

DO LOW-FEE PRIVATE SCHOOLS OFFER BETTER EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR INDIA'S URBAN YOUTH?

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The UN Sustainable Development Goals propose the right to an 'inclusive and equitable quality primary and secondary education' as a global priority. The prior goal of a universal primary education has now been adequately achieved in most countries; thus, the focus of research has shifted to ensuring that adolescents are learning sufficiently. India is a pertinent case study: in 2011 it housed 120.5m people aged 15-19. India faces significant educational difficulties in adapting to the new global economy: **according to a 2017 survey of 30,000 rural youth, 25% of those aged 14-18 could not fluently read a basic sentence in their own language (ASER 2017).** In addition, **23% of all young Indians had left education entirely by the age of 14, rising to 53% at age 16 (NUEPA 2017).** I propose to study these problems of secondary-level learning outcome and youth pupil retention in the context of a new educational phenomenon: the 'low-fee private school'.

Over the last 20 years, students have migrated from government-run schools to low-fee private schools: while enrolment in government schools declined by 13 million from 2010 to 2015, private school enrolment increased by 17 million (Kingdon, 2017). Low-fee private schools (LFPs) are independent from government and dependent on user fees. They supposedly deliver better teaching quality more cost-effectively; however, Srivastava (2007) among others states that fees may decrease accessibility to the poorest households.

I propose to **conduct a case study comparing a number of urban secondary schools**, including government schools and various types of low-fee private school. This will be in the urban areas of West Bengal. This large state is of particular interest: it houses Kolkata, a diverse metropolis, along with smaller towns, allowing for urban comparison. It is also the only state where government per-pupil expenditure exceeds the median private school fee (Kingdon, 2017). The urban context is different to the rural: there are more LFPs, so access is easier for low-income households, which allows government-private comparison.

Educational outcomes will be classed as positive or negative. These will include exam results, enrolment, attendance, and basic life skills; more complex outcomes such as aspiration will also be surveyed, but on a non-normative basis. Failure to achieve the above outcomes centres around the issues of **learning outcome** and **pupil retention**. I will thus study the external and internal factors that drive these two issues. These include teacher ability, adverse teacher incentives from after-school tutoring markets, lesson quality, curriculum type, prior attainment; socio-economic status, pupil external income incentives, and access to facilities. I will also study **the extent to which economic inequality can be lessened by LFPs**, for example by assessing various types of 'public-private partnership'.

I plan to use a mixed approach, combining state-wide econometric data, taken from government censuses and external surveys, and primary field study. Using the well-regarded ASER framework, pupils will be examined on basic literary and numerical abilities and surveyed on their aspirations. Qualitative surveys will be undertaken, aiming to isolate factors for attainment and attendance, controlling for population and selection bias. Interviews may be conducted with local educational experts and teachers themselves. Lessons may be assessed. The objectives of the project are to **study the extent to which LFPs solve issues of learning outcome and pupil retention**; and to **assess the state of the Indian school system** with regards to **youth attendance, skill acquisition, and inequality**.

This represents an extension of current research: there is a lack of literature on the issues of learning outcome and pupil retention. The heterogeneity of urban LFPs – ranging from small 'teaching shops' to international NGO schools – has not yet been studied. Alternative curricula have also not yet been studied. Conclusions made from the study will have the potential to inform policy, helping to improve quality of education for young Indians and preparing them for the global future.