

**PRIVATE SCHOOLING AND ASPIRATIONS: A CASE
STUDY OF PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS IN A LOW
INCOME SETTLEMENT OF DELHI**

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Abstract:

This paper based on an exploratory study of low cost private schools in Delhi, India argues that low income parents have limited access to social and economic resources which gets reflected in their educational aspirations and the future they anticipate for their children. Using Bourdieu concept of “habitus” and cultural capital the paper tries to understand the ways parental aspirations get shaped given their low socio-economic status and get influenced by the household survival strategies and parental education level. Drawing on data from a series of semi structured in-depth interviews with parents; the paper examines the ways in which the low cost schools perpetuate existing inequalities rather than encouraging disadvantaged parents and children. The paper highlights that the poorly resourced low cost private schools fail to give better aspirations to the parents. Also within the given context low income parents tend to cap their educational and occupational aspirations.

Key words: Aspirations, Education, Low cost private schools, Parents

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Introduction:

Educational aspiration are shaped and influenced by the ongoing changes in schooling as well as occupational structures of the society. The world is becoming more and more global day by day. Hence there is demand for various kinds of docile jobs with the advent of mall culture in India in general and Delhi in particular. These changes have influenced occupational patterns in the Indian Society. There is large scale migration to mega cities like Delhi in search of employment. As result many illegal residential areas have grown in Delhi. The government does not own any responsibility of providing civic amenities to these residential spaces. Government's apathy to provide better schooling facilities in these illegal residential places and other underserved areas had given ample opportunity to the private players to provide educational facilities. The number of private schools is increasing. According to the latest DISE data (2012-2013), the percentage share of private schools (including both recognised and unrecognised schools) is around 21 percent at all India level. Now it is more or less acknowledged that there is a huge regulated as well unregulated private schooling market developing across the country (Hill et al, 2011; Jeffery et al, 2005b).

The present paper based on an empirical study in a low income settlement of Delhi explores the aspirations of parents who are sending their children to 'low cost' (Srivastava, 2007) private schools (which quite often remain unrecognized by the government¹). Now it is more or less recognized that parents living in semi-urban area, rural area and at the periphery of mega cities like Delhi, Mumbai and Hyderabad prefer to send their children to low cost private schools instead of government primary/elementary schools in the area. In many cases the unavailability and poor teaching in government primary schools had promoted parents to opt for private schools which they consider affordable. In spite of the claims made by scholars such as Tooley and Dixon (2006) that low income and poor parents living in urban periphery and semi-urban area are accessing low cost private schools, the study remain silent on the aspirations parents have for their children's future. Harma (2009) and Srivastava (2006; 2007)

¹ These schools do not comply with the rules set by the government to maintain minimum standards in education. Hence do not have any legal status. Only recognised schools have the legal authority to issue Transfer Certificate which is required if children seek admission to any other recognised school either government or private at higher level.

have also explored the low cost schooling phenomena in different parts of Uttar Pradesh. They have also focused on the issues of access to low cost private schools but there is no mention of parental aspirations.

There is dearth of literature in India extensively focusing on the educational and occupational aspirations of low income disadvantaged families going to low cost private schools. However few studies conducted in Indian Context do analyses aspirations of parent. Drury (1993) exploring the educational and mobility strategies of middle class and working class families in Kanpur Uttar Pradesh, reported that within the sample population stark difference was found between the educational and occupational aspirations of parents belonging to middle class and working class. Only 31 percent manual worker thought of their children going to university level against 80 percent middle class parents. In terms of occupational aspirations Drury (ibid) further concluded that the middle class aspirations are 'open ended' (that is 63 percent parents said that their children should have professional jobs) at the top while working class aspirations tend to be 'closed ended' at top (only 3 percent parents thought of professional occupations for their sons) and open at the bottom (59 percent manual).

Rana and Das (2004) in a study of private schools in Jharkhand reported that poor parents have very high aspirations for Education and are sending their children to private schools. The low cost private schools are considered better than government schools in terms of presence of teacher and some teaching-learning activities happening in the classroom. These schools seem to have a limited notion of 'education' which fails to give better educational and occupational aspirations to low income parents. The educational and occupational aspirations parents hold for their children's future reflects the class and "habitus" of the parents. The paper concludes that the low cost schools fail to provide 'high aspirations' to parents.

Theoretical Background

Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" is being used to understand and analyse the educational and occupational aspirations of lower class parents. According to Bourdieu (1984:170), "The habitus is necessity internalised and converted into disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions; it is a general, transposable disposition which carries out a systematic, universal application-beyond the limits of what has been directly

learnt-of the necessity in the learning conditions”. He further proposes that “habitus is a system of dispositions such aspirations which mediates relationship between structure and practice” (Majoribanks, 1998:178). Habitus is said to be both the ‘structuring structure and structured structure’. Bourdieu explains that habitus, “operate below the level of calculation and consciousness” (Hart, 2013) and ‘different conditions of existence produce different habitus’. The social milieu and family environment in which an individual is born and brought up helps to develop the habitus. Bourdieu views “habitus as the product of social conditioning and thus of a history is endlessly transformed, either in a direction that reinforces it, when embodied structures of expectations encounter structures of objective chances in harmony with those expectations, or in a direction that transforms it and, for instance, raise or lowers the level of expectations and aspirations”. (Bourdieu, 1990c:116, cited in Reay 2009).

The Context and Research Method

The study is located in a low income settlement of Delhi which is an unauthorized settlement. The study was conducted in year 2011. Initial visits were made to the study area for “social exploration” (Whyte, 1984: 35). Initial interactions with the key informants and residents provided the researcher with an understanding of the prevailing schooling conditions in the study area. The demand for education has given rise to a number of private schools both recognised and unrecognised in the study area. Along with these private schools there is one government primary school. From the observation of the houses of the residents, it can be said that majority of population lives in one room houses having an area of approximately 50 square feet. Being an illegal settlement, the study area is deprived of many basic facilities which a city colony should have. It lacks proper facilities of water supply, sanitation, health and education.

The study is exploratory in nature and snow ball sampling technique was used to locate the families going to low cost private schools of the area. Specifically case study method was used. Three focus low cost private schools were selected. The focus private schools came up during different years. School A was established in year 1994 and is the oldest school in the sample while School B and C were established in year 2004 and 2009 respectively. Households having children in the school going age of 6 to 14 years attending the focus low

cost private schools in the study area were selected to fulfill the purpose of the study. Parents were asked about their immediate as well as long term aspirations regarding the future life of their children. They were asked about the kind of school they would like to admit their children after educating children in a low cost private school till primary/elementary level. The parents were also asked how much education they wish their children should acquire and what kind of occupations they should have. A total of 33 in-depth interviews were taken which includes parents (16), school owners (3) teachers (8) and Children (6). Two three visits were made to the households to establish rapport and 'social familiarity' with the study area. All the interviews were taken in the house of the family. The duration of the interviews was three to four hours. All interviews were taken in Hindi by the researcher. In the present paper parental aspiration part is explored and discussed. Pseudo names are used in the paper.

Brief Profile of Participant Parents

As mentioned earlier, the study area is an unauthorized colony. It houses mainly migrant population coming from States such as Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar and other Indian States in search of employment. To understand the socioeconomic background of the participant parents their level of education, occupation and income was recorded. The parents especially fathers in the sample were engaged in a variety of low level economic pursuits such as daily wage workers engaged in works like masonry, construction and steel workshop and distribution of L.P.G cylinders, etc. Some had petty business like running a small grocery shop or fruit shop. All the mothers in the sample reported to be mainly engaged in household activities and did not work outside the home. In all the households' father was the head of the household. On an average two children were going to school from each household in the sample.

If we see the educational background of the parents we find that most of the respondents and their spouse had low education level with few expectations. Fifty percent (8/16) mother did not receive any kind of formal or informal education and were illiterate. One mother had completed primary level of schooling while one had completed elementary schooling. Only two mothers reported to had completed graduation and post graduation respectively. All the fathers covered under the study reported to have attended some level of schooling lowest

being the primary level while the highest level of education was Masters Degree in Arts. Parents were asked to report their total monthly income. Given the low educational level and occupation the income of the most of the participants (10) falls under 'low income' category which ranges between Rs 3000 per month to Rs. 7000 per month. Four respondents' per month income were between Rs. 7000 to Rs. 10000. Only two respondents reported to have monthly income above Rs. 10000 (Field data, 2011).

Understanding Parental Aspirations

Family plays an important role in socializing children. Through parents children acquire the value system essential to integrate with the existing social values. In order to insure survival in the city, parents strategize the children's schooling accordingly which gets reflected in the future they anticipate for their children. Aspirations can be understood as what an individual expects to achieve in future. Spera, Wentzel and Matto (2009) argue that parental level of education is positively related to the aspirations set for their children. There are different level of aspirations like the type of school parents want for their children at secondary level of education, the education level to be achieved by the children and the kind of occupations they should have in future. The following sections deals with each of the aspirations.

'Schooling' Aspirations

All the respondents were sending their children to case study low cost private schools of the study area. All the children are first generation private school goers. These schools were heterogeneous in terms of per month fee charged, infrastructure and total number of children enrolled. In terms of infrastructure the quality of building was poor with small classrooms. All the schools had furniture, black board and electricity. But lacked piped water supply and drinking water was kept in buckets. None of the schools had library and playground. The per month tuition fee varies between a 'low' of Rs. 130 (for nursery classes) to a 'high' of Rs.550 (for Class VIII). The schools also differed in terms of curriculum² followed. As the schools

² During the Field study the school owners reported to follow SCERT Delhi and CBSE curriculum. The textbooks were provided by the private publishers. All the three schools provided textbooks and stationary from the school on payment.

differ in amount of tuition fee charged so the 'quality' of instruction provided. All the three case study schools claimed to provide instruction in "English medium". Though the 'quality' of English imparted varies across the schools. Parents said that they are sending the children to a particular private school according to their income (Field Interview, 2011). Though there is a positive perception about private schools amongst parents. They do not have any standard criteria to judge the 'quality' of schools. Certain apparent indicators such discipline in the classroom, presence of teacher, regular opening of the school on time were some factors cited by parents which they liked about the low cost private schools. Some parents said that they are sending children to low cost private schools under "utter necessity".

According to Spera, Wentzel and Matto (2009:1141) parental aspirations also get influenced by the "parental perceptions of quality, safety and climate of the school their children attend". The parents perceive that environment of low cost schools is not up to the mark. There is space crunch and lack of facilities such as play ground and play things. In terms of education provided parents wished that the school should provided 'better' knowledge to children beyond the acquisition of numeracy and literacy skills. When asked what parents will do once the child completes primary level from the low cost private school. Four parents said that they will try to put their children in some other 'better' school after their children completes primary level from the private school. This 'better' school for relatively well off parents means some 'recognized' private school which they considered relatively better than the private 'unrecognized' schools. Due to poor economic conditions or job uncertainty two parents said that they do not know what will happen in the future hence they don't have any plans regarding the further schooling of the children.

At primary level private schooling is preferred. Some parents thought that private schooling at primary level could help children to qualify for better quality government secondary schools. Parents hoped that educating children in private school till primary level will help them to have a 'strong academic foundation'. They believed that private schooling will also help children to acquire 'good manners' and better life style. Parents strive to achieve what Bourdieu (1968) calls "institutionalized" cultural capital. Most of the participant parents (8/16) said that they want their children to get admitted to secondary government schools.

Unlike government primary schools, the Government schools at upper primary /secondary level enjoy a better reputation. At upper primary level, instruction in English language is offered and other facilities are also better. Government schooling is more valued at secondary level than private schooling by parents. Parents develop a sense of security and stability once the child gets admitted in government secondary school. Parents believed that if the child studies properly then she/he can complete senior secondary level from the government school. They said that at secondary level of education government provides scholarships and other expenses are comparatively low which proves helpful.

The demand of private schooling at upper primary and secondary level is very high. Upper primary/secondary level education in private schools was perceived very expensive by parents. First there is steep increase in the per month tuition fee even in low cost private schools. Second the cost of textbooks and other necessary items also increases sharply. Many children especially girls dropped out after primary level due to lack of economic resources in the family. Two parents revealed that they educated their daughters up to class V in a 'low fee' private school. They did not have enough money to spend on her further education. These parents said they have to educate other younger children in the family. For instance one family had 4 children (three girls and one son). Two younger daughters and son were going to a 'low cost' unrecognised private school, while the elder daughter dropped out after class V. She stays at home and helps her mother in household chores. When asked, her father said, *"I am a poor man having very uncertain job. After class V, all the private schools charge 'high fee' and other school related expenditure also increases. Since I have to educate my other children I have decided not to educate my elder daughter further"*.

Educational Aspirations

The low level of parental education gets reflected in the educational aspirations they hold for their children. Majority of parents were not clear as up to what level their children should study. More than 62 percent parents (10/16) said that they cannot predict up to what level their child should study. The present economic circumstances of few parents (5/16) were difficult

hence they were uncertain about their children's future education. The constraints of life limit their aspirations. The uncertainty and instability of their present job made many parents say that 'everything depends on the destiny'. They were not sure 'what is written in their future or what is going to happen next', For instance one mother specifically mentioned that 'man is bound by his destiny'. She wanted her children to study properly but was not sure up to what extent children are going to succeed. Further she said, "*We want our children should study properly but it depends upon their destiny up to which level they can study (hum to chahte hain ki bachche padhai kare per inki kismat jaane ye kahan tak padhenge)*" (Usha, Mother).

The willingness of the child to study further after certain grade also influences parental aspirations about children's education. For some it depends upon the ability and 'intelligence' of the child as up to what level he/she will be able to study. Parents said that they will allow children to continue their studies till they want. In the words of Ghanshyam a father of three children, "*it is up to children. They can study till they want to study; it depends upon the child till what level he can study*".

In the same vein another mother said, "*It depends on the intelligence of the children (jab tak unki buddhi parai mein lage)*".

Some parents were committed to support and provide all possible help to their children so that they can achieve academic success. These parents have shown their desire and willingness to provide all necessary support to educate their children. They were willing to do anything for their children's education. For instance, Geeta with firm determination said, "*We will educate our son by doing hard labour (mehnat- muzduri kar ke bhi hum anpe bachche ko padhayenge)*" (Geeta, Mother).

Parental own positive educational experience and the cultural capital possessed by them in the form of knowledge and familiarity with the structure of education system at higher level also influences their aspirations. In the present study only those parents (4/16) who had relatively better economic security and higher level of education (graduation) specifically mentioned that they want their child to complete graduation degree.

Education for Girls

Institutional arrangements influence the educational and occupational aspirations of parents. According to the data obtained from the field, parental aspirations differ on gender lines. Though all parents thought that education is essential for both boys and girls as mentioned by Drury (1992) “the best career for daughter is marriage” is a value held by most of the parents (11/16). The demand for an educated bride seems to create pressure on parents as they felt that if the girl is not educated then it will be difficult to find a match for her. They also believed that if the girls are not educated it might be possible that she will not get married. For instance, Preeti a mother of two children said, “*education for girls is essential. If the girls are not educated then it is difficult to find a suitable match for them. Sometimes if a girl is not educated, her marriage may not take place. (Ladki ki padhai jyada jaroori hai, agar ladki padhi-likhi na ho to achcha ladka nahi milta. Kabhi kabhi ladki padhi-likhi na ho to uski shaadi nahi hoti)*”. Parents felt that educated girls have more chances of getting a better match and the family will also be economically stable. For instance, “*If daughters are able to study then they can reach a good home*” (*ha agar ladki padh jaye to achche ghar me pahuch jayegi*) (Geeta, Mother).

The education of girls is considered more important for their future roles as housewife and mothers. An educated girl is considered more beneficial to the future family and children. Some parents (4/16) said that only an educated girl can have the ability to manage the home ‘properly’. She can bring peace to the family. The education of girls is also seen for the betterment of the future generation. Only an educated girl can take care of her children well and she can teach them. For example: “*Girls should be educated. An educated girl can teach her children.*” (Mobina, Mother).

“*Yes, girls must be educated as an educated girl can manage her home. She is more careful about all the things.*” (Subhash, Father).

“*If the girls are educated, there will be more chances for the development of next generation as an educated girl can take care of her children.*” (Denish, Father).

Girl's education is also seen as a way of protection against future misfortune. A sort of *insurance policy* in case a financial hardship falls on the girl's family. Parents said that if a girl is educated, she can do some job in case she is deserted by her husband. One of the mothers giving her own example said, "*My husband does not give me any money but my mother has educated me till graduation so I am able to do a job and take care of my children*" (Spana, Mother).

The 'role models' or 'significant others' also influence parental aspirations. Parents did not have frequent contacts with people who can act as role models in their life. All parents were upwardly mobile and tried to provide the 'best possible education' to children according to their 'standard'. They tried to provide children with some platform to stand but their efforts are not channelized 'properly' due to lack of economic resources and other social support. For girls the role models available in the locality were teachers of 'low cost' private schools. As these teachers have low educational qualifications. Two parents thought that their daughters could become teachers. Parents also said that education of girls can also bring extra income for the family. If a girl is educated, she can give home tuition to children and can earn some money.

There existed a sharp contrast between the educational and carrier aspirations for one's own daughter and girls in general. Many parents (7/16) said that now time has changed, girls are doing job in every field and are much ahead of boys. As said by one mother, "*now girls are going ahead in every field they can become doctor, engineer and pilot*" (Pinky, Mother.). Similarly another father said "*now girls can join army*" (Subhas, Father). These big things fall apart when it comes down to their own daughters. Most of the parents especially fathers thought that sending out girls for further schooling can bring disgrace to their family. They were afraid of insecure environment of outside world. They were anxious that something wrong can happen to their daughters while she is travelling alone for an hour to attend the secondary school. While boys were seen to bring pride to the family if they study well and achieve education of a 'decent level'. It is evident from above that parents have different aspirations for their sons and daughters. The 'marriage as career' for girls seems to pervade the entire strategy of parents to educate daughters. Here Srivastava's (2007) argument that 'Mental Models' for

girls education are changing and parents are willing to send their daughters to private schools needs further analysis in terms of 'purpose of education for girls'. No doubt 'mental models' for girls education has changed and parents are sending girls to schools. It is clear that the perspectives on girls' education differ slightly. The findings of present study suggest that purpose of education for the girls' remains mainly confined to finding better marriage alliance for the girls. Though few parents see the economic benefits of educating daughters but it remain restricted to certain domains which are seen safe for girls.

Occupational Aspirations

Future aspirations are tailored and influenced by different kind of social networks and prevailing social conditions. Unlike middle class families the lower classes usually do not have cosmopolitan network and requisite cultural capital to make different channels workable for their benefit. Lower classes do not have 'educational adviser' (Drury, 1993) or any other resource to seek advice about the education/ career of children. It seems parents are aware of the inflation of educational credentials. Hence they may not plan any thing for the future career of their children. They have to work according to their own life experiences and the acquired habitus which do not allow them to go beyond the traditional thinking that 'what a child will become in future depends upon the child'. Many parents had a very vague idea about the future achievement of their children and thought "Children will get what is written in their destiny". As majority of parents (8/16) said that they have not thought anything about what their child should become in future. As one mother said, "*the children will become something in future on their own (aage apne aap bachche kuch ban jayenge)*".

Education is seen as a pathway to give better life opportunities. Some Parents (4) dreamt of children's schooling to be helpful in attaining social and economic mobility. Parents did not down play their present occupation but want that their son should not follow in their suit. However most of the parents had modest occupational aspirations for their children. Many parents (6/16) said that if their child (specially the son) will get a job it will be good for the family. They wanted that their son should get some white collar job. Parents highlight the importance of having a salaried work. A white collar salaried job is seen to bring family social status and economic prosperity. As one mother optimistically said, "*the work of their father*

(fruit seller) is very tough and hard. It requires very hard labour. If my son will study he can get some job. A job can bring good name to the family” (Preeti, Mother School A).

Conclusion

According to Majoribanks (1998:178) adolescent's aspirations are 'influenced by the family background, school settings and by Individuals' academic capital'. In the present case study also we can see that the socio-economic background of the parents' and school setting is having strong influence on their aspirations. Parents value education and are aware of the importance of education in life. Hence they are sending children to low cost private schools. Parents aspire to acquire the requisite cultural capital via private schooling within their limited resources. Parental aspirations diverge on gender line. The findings of the study are consistent with what Jeffery et al (2005b) conclude in their study of Bijnor District, Uttar Pradesh, within the patriarchal notions girls education is viewed to make them 'good wives and mothers'. Mainly boys are seen as the breadwinner of the family. From the forgoing discussion we can conclude that though in the literature low cost private schooling is seen as an option to provide education to the disadvantaged sections of the society. But it has got serious implications in terms of quality of education provided, gender and also access to secondary level of education. In long run this arrangement seems to perpetuate existing social equalities in the society. Given the "habitus" of low income parents, the low cost private school setting is unable to provide avenues for parents to translate their aspirations into high academic (such as participation in higher education) and occupational success (children securing white collar or professional jobs). Parents are having modest aspirations for the future life of their children. They seem aware of the structural constrains that hinders their access to secondary schooling there by limiting their aspirations. However given the limitations of the present study more in-depth research is required to be conducted in India in the context of parental aspirations and low cost private schooling.

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