9 | The Idea of Quality in Inclusive Schools

Annie Koshi

The Challenge of Defining 'Quality' Education

The rationale of reserving 25 per cent seats for the economically weaker section (EWS) in schools run by the non-state sector and the ongoing debate on it contributes interestingly to the definition of a 'quality' education as envisaged in the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009. The RTE has used the word 'quality' to define what the state envisages as a meaningful and relevant education and in the process has succumbed to the need of modern times to quantify, prioritise and compare. While setting quality standards is not something to be rundown, the effort becomes particularly problematic in an area like education, where the quality that requires to be quantified is something so delicate a product, as the core or character of education. When we attempt to further define this character by such tangibles as a school building, pupil–teacher ratio (PTR) and timelines for curriculum completion and outcomes, we are stepping into neoliberal ideas of system and management, which are strongly influenced by economic policies. In *A Pedagogue's Romance* (2008), Krishna Kumar explains that the romance and adventure of education lies in the fact that children, like stem cells, have the ability to transform themselves to something far beyond their predicted outcomes, that there is no guarantee that a particular input will produce a specific result. It is in such a situation that this paper looks at the words 'access', 'equity' and 'quality'. These are words synonymous with the RTE. Each of these terms while seemingly simple to understand and deal with, have scaffolding meanings and consequent transactions in different contexts. This paper will explore the meanings and implications of these three interconnected words specifically in the context of inclusion, with special references to the practices of two private, unaided schools — Loreto Day School, Sealdah, Kolkata and St Mary's School, Safdarjung Enclave, New Delhi.

Practising 'Inclusion' in Schools

Inclusive practices celebrate difference and require first and foremost that the child be set at centre stage. All systems are changed to accommodate the child while in other more typical setups the child is required to adapt in order to fit into an inviolate system. Adventure and romance, as is argued here, lies at the core of such an education.

In order to ensure access, an inclusive school will work at removing the barriers that stand in the way of any child attending and continuing in school. The attitude of teachers and their understanding of a child's ability, teaching methodology in classroom, homogeneous assessment practices and high fees, while an integral part of all schools, can become insurmountable barriers to a child with disability (Booth and Ainscow 2000).

In the case of the just mentioned schools, both have reduced, removed or redistributed fees to ensure that they have a representative population from their neighbourhood. For instance, while some children pay half the fees there are others who pay their own and an extra half voluntarily. There is also a category of students who do not pay any fee at all. The community — comprising teacher, student, parent, and immediate neighbourhood — and its empowerment to think beyond conventional understandings form a strong component of all programmes in the schools. This in turn results in changing attitudes and creating welcoming communities.

One visually challenged child was enough to prove in St Mary's that most classroom methodologies in the school catered to a homogeneous group. As attitudes changed and became more welcoming of difference and as a diverse student population entered the school, modifications in pedagogy and curriculum became a daily feature. Each special child brought with him/her new opportunities for the school as well as for the teacher to grow, leading to the introduction of a comprehensive and continuous, child-

centred and child-driven method of assessment. Soon this diverse classroom transaction and assessment patterns was extended to include all children. The modification of classroom transactions, curriculum and evaluation practices is an extremely important part of ensuring an equitable quality education for all children, since a homogeneous curriculum and evaluation cannot be considered equitable unless it is matched with differentiated instruction that suits the needs of every child.

When approached from a rights-based model (and not through a medical or charity model), inclusion has the ability to transform teaching methodologies and assessment practices. It is a great way to enhance a teacher's repertoire of classroom transactions. For in the teacher's quest to reach the child, he/she reaches into him-/herself for new ideas and reservoirs of understanding; as a result, teacher empowerment is an important outcome of the ongoing journey of inclusion. It is a journey that requires each group — parents, teachers and children — to examine itself and to change coordinates in order to fit into each other better.

Working with inclusion requires focused and committed Heads who are prepared for the long haul. Committed Heads hold themselves accountable for their teachers' performances and levels of commitment. The teacher then in turn holds him-/herself accountable to the child. It is only this continued focus, on what matters, that changes attitudes that are stuck in socio-cultural understandings of disability. This melting of hardened attitudes and prejudices continues to be the major focus in all programmes of the mentioned two schools.

It was in trying to understand and implement inclusion in every sense of the word that St Mary's School first modified infrastructure. Ramps were built where possible and a lift was also installed to enable children with special needs to access every floor. Furniture was modified to individual needs and toilets were equipped with supporting bars. Loreto School, Sealdah has proved that the idea of quality and equity does not lie in giving all children similar infrastructure, but in the will of a school and all its inmates to adapt itself to the needs of its children. In Loreto, the use of the building was changed to include a residential space for street children in danger of abuse and violence. St Mary's opened a centre for the Open School so as to allow children studying in mainstream classes an alternative school leaving certificate.

Loreto, Sealdah, in response to the needs of the neighbourhood, held flexi-time classes. They used students to teach their peers. The logic of using peers is that children understand better where the gap in their colleague's learning is and they are best equipped to appropriately address the problem. Thus, both teacher and student benefit and grow in the relationship. Alternative solutions will be required to address new problems; examples of which can be seen.

Tillonia, Rajasthan runs a night school and Deepalya has schools in slums, all of which will have to be closed down if the norms of the RTE (discussed in the next section) are strictly implemented. Access to quality education for all requires that we consider Basil B. Bernstein's statement that 'the right to be included may also require a right to be separate' (2000: xx).

RTE AND INCLUSION

The emerging educational paradigm currently envisaged by the RTE demands greater access and integration of children to help create a more equitable social milieu for access to opportunities. The RTE while wanting to be inclusive and to set quality standards does the opposite by setting norms and standards in class strength, PTR and curriculum and evaluation procedures because it places systems over child and in the process removes the adventure from education by negating difference.

The idea of access as envisaged by the RTE looks at providing 'special training' to differently-abled children, which will presumably enable them to 'be at par with other children' (MHRD 2011: 15) and familiarise them with the new, changed educational transactional mode enabling them to cope with an age appropriate class (GoI 2009). The focus on age appropriate admission, when combined with 'complet[ing the] entire curriculum within the specified time' (ibid.: 8), 'all round development of the child' and 'comprehensive and continuous evaluation of child's understanding of knowledge and his ability to apply the same' (ibid.: 9), raises concerns regarding accessibility of children with special needs. Rather than enabling children to learn at their own pace and providing the space to do so the *Framework for Implementation* (2011) sends out the message that all children can do the same thing. It specifically states that 'the same curriculum be followed for children with and without special needs' (MHRD 2011: 49). In its effort to give access to an equitable quality education to all, the RTE has attempted to plug the loopholes through which schools exclude children by making illegal interviews, admission tests and other such discriminatory practices. But the RTE has denied retention and continued presence by not acknowledging that there are children who are not typical, that there will always be some children who benefit with an early assessment and intervention, while there will be others who will not.

RTE AND RESERVATION

The RTE seeks to reserve 25 per cent of the seats for the EWS, in the very same private schools that have publicly and sadly stated that admitting children from this category will reduce the quality of their schools. Private unaided

schools have taken legal action against the government on this issue. If in spite of this the government insists that these reluctant institutions admit the 'disadvantaged category', one can only conclude that it must be because they believe that admission to an unaided private school guarantees the child quality education. The question that rises then is how will the State guarantee the same quality of education to the remaining 75 per cent of 'out-of-private-school' children. The discrimination in the design seems to indicate that it is right of the state to provide quality education to some and let the others, who also happen to be the majority of students, remain in state schools with constraints.

But more importantly, by indiscriminately seeking placement of 25 per cent in every private unaided school the RTE has indicated that all private unaided schools are quality schools. This is obviously not true. Just like there are good and bad state schools, there are also good and bad private schools. While minimum norms are desirable, the ongoing debate has shown that quality education will be impossible unless schools are also welcoming communities. While infrastructure is important, quality schools would first and foremost have to be inclusive schools, i.e., *(a)* schools that are open to change and adaptable; *(b)* schools that are defined by the attitudes and participation of not just the students and staff, but also the community around it; and *(c)* schools that while redefining themselves also give time for consolidation and research, or what Peter M. Senge (2000) calls 'moving schools' are those that will personify and hopefully redefine quality for all of us.

'Quality' as defined by a 'moving school' and by the RTE has two different parameters. The RTE tends to define a quality education in its narrowest terms of infrastructure, curriculum and evaluation. By creating invisible children who require a differentiated or individualised curriculum and evaluation, the RTE has celebrated a curriculum that is discriminatory. The RTE and the *Framework for Implementation* (2011) have given legal standing to this perspective by conspicuously omitting any reference to co-curricular activities or even to essential parts of education such as physical fitness and sports. It is in this context that this paper argues that there is a need to extend the ambit of education in the RTE to include its ancillary services such as nutrition, care, physical fitness, and community participation if we are to accept the concept of education as one that is more than just schooling.

Conclusion

If the government expenditure is to create long-term solutions and not just dependence, the quality of State-run schools needs to be urgently and consistently addressed. The RTE needs to acknowledge that every child is different from the other and that one story will not fit all. The SSA *Framework of Implementation*, which states that '[i]t provides for children's right to an education of equitable quality, based on principles of equity and non discrimination' (MHRD 2011: 3), needs to clearly acknowledge the need, as well as provide for, a diverse transactional framework and alternate assessment patterns in order to prove that it is serious about delivering an education that is truly inclusive and non-discriminatory. The RTE and the Framework need to accept the value of physical education as well as the arts and crafts in its curriculum. It needs to look closely at infrastructural requirements and state these in appropriately sensitive terminology. It also needs to be clarified that the best infrastructure and parameters in evaluation and curriculum may still fall short of delivering an ideal education if our teachers falter and our understandings fail. Consequently, the RTE should most importantly emphasise and implement a strong teacher education programme focused on the vision of an inclusive classroom and where every child is getting an equitable, quality education.

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Thinking Outside the Government Box

The Role of the Non-Government Sector in Achieving Quality Education for All

Suzana Andrade Brinkmann

Discussions about the role of the private sector in education have become increasingly polarised between those who feel its contribution should be expanded, and others who believe the opposite. But what can sometimes get lost in these heated debates are the repercussions of these decisions for children themselves.

On one hand, the government's 11th Five-Year Plan speaks repeatedly of the benefits of public–private partnership (PPP) in education, and strongly encourages PPP models through private investment (Planning Commission 2008). In 2009, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) released a note on PPP that highlighted several advantages of private schools: cost-effectiveness, better quality and greater accountability through incentives and competition. Others have argued similarly about the merits of the private sector *vs* the inefficiency of the government system (Das 2010; Shah 2010) with Pankaj Jain and Ravindra Dholakia (2009) proposing that the only practical way to achieve universal education is for the government to outsource the bulk of primary education to the private sector. Such proposals have incited vociferous objections from academics, who argue that assumptions regarding the superiority of private schools are unsubstantiated, that it is unacceptable to relinquish the government's responsibility in providing education, and that greater private involvement will only create a more stratified and inequitable school system (Kumar 2008; Ramachandran 2009; Rampal et al. 2009; Sarangapani 2009). The difficulty with these debates is that often the issue gets so bogged down in theoretical positions, ideological prejudices and mistrust of the other side, that it becomes difficult for either side to truly pay attention to valid points being raised by the other, look objectively at the scale of the problem, and agree on a workable way forward based on what's best for children.

Faced with the problem of over 220 million children receiving education of dubious quality, the ultimate goal for both sides is the same: to provide quality education to every child. The question is how best to achieve the goal. This goal is now upheld constitutionally by the 'Right to Education' (RTE) Act, 2009, which is highly commendable. However, what still remains in question is whether the strategy laid out by the Act is indeed the best way to achieve the desired goal. The RTE was intended to promote an inclusive approach to providing quality education for all, yet its provisions will end up excluding a diverse set of stakeholders from helping achieve this gargantuan task. By setting stringent requirements for schools focusing on infrastructure, teacher qualifications and salaries rather than on learning processes and outcomes, the Act will force a large number of non-government schools to shut down. The norms laid down by the Act are well-intentioned, but the question remains whether they will help or hinder us in achieving the desired goal of providing quality education to every child.

This paper argues that these RTE provisions are not ultimately in the best interest of children since they exclude five key non-state education providers and thereby eliminate schooling options for millions of children. It examines some of the key arguments advocated by those supporting this move, and ultimately calls for a shift from a competitive to a collaborative PPP model to enable us to achieve our common goals.

RTE's Consequences for Non-State Schools

In the attempt to ensure quality education for all children, the RTE lays down certain norms that all schools (government

and private) must comply with by April 2013 (see Table 10.1). Any private school that fails to obtain government recognition based on meeting these norms by then will be forced to shut down. Anyone who continues to run an unrecognised private school shall be fined ₹100,000 plus an additional ₹10,000 per day. In effect, the Act means impending death for thousands of non-government schools around the country that do not meet these standards and are unlikely to be able to. Sure enough, the crackdown has already begun. Education officials in Visakhapatnam and Chennai have already closed down hundreds of unrecognised schools, threatening to impose fines, seal premises, launch criminal proceedings, and even imprison errant school managements (Kumar 2011; Manikandan 2012). The ironic part is that most government schools themselves have been unable to meet these norms, even after a decade of intense efforts under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), and after two years of the RTE being in place. A recent review of the RTE's implementation by the civil society-led RTE Forum reveals that 95.2 per cent of government schools are not compliant with RTE (*First Post* 2012). However, it is not clear whether there will be any consequences for government schools that do not meet the April 2013 deadline — in fact there are already attempts by the government to simply extend this deadline (Chopra 2012).

WHO IS BEING EXCLUDED BY THE ACT?

There are five non-state educational providers in particular that will largely be forced to close down as a result of the Act. This section will look more closely at each of these groups.

NGO or Community Schools for the Poor

India's education sector has had a rich history of participation by voluntary non-state organisations (charitable trusts, NGOs, faith-based, community groups) that have provided quality education to the poor at very low costs. Although their number is difficult to assess, NGOs have played a significant role in complementing, and at times making up for the lack of state initiative or capacity in providing access to primary education (Blum 2009; Kumar 2008; Sarangapani 2009). The idea and history of mass education in India traces back to the very first schools for lower caste and girl children set up by missionaries in the 19th century (Kumar and Oesterheld 2007). NGOs have been particularly effective in penetrating remote or difficult areas or groups where cultural, social or geographical barriers keep children away from attending school. NGO-run schools have often sought to promote strong school-community links in curriculum and teaching, and community participation in school management and support, such as the schools run by Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samithi (BGVS) (see Box 10.1).

While some NGOs have remained small-scale, others have expanded and also sought to strengthen the government system. As Krishna Kumar (2008) points out, 'there now exists a small but significant number of NGOs who have made a valuable contribution in augmenting the state system's meagre capacity to innovate' (ibid.: 9). Shanti Jagannathan (2001) conducted a study of six such prominent NGOs: M. Venkatarangaiya (MV) Foundation, Pratham, Bodh Shiksha Samiti, Rishi Valley Rural Education Centre, Eklavya, and Centre for Educational Management and Development. She found that their work was catalytic in

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BOX 10.1
BGVS Community-Owned Schools

Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samithi (BGVS) was set up in 1989 to promote mass literacy campaigns and universalisation of quality education across the country. Originally set up at the Indian government's request by the All India People's Science Network based on their positive experience in Kerala, BGVS's general council includes activists, government representatives, educationists, and social workers from across India. BGVS has worked in various community development initiatives in 20 states with nearly 400,000 volunteers. In 2005 it began partnering with communities to open 1,200 'Gyan Vigyan Vidyalayas' in nine states — schools owned and supported by the community without government or outside funds. The idea was to avoid dependency, become sustainable and retain freedom in teaching-learning processes. Teaching methods are child-centred and fear-free, based on activities, exploration, creativity, critical pedagogy, and children's socio-cultural contexts (many of the features promoted by the RTE). The schools foster democratic secular values through songs, stories and activities promoting equality, peace and respect for diversity. Schools also act as community centres with a village library, children's activity centre, mothers' self-help group, and primary health centre. All schools are non-profit, and while they may charge minimal fees, no poor children are denied admission. Schools are managed by School Management Committees (with strong representation from women and marginalised groups), who mobilise community resources of approximately ₹200,000 per school for infrastructure, and an average of ₹1,000 per teacher for honorariums. In the first two years, the BGVS spent about ₹15 million on material preparation, residential trainings and monitoring of over 4,000 teachers, while communities invested almost ₹222 million in start-up costs and ₹100 million in salaries for the 1,200 schools. However, most of these schools will have to close after the RTE, although about 70 have said they will try to raise community funds to meet the RTE norms (BGVS n.d.).

TABLE 10.1   RTE Requirements and their Implications for Various Types of Schools

RTE Requirements

1. *Infrastructure*: All-weather building, separate classrooms for each teacher, Head-Teacher's office, playground, boundary wall, library, separate boys' and girls' toilets, drinking water, kitchen for mid-day meals, ramp access, teaching-learning equipment, play material and sports equipment.
2. *Maximum pupil–teacher ratio (PTR)*: 30:1 at primary, 35:1 at upper primary. Separate Head-Teacher and part-time art, physical and work education teachers for schools with over 100 children.
3. *Minimum teacher qualifications*: Typically Diploma in Education (DEd) or Bachelor of Education (BEd), plus passing the national Teacher Eligibility Test.
4. *Teacher salaries and service conditions*: As per prescribed State norms (Sixth Pay Commission followed in most states; e.g. in Uttar Pradesh, monthly salaries range from ₹17,996 to ₹22,955 for regular primary teachers [Kingdon 2010]).
5. Schools must follow a standardised time-bound syllabus prescribed by state/central boards.
6. Out-of-school children must enrol directly in formal schools at age-appropriate class, and receive supplementary 'special training' at the school itself for prescribed time-periods.
7. All children must enrol in a recognised formal school as defined in section 2(n) (UNICEF 2011).
8. National Institute of Open Schooling's (NIOS's) 'Open Basic Education' (OBE) programme, which hitherto certified children in home-schooling or non-formal centres through exams in Classes III, V and VIII, will now be discontinued, since all must enrol in formal schools (Sinha 2010).

School Type	Implications of RTE
Government Schools	• As per the RTE Forum report (cited in *First Post* 2012), only 4.8 per cent government schools were compliant with the RTE in 2009–10. • As per the MHRD (2012), 20 per cent government teachers (nearly 800,000) lack qualifications; 43 per cent primary and 33 per cent upper primary government schools have PTR higher than the RTE norms. • However, no clear penalty exists if government schools fail to meet RTE norms by April 2013.
Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) Schools	• Many serve the poor, charging minimal fees, and cannot meet the RTE infrastructure, qualification and salary norms, and thus will have to close. • Many NGOs are now focusing instead on enrolling children in government schools, as the RTE suggests (Sengupta 2011).
Alternative Schools	• Many founded by concerned individuals on minimal budgets and fees, thus unable to meet norms. • Schools' philosophy based on moving beyond textbooks and designing flexible self-paced curriculum with experiential materials, no longer admissible under the RTE. • Some have appointed unqualified community youth as teachers and designed their own high-quality but uncertified training programmes. Several educators have been teaching at SSA teacher trainings and prestigious masters programmes (e.g., Tata Institute of Social Sciences [TISS] Master of Arts [MA] in Elementary Education), but do not have the government prescribed qualifications, and thus are no longer qualified to teach children (Alternative Schools 2010).
Private Budget Schools	• Mostly cater to the poor, charging monthly fees of ₹70–150 (rural) and ₹350 (urban) (De et al. 2006; Shah 2010). • Kartik Misra (2012) estimates that to meet the RTE norms, they would need to raise monthly fees to ₹1,370–4,426, which most parents cannot afford. Thus, most would have to close. • Many have *kaccha* structures (De et al. 2006). In densely-populated urban areas or slums, it is impossible to build RTE-mandated playgrounds and classrooms • Teacher salaries are typically less than one-fifth of government salaries — sometimes even one-tenth (Muralidharan 2006).
Non-Formal Schools	• No non-formal schools are permitted under the RTE. • The Act makes little mention of what will happen to thousands of children (34 per cent) that drop out of formal primary schools annually (UNESCO 2010) — hitherto being reached by non-formal schools. Thus, thousands of children will have to return to the very schools that were unable to retain them.
Home-Schooling	• When Delhi homeschooler Shreya Sahai was denied permission to take the OBE exam because of the RTE, she filed a case with the Delhi High Court arguing that the RTE infringes on parents' freedom, which has dragged on for two years (Dore 2011, 2012). • The MHRD's stance has been ambiguous: at the last court hearing it released an affidavit on 16 July 2012 that said that parents who voluntarily opt for home-schooling may continue to do so. However, in October 2012 the MHRD reversed this stand saying that the RTE is indeed against home-schooling, seeking more time to clarify the issue. The next hearing is scheduled for 19 December 2012 (*Deccan Herald* 2012; Garg 2012).

Source: Compiled by the author from the RTE Act and RTE Model Rules, 2010.

strengthening the accountability, quality and effectiveness of the government system. Jagannathan postulated a growing and strategic role for NGOs at the macro level, in supporting and enriching the government's efforts to provide quality education. However, in the wake of the RTE, the space for community schools run by small NGOs is rapidly shrinking. As educationist Meena Shrinivasan argues, 'while NGOs that cheat parents and children will be tackled by RTE, the "ones doing good work, especially in tribal areas, will also be elbowed out"' (Sengupta 2011).

Alternative Schools

One distinct category of NGO-run schools is 'alternative schools', also known as innovative or experimental schools. While many of these have also targeted marginalised children, their distinctive feature is their focus on experimenting with progressive or holistic philosophies of education. Their attempt is to cater to children who do not fit into rigid mainstream schooling structures. Their approach involves non-competitive learning environments with a flexible learning pace, enriched curriculum and child-centred pedagogy, non-threatening continuous assessment, and welcoming of different learners' uniqueness and mother-tongues (Alternative Schools 2010). By innovating in their own alternative settings, many have also been able to play a key role in supporting innovation in government schools, developing good classroom working models, and extending the national education discourse. Many of their founders have been involved in developing national educational policies such as the National Curriculum Framework, 2005, and in government teacher training, curriculum and material development processes. Thus, alternative schools have enabled the government to achieve its own educational goals by nurturing the seedbeds where educational innovations can grow and ultimately catalyse shifts in the mainstream system. This is perhaps best exemplified in the work of Rishi Valley, described in Box 10.2.

However, many alternative schools are now uncertain about their future in light of the RTE. On 14 July 2010, a National Consultation on the impact of the RTE on alternative/innovative schools was organised in Pune by Dr Maxine Bernstein, who runs an innovative school in rural Maharashtra. The group of alternative educators thereafter drafted a document titled 'A Space for Alternative Schools' (Alternative Schools 2010) which was submitted to the MHRD, advocating preserving their existence despite the RTE. The document was signed by about 35 prominent institutions like Digantar (Jaipur), Loreto School (Kolkata), Sita School, Suvidya, Asha for Education, Taleemnet (Karnataka), Centre for Learning, Rishi Valley, and others. However the fate of these schools is still unknown.

Non-Formal Education

Another significant area of NGO involvement has been non-formal education (NFE). The National Policy on Education, 1986 initiated a large systematic NFE programme for deprived children, school drop-outs, children from habitations without formal schools, working children, etc. After reaching Class V children were expected to move to formal schools. Under the SSA, a special component called Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) and Alternative and Innovative Education (AIE) was set up to provide diversified non-formal strategies for bridging out-of-school children into the educational system. EGS centres are set up in remote areas with at least 15–25 children and no nearby formal school. AIE centres are intended for very deprived children who do not fit into the rigid formal system, e.g., street-children, migrating or working children, sex-workers' children, and older out-of-school children, transitioning them to school through back-to-school camps or bridge courses.

The SSA strongly encouraged NGOs to run non-formal education centres, acknowledging their useful role in advocacy and ensuring accountability of SSA initiatives. In fact government funding for NGOs in the education sector has

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Box 10.2
Rishi Valley's 'School-in-a-Box'

Rishi Valley Rural Education Centre (Andhra Pradesh) began by setting up 16 one-room multi-grade 'satellite' schools in remote villages without schooling access. In 1993 it developed the 'School-in-a-Box' kit with an accompanying teacher-training programme, which it began trialling in interested government schools. The approach breaks up the syllabus into small 'milestones', arranged in the form of a 'learning ladder' with a series of activities and learning cards for each milestone, including self-assessment cards. Each child tracks their own level, and independently carries out a series of activities at their own pace with the help of teachers and peers, using a variety of learning materials. Groups of government teachers visited these schools from Karnataka (1995) and Tamil Nadu (2003), and were inspired to adapt this approach to their own government schools. Based on their success, today this 'Activity-Based Learning' approach has been upscaled to all government schools in both these states, as well as in pilots in 11 other states, reaching an estimated 10 million children in over 250,000 primary schools across the country (UNICEF 2012).

been predominantly for running NFE courses (Jagannathan 2001). For example, the MV Foundation (Andhra Pradesh) has helped mainstream thousands of rural marginalised children into government schools. However, the NFE system in India has been criticised for not getting children successfully absorbed into formal schools, or for providing sub-par education quality to underprivileged segments of the child population (where quality is defined particularly in terms of school facilities and qualified teachers). However, when quality is seen in terms of learning outcomes, not all NFE initiatives have been of poor quality, as can be seen in the example of Gyanshala schools which have produced learning outcomes comparable or higher than government schools (see Box 10.3). Moreover, NFE centres have been meeting a critical gap in reaching children that have been unable to enrol or be retained in mainstream schools. Regardless, all such non-formal education centres are now outlawed by the RTE.

Private Budget Schools

Low-cost or unrecognised private schools have been rising rapidly across the country: while official DISE data records 26,377 unrecognised schools reaching 2.67 million students, *the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2011* (ASER Centre 2012) estimates that nearly 40 million rural children will be affected if budget private schools are closed down by the RTE. Many suggest official figures are grossly underestimated; for example, while official DISE 2011 data records

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Box 10.3
Gyanshalas

The Ahmedabad-based NGO Gyanshala, started in 1999 by Pankaj Jain, has set up over 350 low-cost non-formal schools for poor children in Classes I to III. Classes are held three hours per day in slum or village residences so that young children can easily walk to them. Costs are kept low by hiring local teachers who have passed Class XII and are willing to work for ₹2,000–2,500 per month. Gyanshala's design team studied top schools in India and the United Kingdom (UK) and put together its own curriculum with a detailed schedule of daily lesson plans and small-group activities, which teachers follow strictly and are closely monitored for. Studies have found that after three years children can read, write and perform basic maths better than their government-school counterparts. Since 2006 the Gujarat government has been supporting 70 per cent of project costs under the SSA's AIE scheme. Currently Gyanshala plans to expand to Bihar and Uttar Pradesh as well. Though critiqued for their low infrastructure and teacher salaries, Gyanshala argues that it is able to provide effective basic education at ₹1,500 per child annually — roughly one-tenth the cost incurred by government schools in the same city (Vachani and Smith 2008).

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14 recognised and three unrecognised private schools in all of Bihar, Rangaraju et al. (2012) found 1,224 private schools in Patna alone (78 per cent of Patna's total schools), out of which 69 per cent are unrecognised. Parents typically choose these schools out of desire to learn English, and dissatisfaction with teacher attendance and performance in government schools (Das 2010; De et al. 2006, 2008; Kingdon 2008; Ohara 2012). While some have labelled these schools 'sub-standard teaching shops' that exploit children and teachers with low infrastructure and salaries (Ohara 2012; Ramachandran 2009), others argue that they are more accountable and significantly more cost-effective than government schools (their per-pupil expenditure is only 41 per cent that of government schools [Kingdon 2008]), which also enables them to hire more teachers, have lower PTR and reduce multi-grade teaching (Jain and Dholakia 2009; Kingdon 2008; Muralidharan 2006). Concerned about the RTE's ultimatum, 21 budget private schools from eight states have formed a National Independent Schools Alliance to improve their learning outcomes and convince the MHRD to allow their continuation (Singh 2012).

The quality of budget private schools has been debated, and findings remain inconclusive. In terms of learning outcomes, several studies have found that private schools perform better at both primary and upper-primary levels (ASER 2012; De et al. 2006; Goyal and Pandey 2009; Mehta 2005), with some finding this even after controlling for family and school characteristics (Desai et al. 2008; Kingdon 2008; Muralidharan 2006; Wadhwa 2008). For example, Sangeeta Goyal and Priyanka Pandey (2009) found that students of Classes IV–V from Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh perform better in language and maths in private than government schools, and in private-unrecognised than private-recognised schools, although overall learning levels were found to be low in all three school-types. Sonalde Desai et al. (2008) found that among 12,000 8–11-year-olds tested, children in private schools have higher reading and arithmetic skills than in government schools after controlling for family factors. Wilima Wadhwa (2008) uses ASER 2008 data to also show that after controlling for family-income-related factors, Class V private schools still have a learning advantage of 9 per cent over government schools, although the effect varies considerably across states. Geeta Kingdon (2008) reviews various studies from the past two decades conducted at different class levels in various states (Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh), and finds that all, including her own, share the common conclusion that private schools outperform government schools in imparting learning, even after controlling for student intake. In terms of non-academic quality indicators, several studies have found that unrecognised private schools outperform government schools in terms of

PTR, teaching activity, teacher attendance, and infrastructural inputs (Bajpai et al. 2005, 2006, 2008 cited in Jain and Dholakia 2010; Rangaraju et al. 2012; Tooley and Dixon 2007; Tooley et al. 2007). Others have shown similar findings, in addition to aspects such as having less single-teacher and single-classroom schools, higher levels of teaching activity, higher school-level accountability, and higher teacher and student attendance (Goyal and Pandey 2009; Mehta 2005; Muralidharan 2006; PROBE Team 1999).

Critics of budget private schools such as Padma Sarangapani (2009) and Vimala Ramachandran (2009) have argued that the findings of Pankaj Jain and Ravindra Dholakia (2009) and James Tooley et al. (2007) are 'seriously flawed' (Sarangapani 2009: 68) and their proxies of school quality narrowly selected, and they claim there is 'no credible evidence' (ibid.: 69) that the quality of budget private schools is better, suggesting that the problem of low learning is all-pervasive across government and private schools. However, neither of them address the studies cited above, or cite any research that proves that private schools are any worse than government schools; the only support cited by Sarangapani (2009) is a second-hand opinion shared in an e-group debate. Overall, there does not appear to be much rigorous research indicating that private schools are worse than government schools. While many suggest that further research is needed, most show that the performance of private schools is at least at par if not better than government schools.

Home-Schooling

There are a small but growing number of Indian parents opting for home-schooling, often because they are dissatisfied with the mainstream system, or feel that rigid school structures don't allow their children to pursue other interests. The modern-day home-schooling movement gained prominence in the 1960s in America, particularly with educationists like Ivan Illich, John Holt and others, with 1.5 million children in the US now being homeschooled (Planty et al. 2009). It is common in many other countries like the UK, Australia, France, Poland, and Austria, typically due to dissatisfaction with government schools and high-cost private schools, religious beliefs, or wanting to cater to gifted or learning-disabled children (Gross 2003). In India, home-schooling currently does not require any registration or regulation, and on reaching Class X a homeschooler can sit privately for examinations in Classes III, V and VIII through the NIOS's OBE programme, and for Class 10 exams with NIOS or International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE). There is no specified syllabus, and parents use the CBSE, government syllabi, or alternative methods such as Montessori or Waldorf. Homeschoolers argue that home-schooling allows children to excel in their natural talents and interests, and lets them learn from a more flexible open-ended set of experiences rather than being confined to a classroom. Examples include Sahal Kaushik who become the youngest topper of Delhi's Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) entrance exam at the age of 14, or Shreya Sahai who had her first solo painting and photography exhibitions, and became a Hindustani classical violinist, all before age 11 (Sinha 2010). In recent years, Indian home-schooling parents have increasingly connected through social networking media like Yahoo groups, Facebook, blogs, etc. Many of them are facing considerable anxiety due to the RTE and because of the resulting discontinuation of the NIOS OBE scheme.

TO KEEP OR NOT TO KEEP THE PRIVATE SECTOR: WHAT'S BEST FOR CHILDREN?

Notwithstanding the divergent ideological positions on whether the private sector must be promoted or relegated in the sphere of education, the question remains: will closing down thousands of NGO-run, alternative, non-formal, and private schools ultimately benefit children, and will it for that matter benefit the government's efforts to provide quality education for all? The answers should be sought in the arguments extended in favour of closing these schools. This section examines key assumptions underlying arguments in support of the RTE's provisions and argues that the strategy adopted by the RTE will not ultimately benefit children or help achieve its own goal.

Assumption 1: It's the *Government's* Job to Provide Education; What's the Need for Involving Others?

Key RTE proponent Vinod Raina has argued that it is the government's responsibility to provide schools for all children, and if unrecognised schools — negligible in number according to him — are forced to close, the government will simply step in to meet the gap (Mukherjee 2012). The assumption is that education is a public service, and that privatisation is an ideology that seeks to 'dislodge the government from its status as the major player in educational provision' (Kumar 2008: 8; Ramachandran 2009). This paper by no means wishes to exempt the government from its primary role in universalising quality education. However it is simply unrealistic to expect the government to achieve this on its own. After decades of attempts, the goal remains a distant dream, and it certainly will not be achieved by April 2013 — the date when thousands of unrecognised schools will be shut down. Pankaj Jain and Ravindra Dholakia (2009) have demonstrated that even a proposed allocation of 6 per cent of government GDP on elementary education (current

spending is less than 4 per cent) would be insufficient for achieving universal education as per current RTE norms. In order to be able to pay all teachers according to the Sixth Pay Commission, the education budget would have to be over 15 per cent of the GDP, which is simply not feasible.

If all unrecognised schools close in April 2013, nearly 40 million children will be ousted from their schools and will have to enrol in government schools, which are already short of a million trained teachers just to cater to those currently enrolled. Meeting such a vast intake would require government schools to flout RTE norms themselves either by appointing untrained teachers, or by exceeding the mandated PTR. Either way, the quality of education would suffer until more schools can be built and teachers hired to accommodate these children. Additionally, many slum or remote areas currently served by unrecognised non-state schools do not even have government schools nearby, which raises the question of what would happen to these children if their schools were to suddenly close down. By emphasising rigid norms, the RTE may end up reducing access to education for millions.

Assumption 2: Since Many of these Schools have Low Quality, Allowing them to Continue Denies Children's Right to Quality Education

Some argue that budget private schools should not be endorsed since there is no credible evidence that their quality is better than government schools, and studies show that both private and government schools struggle with poor learning (Sarangapani 2009; Ramachandran 2009). The concern of this group, according to Venu Narayan (2010), is that 'profit-driven private provisioning will lead to exploitation of the poor who are too ignorant and apathetic to make informed choices' (ibid.: 25). Ultimately, it's a question of upholding children's right to quality education, rather than fighting for the right of individual schools to survive, argues Vinod Raina (Mukherjee 2012); if it's the child's right to have schools with proper infrastructure, playgrounds, etc., then all schools must meet these obligations.

First, as mentioned earlier, many studies indicate private schools do provide better or at least comparable quality to government schools; so far none have indicated they are any worse. Even if the evidence is not yet conclusive, the answer is not to eliminate them entirely but to conduct further research, and not punish those who may be performing better. Until the government can itself meet its own norms and offer the quantity and quality of education mandated by the Act, would it not be a greater denial of poor children's right to education to force closure of all alternate options that offer comparable or better quality education? The government does not need to shut down other schools in order to fulfil its obligation to provide quality education

to all children. If government schools improve their own quality, parents themselves will willingly choose to send their children to government schools, as happens in most Western countries. Research suggests most parents' first choice would indeed be to send their children to well-functioning government schools rather than private schools (Ohara 2012).

If despite the 'price advantage', better infrastructure and incentives in government schools, parents are still opting out, the answer is to improve the system, not to eliminate alternatives. The right to education should also mean that children or their guardians have the right to choose the type of education they feel is better — whether private, alternative or home-schooling — rather than the state dictating the form it should take. The right to freedom is as much enshrined by our Constitution as the right to education. Part of the problem is that we don't trust the poor to make wise choices; we think they are being fooled and exploited by budget private schools. We ignore the fact that parents intrinsically want the best for their children. It seems unfair that only the rich (including the policymakers and officials implementing the Act) should have the freedom to send their children to high-fee private schools able to meet RTE norms, while the poor will not have a similar choice. One could argue that this rule is also promoting inequality and stratification: while the Act opens the door to private schools for a few from economically weaker sections (25 per cent), it in effect closes the door for the rest (Das 2010; Shah 2010).

Assumption 3: Quality Education Requires High Infrastructure, Teacher Qualifications and Salaries

A more fundamental issue is how the Act defines quality education. Section 8(g) of the RTE Act states that the government's obligation is to 'ensure good quality elementary education conforming to the standards and norms specified in the Schedule' (GoI 2009: 4) — a Schedule that talks almost entirely of infrastructure, numbers and inputs but mentions nothing about learning processes or outcomes for children. While the rest of the Act does talk about learning processes, these are not the criteria used to determine whether schools obtain recognition. Things like rooms, floor-space, toilets, etc., may be easier to monitor, but these are the requirements for a good building, not for a good education. At its essence, quality education is one that enables students to learn with understanding, to learn how to learn, to think for themselves, to realise their full potential, and to develop an open mind committed to values of equality, freedom and service. As many of India's greatest educational philosophers have argued, such things do not require a formal school building. In fact, many have argued that our present-day schools are having

negative effects on children's individual and social well-being. The Act guarantees a right to schooling rather than a right to education. If followed to its entirety, it will produce a schooled population, but not necessarily an educated citizenry.

There is little proof that having bigger buildings and teachers with higher degrees will result in better quality education. Studies have demonstrated that when the US in the early 20th century moved towards universal government formal schools with bigger infrastructure and more qualified teachers, learning levels actually decreased (Gatto 2009). Similarly, Bhattacharjea et al. (2011) found that teachers' qualifications did not make a significant difference in their ability to teach well. This is substantiated by the fact that 93 per cent of trained teachers who appeared for the 2011 Teacher Eligibility Test did not even pass (*First Post* 2012). Neither does having standardised textbooks and syllabi ensure quality education — many alternative schools are able to cater to individualised students' needs better with contextualised learning materials. And as Gurcharan Das (2010) points out, high teacher salaries are good in principle, but only if accompanied by improved performance.

Assumption 4: The Private Sector is Driven by Profit Motives and will Invariably Deepen Inequality and Exploitation

This argument is partly driven by an ideological mistrust of the capacity of markets and the private sector to contribute to any larger societal good. First, as highlighted above, one must acknowledge that the private sector is much larger than profit-driven private schools, and there are a myriad NGO-run, alternative, non-formal, and even private school initiatives that have aimed at benefiting the poor (e.g., Loreto Day School [Kolkata], Aksharnandan and Gyanankur [Pune] are three examples of quality private schools that have opened their doors to the poorest). Venu Narayan (2010) argues that while there has indeed been an upsurge of private schools that are driven by capitalist entrepreneurship, rather than pointing to an inevitable phenomenon of failed markets, this upsurge could well be seen as the product of failed regulation. The government's tendency of trying to prevent profiteering by choking supply through regulatory overkill has often promoted greater corruption and lower quality, when groups with political leverage manage to capture licenses. Sure enough, the RTE's long list of recognition criteria has already generated an increase in corrupt inspectors demanding bribes in exchange for not closing down schools, or of schools maintaining false records with inflated fee and salary figures (Das 2010; Rao 2010).

On the other hand, if diversity, competition and choice are encouraged, but regulated through monitoring of quality, this could actually help to trigger a virtuous cycle of competitive improvement and accountability. If dissatisfied parents have no alternative of transferring their children elsewhere, government schools will have little incentive to improve. Sectors such as telecommunications and transport have shown that opening up private opportunities can have a positive effect on the public sector's willingness for reform, and that the government can indeed deliver results when faced with consumer choice and competition. This can be seen even in the education sector in Kerala, which has a unique model of choice and competition with among the highest percentage of private schools in the country, and also among the highest quality government schools.

WAY FORWARD: A NEW KIND OF 'PARTNERSHIP'

While the RTE's goals are laudable, it is not clear whether its means are the best to achieve these goals. To increase access to quality education, what's best for children is to have a variety of schools that parents can choose from — both well-functioning government schools and non-government options. But this calls for a new approach to 'public–private partnership' — beyond the narrow traditional models of 'supply-side' PPP (e.g., private-aided schools which are government-funded but often not of much better quality) or 'demand-side' PPP (e.g., government-funded vouchers that allow parents to choose any school, but which may be difficult to implement in India) (Narayan 2010). A more sustainable model is a collaborative approach to PPP where the private sector views it as a partnership and invests in strengthening the government system, while the government also views it as a partnership and allows other players to contribute. This requires encouraging greater choice and diversity in the system, but with a stronger quality benchmarking process for both private and government schools, and greater faith in parents' capacity to make intelligent choices when provided with more information. Some suggestions are offered in this section.

Partnership in Strengthening the Public Sector, Not Replacing It

Kumar (2008) rightly critiques the current 'partnership' model for being more of a roadmap for territorial division than a true sharing of responsibility aiming to improve government efficiency through joint engagement. The focus of private partners has been more on running parallel schools than on investing in systemic institution-building and structural reforms, particularly in neglected areas such as teacher education. Conversely, even NGOs that have invested in strengthening the system have not been viewed by the government as full-fledged partners,

and collaboration has remained fragmented and ad hoc, with no enduring institutional mechanism for civil society partnerships (Chauhan 2011; Jagannathan 2001). Vinod Raina has suggested setting up of a Council for People's Partnership to institutionalise Government–NGO partnerships (Chauhan 2011), while Alternative School advocates have suggested that these be recognised as Resource Centres to support or even help run nearby government schools. Some seeds of hope lie in examples like the Goa Unaided Schools Association, which recently approached the state government to adopt neighbouring government schools to help improve their quality or in the Karnataka government's School Adoption Programme, described in Box 10.4.

Strong Monitoring Based on Outcomes not Inputs

If our goal is to guarantee children's rights, not just to schooling but to quality education, we must place greater emphasis on outcomes. Gujarat offers a hopeful example of moving towards performance-based public policy that focuses on children and parents (*Financial Express* 2012). In its recently-notified RTE rules, the criteria for unrecognised schools to meet RTE norms places 30 per cent weightage on student performance (through independent standardised assessments focusing on learning, not just rote); 30 per cent on the students' improved performance over time (so that results are traceable to school's efforts, not just to admitting 'brighter' students); 15 per cent on students' non-academic performance and parents' feedback; and only 15 per cent on

inputs like teacher qualifications and infrastructure. This is a tremendous step forward in facilitating schools that offer quality despite not having huge financial resources, while penalising schools that are not performing despite having high infrastructure and funding.

To curb corruption by officials in the evaluation process, parents should be closely involved, since they have the biggest stake in schools functioning well and thus the least incentive to mis-report, and are unpaid, which leaves less room for pocketing bribes. Increasing community accountability of schools is indeed one of the goals of the RTE and of the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) Act. Another option is a graded recognition system that evaluates schools through independent agencies, such as Gray Matters Capital in Hyderabad, which has evolved a rating system for low-cost private schools based on student performance, teacher attention and essential safety and comfort features (Dixon 2010). This would promote transparency, which helps parents exercise informed choice, while also incentivising schools to acquire higher ratings by improving their quality. Monitoring of alternative, non-formal and home-schools could be done either by a Council of Alternative/Innovative Education established for this purpose, or help could be sought from the NIOS which already has an accreditation system in place.

Freedom, Flexibility and Facilitation for Private Partners, Not Over-Regulation

Once a strong monitoring mechanism can identify which schools are performing reasonably well, there needs to be a shift from a suspicion-based regulatory approach seeking to close schools down, to a facilitative approach based on freedom, trust and public vigilance that aims to help these schools improve. Instead of being closed, unrecognised schools could be allowed to develop an Improvement Plan and then be assessed on its adherence to the plan over a period of time. Raina's suggestion that NGO/budget schools should raise funds from corporates to meet RTE requirements (Mukherjee 2012) is not very realistic or sympathetic, given that many of them have little resources or expertise required to engage in successful fundraising. Second, compared to the cost of closing down existing unrecognised schools and building entirely new government schools to replace them (not to mention the consequences for children who are left temporarily without a school), it seems much more simple and cost-effective for the government to give grants to help these schools improve their infrastructure and teachers, or in the case of poorly-performing schools, to transfer management to the government or a third party (which has been Gujarat's approach). Flexibility for infrastructure norms may also be needed depending on the location and context of the school, without compromising

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Box 10.4
Karnataka's School Adoption Programme

The Karnataka government in 2001–02 initiated a School Adoption Programme that invites donors, NGOs and corporates to get involved in improving the quality of government schools. Partners select any school and prepare a time-bound 'programme of action' for its overall development or specific interventions, ranging from infrastructure development, teacher training, students' educational tours, after-school or weekend remedial classes taught by local corporate employees, etc. About 900 schools in Bangalore and across Karnataka have been adopted by foundations such as Azim Premji, Infosys, Akshara, Shikshana, and Dream School Foundation. For example, Shikshana has adopted 120 schools, providing teaching aids, library books, extra materials, assessments, and scholarships. Despite some drawbacks like low monitoring and accountability, the programme has been a success. As one participating government teacher explains, 'Everyone says government schools are bad. Instead of blaming each other, if people in society — parents, corporates and NGOs — work together, we'll get there faster and our children are the ones who'll benefit' (Ravi 2008).

on the essential needs of children. For example, aspects like toilets, drinking water, light, ventilation, and some open space can be prioritised, while others like square-footage or playgrounds could be treated more flexibly for urban or tribal locations where these may not be feasible. In Gujarat's pragmatic approach, as previously mentioned, if a classroom doesn't meet the minimum square-footage, instead of needing it rebuilt, the PTR can be altered so that at least each student has adequate space.

Similar flexibility could be given to teacher qualification norms, by allowing alternative modes of school-based certification programmes for teachers, perhaps drawing from innovative training programmes developed by alternative schools. A well-designed test could also be developed to assess working teachers' subject-related and pedagogic competence, whereby those who pass the test and have significant experience may be exempted from the qualification requirement (Alternative Schools 2010). Moreover, schools could be allowed to pay teachers based on the fees they charge, and to move beyond the state-prescribed textbooks and syllabi as long as they uphold larger curriculum objectives and quality standards (which could be assessed from students' learning outcomes). Finally, the NIOS OBE scheme must be permitted to continue to allow freedom and flexibility to alternative, non-formal or home schools that meet quality benchmarks to offer diverse curricula and still be recognised by the formal system.

CONCLUSION

Ironically, the RTE's strategy, rather than facilitating quality education for more children, will end up closing educational options for millions of children. To truly uphold every child's right to quality education, the strategy we need is to have a variety of schools that all children can choose from, both well-functioning government schools and non-government options. But this requires a shift from the current competitive PPP model, where each player sees the other as a rival whose role should be minimised, to a collaborative PPP model, one of true partnership between public and private sectors. On one side, the government needs to amend the RTE to provide flexibility to private partners rather than seeking to exclude them, and to help ensure they deliver quality as defined by outcomes, not just inputs. On the other side, private players must invest in strengthening the government system rather than just running parallel initiatives. Such a diverse system will in the short term increase parents' freedom to choose what they see as best for their children, and in the long term put pressure on both government and non-government schools to improve quality for India's 220 million children — a task which neither side can achieve on its own.

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