teachers teaching well and clearly, then it will be a good classroom.”*

Interviewer: *“Is it a good school or not?”*

Father: *“No, it is a good school - all the facilities are not there but the teaching is good.”*

Interviewer: *“Do any of the Government schools nearby have all these facilities?”*

Father: *“No, there are no such Government schools nearby.”*

Interviewer: *“What about private schools?”*

Father: *“There are no private schools also which have these facilities.”*

Interviewer: *“Did you ever feel that your child should have all these facilities that you talked about?”*

Father: *“No madam, for me, if the teaching is good, that is enough.”*

A mother in Kalahandi explained how she had moved her child from Government school, to private school, back again to Government school. Her daughter wanted to go to the same school as her friends, and her mother said she had visited, *“and everything was nice and neatly maintained... there are lots of teachers there. They are nice. They teach her well.”*

Some parents in Sagar emphasise the availability of computers and the importance of learning computer skills. As one mother said:

“Nowadays most of the jobs are computer based jobs. And for working with computers one needs good education. So unless we have good school education we cannot go for higher studies. If we educate our children in good school they will get good jobs and this means getting a fat salary and leading a nice life. Moreover, they will not regret and blame us. We are struggling hard to meet both ends as we did not get good education and we don’t want our children to suffer like us.”

Another mother in Sagar simply said “*actually, we have to be computer literate these days to survive in this world in this generation.*”

(d) Accountability

As noted above, teacher accountability is problematic in India, and this is reflected in accounts from parents. Poor parents recognise that they lack social power when it comes to complaining about teachers and schools. As one parent from Perambalur said:

“Here people are illiterate...parents of those children are ignorant... they know only that, their children are going to school... they don’t know about what his child has learnt, what is he studying... they will be knowing that his child has gone to school in the morning and has come back in the evening... they don’t have the knowledge of how much he has studied and what he has studied... those who have such knowledge do not send there [their children to Government schools], they send to outside...”

On the other hand, parents who pay clearly feel they have a voice in their children’s schooling, that seems to be lacking in Government schools where they seem powerless to do anything about the problems they encounter (unless teachers are grossly physically abusive to children). One mother in Perambalur explains when asked about the difference between both the schools:

Mother: *“For private schools, we pay money, we can question them [the teachers] if children come home early or if they don’t study well, if they don’t teach properly, we won’t send the children to their school but in Government [schools] the teachers come and teach for the sake of their salaries, so they just come and go daily.”*

Interviewer: *“If they don’t teach properly, won’t they lose their jobs?”*

Mother: *“If they don’t teach what’s there for them, they come they teach something and go, they come and teach as per their time and go, if the children study or doesn’t do their homework they will not bother, they come teach and go as per their timings.”*

A mother in Kalahandi who sends her son privately and her daughter to the Government School, said the private school is the best. When asked about whether her daughter’s school is not good she says:

“But that is a Government school. In a private school, if they do not teach well...we can ask them strongly about it. But that is not the case with the Government schools. They might us ask us something in turn...but I am an illiterate...so we just leave it like that. But here because we pay, we have the right to ask. Even if they do not teach, they earn a bad name.”

Parents in Kalahandi had complained directly to teachers in the extreme case of corporal punishment by a teacher in the local (Government) school described above in Section I(b). One mother described how parents had gone to the school and told teachers not to beat the children, but this was an isolated case of abuse.

There is also an indication from some parents that they are resigned to fact that both private and Government schools fall short of their expectations in relation to quality, and that they must ‘overlook shortcomings’ – as one mother of a child in Sagar said:

Mother: *“Presently, there is not a single school around that has all the mandatory qualities. We have to overlook certain shortcomings and go ahead...”*

Interviewer: *“So there are shortcomings even in X school [private]?”*

Mother: *“Yes... you are right. Even this school is somewhat better than others are but not the best with all 100% qualities.”*

Interviewer: “So...there is no perfect school?”

Mother: “Yes, madam we have to compromise and we have to be content with whatever is available. For example, they have to conduct parent teacher meeting at least once in 2 to 3 month but here they did not hold it. In this way there are many issues, which they have not done, but we have to overlook such flaws and go ahead.”

2. Decisions

Parents make decisions about school quality based on a range of factors. In this section, we explore (a) the importance of learning English, (b) the choices parents make based on which child in the family to prioritise, (c) sources of information about school quality that parents draw upon, (d) perceptions of changes in the quality of schooling, and finally, (e) the financial implications of decisions to pay for schooling for poor households.

(a) The importance of learning English

Parents (and children) have very high aspirations and expectations of formal schooling, and ‘English-medium’ instruction is an important reason why parents chose private schools. Learning English is associated with better opportunities in higher education, and the job market. As one mother in Sagar said: “We talk in Telugu at home and outside.... But in degrees and in all the studies, English is a must. At intermediate [level] also, all are English medium... So we prefer English medium.”

A mother in Sagar (quoted at length in the previous section) was critical of the private school she was sending her daughter to:

“They say that it is an English medium school and the students will be taught to speak in English but in reality, nobody speaks English in these schools all of them speak in Telugu. Even if they speak, it is not of good standards. My daughter is in 5th class but she can follow English to certain extent but she cannot speak fluently.”

And a mother of a girl in Sagar also explained:

“Yes... we had to change the school to an English medium school, as the Urdu school did not offer brighter prospects. The child might face problems as there are not many schools and colleges offering higher studies through Urdu medium. We also thought that she might find it difficult to learn English and Telugu later on...we felt that Urdu medium education would not be of any use to her for a bright future. My own sister had to give up her studies later on as she had studies in Urdu medium school and suffered a lot.”

A mother in Perambalur explained that English-medium teaching was a marker of a good school:

“A good school means the children must know English, Hindi, Telugu. They should know everything my son doesn’t know, he doesn’t know English, Telugu and Maths he doesn’t know the question and answers.”

A mother in Perambalur explained that in the Government school,

“Teachers are Telugu medium teachers...though English medium started in Government schools...new staff are not given...but teaching is done by old Telugu medium teachers only...they do not teach so correctly...won’t be teaching effectively... it may lead to some problems.”

She explained that ‘the teachers [in Government schools] are suffering’ because they are being asked to teach in English: “whereas in private schools.... they are taking those who completed MA in English”. She

felt that teachers with Telugu are able to teach up to 6th and 7th classes, “whereas in the case of 8th, 9th and 10th classes, the teachers themselves have no basics, then how can they teach the children?”

A mother of a girl in Perambalur wanted to send her daughter to a private school “we thought she will learn good English there so we wanted to join her there...[the Government schools] are good but they don’t teach English, whether they teach or not, I wanted my daughter to study more nicely but she said she wanted to go to Government school and she went”.

In Sagar, a mother said: “People feel that Government schools are not good...English medium is not there...English medium introduced two years ago only...since English medium is not there...in current days, who will educate children in Telugu medium...none educates in Telugu medium.” Another parent commented: “teachers in G school [private] unable to teach in English after 1st grade, so switched to Telugu...the teachers do not have the basics.”

(b) Investment choices

There is a general sense that parents who can afford to send their children to private school, do so. One mother (whose son is currently in residential Government hostel) who felt the school is good, and the teachers ‘are teaching nicely’ and food is good, commented: “those who have money they send [their children] to private schools and poor people like us they send to Government school”.

A mother whose daughter is in 4th class in a private school, and stays in a hostel:

Interviewer: “Is there any difference in the school where your daughter studies, and the [Government] school in your village?”

Mother: “The difference is there. This [Government] school they teach freely, it depends on us whether to send the children or not, but there [Private school] we spend money and we have to send the children without fail, and they teach well.”

However, she also pointed out that it partly depends on the child – and it is not worth sending a child who ‘won’t learn’. When asked whether only poor families send their children to the Government school, she replies:

“No nothing like that, there is no difference like that, everyone goes, the rich and poor all go, some think why to waste money on children who don’t learn and study well, so they send them to [this] school, and some people who have more work and cannot prepare food and children in the morning they send them to this school.”

Thus, in situations of poverty, parents can decide not to ‘waste money’ on private education if children are deemed not to ‘learn and study well’. Some families described making decisions about which school to send a particular child to not so much on the basis of quality, but on the characteristics of the child in question. A mother in Kalahandi who had enrolled her eldest son in a private school, overall thought private schools were better, but her daughter was enrolled in a Government school.

Interviewer: “Ok...she has changed 3 schools, how is she regarding studies? Which is the best school?”

Mother: “It is the best here...she has the most in this school [Government] ... The studies are good...the girl is happy.”

Interviewer: “How is she happy?”

Mother: “She is not crying, she is studying well, there is good food and she is also very disciplined there...they get tea and snacks in the evening...she does not eat much food there because the rice is undercooked...she eats the food which I take for her but she has the snacks and all.”

Decisions can also be influenced by gender and age of child (as mentioned, more boys than girls are enrolled in private schools), as the following example from Kalahandi shows:

Interviewer: *"If you would have had two more children, in which school would you have joined them?"*

Mother: *"I would have sent them to a Government school."*

Interviewer: *"But you already put one child in a private school?"*

Mother: *"Yes...that is because he is a boy."*

Interviewer: *"What about the girl?"*

Mother: *"She is a girl...so I will educate her in a Government school till her tenth class"*

Interviewer: *"If you would have another boy, where would you have put him?"*

Mother: *"In a Government school."*

Interviewer: *"How come, he is also a boy?"*

Mother: *"Yes, he is. But I want to educate the oldest son the best."*

On the other hand, another mother in Kalahandi explains that her daughter is the better student, compared to her brother, she will *"do well wherever she is in"*, whereas son is not doing so well and therefore in private school (so gender overrides children's perceived ability/ intelligence as criterion for deciding who attends private school):

Mother: *"[my son] does not perform that well in academics whereas my daughter is quite opposite."*

Interviewer: *"So, you think a private school teaches ...all these things?"*

Mother: *"Yes...and we are quite confident and rest assured that the girl do well wherever she is in."*

In settings with limited supply of schools, **distance** to school may override quality of school as a factor in deciding where to send a child to school. One mother in Perambalur had moved her son back because she perceived that younger children were not cared for; she also had concerns about her child travelling to school:

"children used to face difficulties even to use the bathrooms... then we decided to admit in [Government school]...strength is less there...that school is little peaceful also...[Private school] is better...several people prefer that school only...we felt, our child won't require so much... so we admitted him here... another problem is route is very nearby...to go to [Private] school the boy has to cross the road...that is the main reason...whatever may be teaching and caring, crossing the road is the problem...we won't be there...my husband goes that way and I go this way...whereas the boy need not cross the road...That's why he used to go to G [private] school last year...now he need not cross the road, he can go by this lane itself...that's why we changed."

This mother seems to be saying her child does not need the better quality offered by private schools, presumably because her expectations for him are low. Distance can be a barrier to attending private school, as mothers have to get up early and prepare food, so prefer to send their children to local Government schools in the village. A mother in Perambalur, asked why her

daughter doesn't go to private school, explained that she needs her daughter to look after siblings, so therefore she attends the local Government school in the village:

Interviewer: *"Why didn't you send your child there [private school]?"*

Mother: *"We have not joined the child there still."*

Interviewer: *"Why?"*

Mother: *"We have problems; there is no one to take care of the children at home when we go out for work so we have not joined them there still."*

This illustrates not only the limited choice of school in rural areas but also social roles of girls influencing the choice of school – so quality is not the only factor affecting parents choices, and it is important to understand decisions holistically, in the context of children's work responsibilities in poor families (though this is only one case: see also Morrow and Vennam 2010).

(c) Sources of information about school quality

Parents seek a range of sources of advice about schools. A mother in Perambalur said she talked with her neighbours about good quality private schools, but she couldn't afford to send her child there: *"I tell them your position is good, and mine is not so good, for us it is hard to earn our daily bread, so how can we pay so much money, so I have enrolled him in the Government school. Let him study there, I tell them"*.

Mothers may also defer to more educated male relatives for advice on matters related to education and/or have limited decision-making due to gender norms/ dynamics (e.g. influence of father-in-laws). In Kalahandi, a mother explains that her brother-in-law used to take the children to school: *"He would go to school and oversee everything. Since he is educated, he would oversee"*. Another mother in Kalahandi mentioned that her father-in-law knew someone who recommended a particular school. When asked, *"who enquired about it, did your father-in-law?"* She replied *"Yes, he enquired and he only got him admitted"*. Then asked, *"Didn't you say anything regarding the school?"* The mother replied: *"what can we say?...wherever he says, we will join [enrol the child]."*

How parents judge school quality schools is likely to vary according to their own experiences of schooling when they were children. In rural sites, there are some examples of caregivers (mothers) who expressed a lack of confidence in asking about their children's schooling, compared with caregivers from the urban site. For example, a mother in Kalahandi, when asked what she thought about private schools, replied: *"How would I know all these things madam, will I make any enquiries?"* When asked what her son's marks were like, she said: *"We never asked..."*. Another mother when asked to describe "a good school, said *"What do I know?...you know things better..."*

These examples from rural areas contrast with examples of mothers from the urban site, some of whom (not all) are very informed and engaged, visit schools to enquire after children's progress and seem more aware of children's performance (also reflected in detailed and nuanced discussions from the urban site on quality). One mother explains that she can tell whether a school is good or not *"by keeping the children in view [keeping an eye on the children]"*. She says she often goes to visit the school. The interviewer asks: *"You mean you decided according the marks?"* Mother replies, *"Not only by the marks but by the way of her reading also"*. Obviously illiterate parents are not in a position to evaluate (or support) their children reading.

(d) Perceptions of changes in quality of schools

Only one mother, in Perambalur, felt that Government schools had got worse in recent years. She explained that *"strength in Government schools has declined ...every year we visit the schools...under Badibata [The Drive for Enrolment] programme...we send the reports to Government...we visit all the*

schools...in some schools there are 7 or 8 children...one school is closed as there is no strength...it is like that in Government schools...these Government teachers just look for the time...they are not bothering about how much the boys have learnt...only very few are working sincerely”.

On the other hand, a mother in Kalahandi described how her son had not improved despite being sent to private school. She explained that she thought “*education is important, in private institution they will teach better, so we sent them there. ... We sent them for a year, but there isn’t any improvement in them”.*

Interviewer: “*In your observation, which school is better... Government school or private school?”*

Mother: “*It is one and the same for us... we admitted earlier as we were not aware... we brought him back here.”*

A mother of a child in Sagar who is currently enrolled in Grade 4 in an English-medium private school, is suggested that standards had fallen in both Government and in private schools. She said:

“In municipal [Government] school, the teaching imparted is below par. The teachers are indifferent to the plight of the students as they are paid good salaries from the Government, so they are secure and do not bother about anything. They do not pay individual attention to the students. The classes are not held regularly and the lessons are not taught properly. They do not teach the whole lesson but they just skim through it and they also do not give the answers to most of the questions and leave the children in a quandary. If the children have any doubts the teachers do not clarify that. The teaching is haphazard and there are no explanations. However, [in the past] private school teaching was good. The teachers used to ask each and every student individually whether they were able to follow the lessons properly. But nowadays the trend has changed, even in private schools. Even here they have become quite callous and the teaching is not at all effective. They are blatantly letting the children mug up the subject matter [learn it by rote]. The students are learning blindly without any insight into the subject.”

(e) Implications for households of paying for schooling

Parents have very high aspirations for their children, and make financial sacrifices in the hope that their children will have a better life than their own. As Singh and Sarkar (2012) point out, there is a tremendous financial burden on poor families when they chose private schools. As one mother of an only child, a girl, in Sagar, said,

“People are not worried about their economic background or financial position ... they are only bothered about their children’s education. They are prepared to give up anything for the sake of their children’s education. They want to give their children whatever they missed in their childhood and they want their children to attain that position which they failed to get.”

She explained her daughter had attended three private schools and currently studies Grade 5. Her husband works as a master stonemason, which places the family in the middle wealth quintile in the Young Lives sample. The family currently pay Rs15,000 (US\$276) annually, and she fears the fees may increase to Rs20,000 (US\$369) next year. She says:

“It’s not [that] we have that amount... we have to raise that money somehow and pay her school fees and later on try to clear the incurred loans....This is very burdensome. We will not have any savings as we spend everything on education. Strictly speaking, even people of our status cannot afford these schools. Now we have to send our child to even lower rung [private] schools.... the difference in fees between [the] two types of schools ranges from 5,000 to 10,000 [Rupees] and the quality of education offered is very different. There is a lot of disparity.”

Private schools are perceived as good quality, as one mother said, “*but they ask for money weekly, and we don’t get money weekly... [so] I don’t send my children”.* Parents invest heavily in their children, because they may feel as one mother put it: “*our future has got wasted... at least future of children*

should be good". Other parents talked about how they "borrow money from others or we can mortgage our house". A father in Perambalur said:

"...for my daughter's bright future we are ready to do labour, work, earn and spend, for the child's future, whether we have or not we are ready to earn and spend."

A mother of a child enrolled in private school in Kalahandi explained "Problem with money means, we have to do one or the other thing and pay, children's education is important, even though we have lot of debts, we have to work hard and get them good education". A mother in Kalahandi explained that Government schools are preferable because they are free, but quality needs to improve

Interviewer: "What is the difference between this [Government] school and private schools?"

Mother: "Difference in the sense... teachers may not be coming regularly to these [Govt] schools... so we admitted them there... but this school is better... Government school is better."

Interviewer: "How?"

Mother: "We need not pay money... they teach without taking money... whereas there [Private schools], whatever you do, be it by way of wages, you have to pay... what is the use of it... this is better?"

In more affluent urban Sagar, one mother said "we take loans for our children's education. Our monthly income is only 6,000/- Rupees. And we have to educate both of them and also feed them. Of course we need not pay any house rent as it is our own house".

DISCUSSION

From our small-scale qualitative research with a pro-poor sample, we can see that these parents have very high aspirations and expectations of formal schooling and want their children to have better lives than they have themselves. It is important to note that this paper has explored definitions of quality in schooling via analysis of data gathered to explore perceptions of Government schools and private schools and factors influencing parents' decision-making. (Thus, we caution against being distracted by debates about private vs. Government schools). However it is clear that all parents, however impoverished and disempowered, have strong views about what counts as good quality education. However, poorer parents in rural areas seemed much less likely to say they could hold teachers to account than parents in the (more affluent) urban site. If they do not have their own experience of formal schooling to draw upon, they recognise their own limitations, and they ask for advice from relatives or neighbours. Definitions of quality from parents' point of view, then, include the following components:

- Teachers 'taking care' of pupils
- Teachers being present
- Good exam results from children
- Children being taught in English.
- 'Care' may equate with teachers disciplining children, sometimes using corporal punishment, which is expected and acceptable (despite being illegal), so long as it does not constitute serious physical assault.
- Parents feel they can complain to teachers in private schools because they pay for the service.
- The quality of infrastructure (that is, school buildings, toilets, playgrounds, and so on) was mentioned by some parents but was not an over-riding concern.

Mostly, their accounts emphasised the importance of teachers 'teaching nicely' and taking care of the children. Parents were (mostly) dissatisfied with Government provision, but expressed some concerns about private schools too, though private schools are understood to be generally of higher status, and for higher status children. Quality is a central consideration when choosing schools, but how parents determine quality differs greatly – some may rely on relatives' opinions, a few mentioned their children's preferences, some mentioned the importance of being able to call teachers to account, others mentioned assessing school quality by the marks their children received, and some (educated) parents may assess child's reading abilities independently, and so on. Parents felt able to complain about teachers in private schools because they are pay fees, while they do not feel able to complain to teachers in Government schools. However, not all parents are convinced that low-fee paid private schools were of higher quality in all cases, and there is evidence to suggest that this assessment is correct (ASER 2013, Rolleston et al, forthcoming 2014).

Implications

The expansion of low-fee private schools in Andhra Pradesh means that the 'poorest of the poor' aspire to send their children privately, but are unable to do so, even though fees are low (Woodhead et al 2013). Private schooling only offers a choice if families are in a position to opt into it. Other families are taking out loans and becoming indebted in order to pay for fees. This raises important questions for policy.

Accountability: The marketisation of education does not appear to buy better quality of schooling, but it does offer some accountability via 'customer choice' and parents appear to feel they have the right to complain because they are paying fees. Presumably this needs to be understood of in the context of increasing consumerism in India, combined with mistrust of Government systems/teachers, and multiple factors relating to parents' social status, own educational experiences, and so on. Illiterate parents may have never set foot in a school premises. They have a strong sense

of their own positions in the social hierarchy, and lack social power to complain. Poor parents perceive private schools as better quality than Government schools, and express a sense of dissatisfaction with state provision that they feel they are not in a position to complain about. Government schools need to find better ways of communicating with parents, to make themselves more accountable, and this is where lessons could be learned from the private sector. However, social distance between poor parents and more educated teachers may be a barrier to this.

Equity: There are implications of these findings for Education for All and the implementation of the Right to Education Act 2009 in India, and raises concerns about equity and perpetuation of inequality. As Woodhead et al 2013 note, private schooling 'is unlikely to be the best means of providing education for all children in the longer term in ways that respect equity principles, especially in the absence of strong government regulation' (Woodhead et al 2013 p73).

If children are in English-medium schools and acquire rudimentary knowledge of English, or are in better-equipped schools and learn how to use computers, then the school-choice system may be inadvertently reinforcing inequalities for poor children that track through to adulthood and the labour market. The long term implications of this are currently unknown, and Young Lives will be well placed to track what does happen to children who move school so frequently in the quest for better quality education.

Quality: While it is apparent that school systems in India have reached stagnation in learning (with questions being raised about whether schools really support learning and enable children to make progress at all, ASER 2013, Rolleston et al 2013), the slight improvements shown in learning outcomes for children educated in private schools means that there may be widening inequalities along lines of socio-economic status, caste and gender.

The ongoing debates about the Post-MDG development agenda⁷ (UN 2013) rightly emphasise the importance of 'quality education', with the recognition that globally, 'there is an education, learning and skills crisis', and that vast numbers of children can 'not read or do basic maths after multiple years of schooling' (UN 2013 p36). The focus on quality in schools needs to include parents, because they are making key decisions about where to send their children to school, based on complex judgements about the quality and desirability of various aspects of school. However, as the Post-MDG agenda also recognises, this also relates to fundamental questions of structural poverty, equity, social justice and the duty of Governments to ensure universal access to good quality schools for all children.

⁷ Illustrative goals: Goal 3, (b) ensure every child, regardless of circumstances, completes primary education able to read, write and count well enough to meet minimum learning standards.

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