

Matching services with local preferences: managing primary education services in a rural district of India

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Introduction

As the World Bank notes, ‘the state is in the spotlight’ (World Bank 1997a: 1), with the focus on finding new ways to address problems of corruption, inefficiency, and social exclusion, particularly in the functioning of third world governments. The search for new ways of improving the record in the social sector in India is particularly urgent given the country’s poor record in education. Disadvantages in access to education are particularly acute for the poorest households, and intensify by gender and caste. While resource allocation for primary education has been traditionally low, though steadily increasing, the evidence that funds that have been allocated for key education programmes have remained under-spent prompts us to focus on the content and management of education sector programmes and policies.¹ Urgent reforms are clearly needed to improve both the universal availability of quality basic services and universal access to these services.

Big questions remain to be answered. How can public services be structured to ensure maximum efficiency and equity outcomes in relation to basic services like primary education? Given the persistent exclusion of a significant percentage of the poorest, whose participation in education is constrained by a wide variety of factors operating both on the service provision side and household side, what structure of delivery can ensure the efficient provision of services that will secure the effective participation of the most disadvantaged? Advocates of decentralisation suggest that reorganising structures and relationships between levels of government, and/or between government and civil society or the market, offers a way to address chronic public sector management problems. It is suggested that

decentralisation or the dispersal and distribution of power from the centre (Wolman 1990: 29) has several benefits that would help to address problems of inefficiency and misallocation of resources in public service delivery. In its 1997 annual report, the World Bank suggests that decentralisation ‘offers the chance to match public services more closely with local demands and preferences’ (1997a: 120), thus offering a more informed basis upon which to make decisions about the allocation of resources, a view that is supported elsewhere (Wolman 1990; Rondinelli et al. 1983; Bennett 1990).

The intention here is not to go deep into the debate about decentralisation, which is on-going, contested, and empirically rich and diverse. Rather, this paper attempts to think about users’ ‘preferences’ in relation to primary education services, and to see how public service delivery may be improved if attention is paid to such preferences. This is done through empirical application to one particular aspect of education service delivery, school timings, among poor households in a village of Raichur district in Karnataka. The paper draws on interviews carried out with parents from poor households in one village, supported by interviews with local administrators, community members, and teachers. Some of the questions raised are: How are poor parents’ ‘preferences’ revealed? What if their ‘preferences’ run counter to policy interests — whose preferences really count? How homogeneous can preferences be, even within a village? Can selected aspects of education delivery (i.e. school timings) be changed to match local preferences, or are local preferences symbolic of a more deeply embedded perspective on the role and importance of education, hence necessitating a re-think of the nature of the production of education services as a whole? The case used to explore these questions is ‘micro’, but serves to illustrate the complexity involved in making planning contextual and localised.

The equity and efficiency merits of decentralisation

Wolman (1990) identifies three core values identified with beneficial outcomes in decentralisation — efficiency values, governance values, and distributive values. *Efficiency* values arise when power is shifted to local levels of government covering smaller jurisdictions, thus enhancing the possibility of convergence of interests and preferences as the population is likely to be more homogeneous than in larger areas. *Governance* values include enhanced responsiveness of services and accountability to citizens, promotion of diversity and innovation in public policy,

encouragement of public action and political participation, and establishment of countervailing loci of power to provide checks on corruption, and arbitrary behaviour in decision-making. *Distributive* values are associated with the redistribution of power and changes in ‘the patterns of winners and losers from public policy’ (ibid.). Reducing distances between government and citizens, whether through financial, administrative, or political decentralisation is considered to offer possibilities for greater efficiency and equity in service delivery.

Advocates of decentralisation are also united in cautioning against assuming that these benefits are unconditional outcomes (Wolman 1990; World Bank 1997a; Bennett 1990; Rondinelli et al. 1983). Wolman notes that many of the expected benefits of decentralisation are actually *a priori* judgements and require empirical scrutiny as they are based on assumptions about a wide range of important factors or variables. For instance, the organisational capacity of the units of administration to which power is devolved or management assigned will determine the extent of responsiveness, including the ability to plan resource allocation, and to monitor or regulate outcomes in service provision in keeping with local preferences (op.cit.). A second important factor is the extent to which local communities are in a position to access the information that is in theory more readily available — this will depend on existing social structures and settlements based on which groups within a community have relative power to take advantage of more localised government. Structural arrangements for decision-making and financial control also play a crucial role — the success of decentralisation strategies will depend on what is decentralised and how — the levels and the nature of control (e.g. are decisions over content of policy decentralised, or just management of pre-determined goals?), and whether control over budgets is also handed over to local levels of government. The case for decentralisation also will vary between sectors and on the type of service provision that is being decentralised.

The agenda for improvement in education service delivery in India

Assessments of the extent of failure in education provision in India produce mind-boggling statistics: half of the world’s illiterate population is in India; 40–50 per cent of India’s primary school-age children do not go to school according to some estimates,² while others claim that 32 million children of the 105 million children aged 6–10 years are out of school

(World Bank 1997b:3). The financial implications are proportionately huge — if all children of ages 6–10 are to be accommodated in school by 2007, the infrastructure requirement would possibly total 1.3 million classrooms, and 740,000 new teachers (World Bank, *ibid.*). Calculating the cost of making education for children in the age group 6–14 a fundamental right,³ it was estimated that an additional 400 billion rupees would be required over and above existing levels of expenditure to educate all the children over the Ninth Five-year Plan period (Government of India 1997).⁴

The large and increasing scale of education requirement and provision in India (owing to population growth) has meant that the costs of providing education services for the goal of Universal Elementary Education (UEE) have been prohibitive and have increased with successive years of failure to invest sufficiently in infrastructure, particularly school buildings and teachers. World Bank assistance now constitutes 25 per cent of the total education outlay, with the help of which the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) has been launched to inject much needed funds into districts with the lowest literacy rates and greatest gender disparities.⁵ Two processes are evident in this programme: central control over education, which is considered necessary to ensure that resources are allocated and UEE policy is promoted as national policy; and a simultaneous emphasis on local participation to monitor and make government accountable, and to ensure that teachers attend, buildings are built, and that children do not drop out. DPEP emphasises ‘contextuality’ in education planning given local variations in education attainment and social diversity within the overall framework of UEE which emphasises access, retention, and achievement as three interrelated aspects (Government of India 1993:37).⁶

Addressing the huge scale of financial and management requirements in relation to providing UEE requires addressing the challenge of decentralisation: what aspects of education service production should be decentralised to what level, and how should controls over planning and budgets be structured to maximise equity and efficiency? In the Indian context, decentralisation of primary education refers primarily to inter-governmental restructuring, and not privatisation. High externalities result from education, with benefits accruing not just to the individual but to society at large. Returns to education are calculated at two levels: *private* returns or income benefits accruing to the individual, calculated as ‘a measure of the expected yield of the investment, in terms of the future benefits, or income stream generated by the capital, compared with the cost of acquiring the capital asset’ (in this case education) (Woodhall 1997:

220); and *social* returns, or returns that benefit not just the individual but also the society at large, such as 'better family health, lower fertility, and thus slower population growth' (World Bank 1997b: 1), and a more productive and better skilled workforce. Both private and social returns to primary education are considered to be higher than returns to secondary and tertiary education (Psacharopoulos, cited in Colclough 1991; Woodhall 1997), implying that both states and individuals have an incentive to invest in primary education.

However, because social returns do not accrue to individuals alone but to society at large, they are not internalised by individuals and hence the attractiveness of education investment in terms of perceived private returns may be lower than its full social benefits. Furthermore, private returns may be low for poor households, as these depend on a variety of factors, including structures of economic opportunity, ownership of capital, including land, and socio-political factors. For poor households, the incentive to invest in primary education is low on all three counts, whereas the incentive for the state to invest in education remains high.

A second case for state responsibility for education provision rests in the area of equality of opportunity. Social exclusion in India has deep structural roots and translates into systematic disadvantage in access to public resources, especially across axes of inequality such as caste and gender.⁷ Enabling equal access of all to basic education remains an important part of the poverty alleviation and development agenda, and 'the dialectical relationship between educational progress and social change' (Drèze and Sen 1995: 109) provides governments with a central role in education. In India, central government's financial responsibility for primary education provision has increased recently, because states are not uniformly capable of coping with the huge financial costs of universal provision.⁸ Thus, the decentralisation agenda for primary education in India has to be concerned with finding the most appropriate levels of government through which equity and efficiency goals in education are achieved.

Users' relationship to the education system in Raichur district

Policy concern with providing UEE rests on the assumption that households are in a position to use services if they are made available.⁹ However, household-level capacity to invest in education is likely to vary depending on caste and socio-economic class, the social and cultural environment, and the economic opportunities available, which are all factors that impinge on

household decision-making. In Raichur district, female literacy rates are the lowest for the state (22.2 per cent), compared with the state average of 44.3 per cent.¹⁰ Economic opportunities in the district are curtailed by the poor irrigation infrastructure in some blocks which are drought-prone, resulting in a single agricultural season in a year, necessitating migration for small farmers to neighbouring areas in search of employment for half the year.

Elsewhere (Subrahmanian 1997), I outline some of the implications this has for education achievement, summarised here rather briefly. Even where primary schools are functioning regularly, a significant number of children attend school irregularly. A principal factor is that children from poor households miss school for long periods in the year when they accompany their parents during migration, or attend irregularly because of involvement in household activities. Some parents say that, despite their insistence, their children refuse to go to school, and for working parents it is impossible to monitor their children's activities. A few parents cite teachers' behaviour as a reason for not sending their children to school. Some of these are practical problems, solutions for which can only be found at the local level. Village Education Committees (VEC) have been formed in DPEP to facilitate and ensure better feedback from communities about the functioning of the education system, and to enable greater control over the behaviour of teachers.

The case of rural school timings

Rural schools in Raichur district run from 10.30 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. Despite high rates of school enrolment (nearly 100 per cent in the villages studied), in reality there is absenteeism as well as irregularity in attendance in primary school. Children's involvement in household activities such as animal husbandry, water, and fuel collection mean that they often interrupt school attendance to fulfil domestic duties.¹¹ Their participation in household activities also intensifies by season, including migration in the off-peak season. In the rural areas, children's involvement in household duties is not really 'labour force participation' — this is considered to be part of their contribution to household survival, fundamental to their sense of well-being, and not in conflict with children's participation in school, *provided the timings of school allow for both to co-exist*. While parents did not articulate this explicitly as a 'preference', their frequent references to the need for 'night schools' was an implicit plea for offering the option for children to be both educated and to continue carrying out chores for the household.

This was corroborated in interviews with two bureaucrats who had been carrying out micro-planning exercises with children to ascertain their motivation relating to schooling:

We asked a lot of people about their preferences... We keep doing seasonal charts [with the children]. When they are very happy, it's actually season time, and they have a little money in their hands.¹²

[Children] go to the fields, do the work, then they save their money and buy jugs and glasses for water [for the school]. ... 'I have earned and want to do something for my school' [they say]... If we gave them facilities to work and study at the same time, then it would be good. If you leave them to work for a little while then they will focus on their studies better, because they also have so many problems at home.¹³

These interviews, and informal discussions with children, indicate that they are closely involved in, and concerned about, household economic survival, and their sense of well-being is fulfilled by being able to help out and contribute to household work. Bureaucrats and parents interviewed also said that children were often scared to go late to school fearing teachers' reprimands, and hence often missed an entire day rather than just the time that they were away on errands. Forcing a choice between education and children's domestic contributions leads many parents to educate only some of their children, leaving the others free to help out at home. It is no surprise that the children who are more likely to get left out are female, given norms of early marriage for girls, low economic expectations and opportunities for girls, and concerns about adolescent girls' security.¹⁴

Accommodation of children's contributions to the household with their schooling would, therefore, be possible if school timetables were changed. However, this brings household preferences into some conflict with policy goals. UEE is promoted as the other side of the coin to child labour — it is considered essential to provide compulsory primary education services to ensure that children can be taken out of the labour force and participate fully in education instead. While policy preference for day-time school is not explicitly stated in policy documents, it is noteworthy that evening school is only ever suggested in the context of alternative, 'safety-net', non-formal schools for those children who are economically active.¹⁵ Formal schools are very much the norm, and it is assumed that those who cannot attend formal schools with their fixed timings are 'outside the loop' and hence need a parallel schooling system. This view excludes the perspective that children's feeling of well-being and parents' strategy of risk-management may necessitate a different conception of 'formal' schooling.

Strategies for children's schooling pursued by poor households are fundamentally inter-linked with a range of other decisions about survival, security, and long-term household well-being (see Subrahmanian 1997). Parents whose children are involved in domestic chores send their children in and out of formal school in the hope that children may learn a few skills while continuing to help at home. The low expectations from education are not surprising — the encouragement of this ambivalent relationship to schooling is an outcome of parents' concerns for the future of their children. In the absence of any opportunities for economic betterment, it is often a risk to invest fully in a child's education, both in terms of short-term losses, and in terms of the oft-experienced phenomenon of educated youth who remain unemployed and yet refuse to return to work on family farms. The trade-off between long-term uncertainty and the vague possibility of gain is particularly evident with girls' education: with great social value being placed on girls' adolescent marriage, the barriers to girls' education are erected as early as puberty.

Underpinning parental decision-making on schooling are evaluations about the usefulness of education when applied to existing life circumstances. Decisions on investment in full-time schooling are based not just on immediate economic circumstances, but an evaluation of the medium to long-term prospects of household survival and economic security. Under such circumstances, participation in education on terms that satisfy national policy goals of UEE are not guaranteed, even if access is made universal. This immediately brings into question some of the centralised, standardised aspects of education policy which focus on building up a system of formal schooling in which all children, regardless of caste, class, and gender, can participate. Even if the investment in education is such that equitable access is ensured, getting households to participate in it is not such a simple matter, particularly where economic circumstances compel non-compliant household behaviour.

Some thoughts on 'preferences'

How are preferences revealed?

'Matching services with local preferences' assumes ease in the articulation or discussion of 'preferences', which belies the complex processes through which preferences are often, in reality, revealed. As evident in the case presented above, poor parents' 'preference' for flexible hours of schooling which allows for children to both work and learn something is not

explicitly stated as preference, but reconstructed by an external researcher (the author) in the course of analysing wider education-related discussions and observations of behaviour. These 'preferences' are embedded in a wider context of perspectives and world-views, and are likely to emerge only through processes that fundamentally enable poor parents to have the confidence to express these views. Decentralisation may bring administrators closer to local realities, but this does not necessarily mean that preferences will be understood in the context of their complexity.

Whose preferences count in the context of conflict between local and policy perspectives?

Even where 'preferences' are picked up through participatory processes (as with the two administrators quoted above), they will not necessarily have an impact on the way services are managed. Upward feedback systems should be strong, and control over decision-making should be sufficiently devolved, to translate 'preferences' into systemic changes. A critical issue, however, is the recognition that policies, too, contain implicit 'preferences' in relation to the shape and design of services, which give rise to contradictions when couched in the language of participation and contextuality, and force the question — whose preferences count? Both household and state discourses are embedded in wider perspectives on poverty and its determinants; and, in the case of primary education, the critical question is that of understanding the role of children in managing poverty situations. While many authors have pointed out that over-emphasis on poverty as a causal factor in poor schooling can focus attention away from the crucial issue of the quality of schooling provision (see Drèze and Gazdar 1996), it is important to recognise the specific ways in which poverty structures both parents' and children's expectations and self-perceptions. Listening to 'preferences' and structuring services accordingly may go a longer way in encouraging participation and ownership among excluded groups than striving to push them into a schooling system without paying attention to their life-worlds.

Part of the conflict arises from the 'doublespeak' inherent in policy, where the push for UEE is tempered with the view that 'the Government would have to continue with its approach to motivate parents and children, involve communities and build up public opinion in favour of UEE' (Government of India 1997: ii). Winning excluded households over to the education system should involve making their preferences count, but there are barriers to this within the functioning of the policy process.

How homogeneous are preferences in a village?

Average school attendance is around 50 per cent a year in the village discussed, and the excluded are the poorest and often from the lower castes. Their preferences diverge from those of the better-off families who may see no need to alter the present system. The proposal that non-formal education (NFE) centres are established to serve as a safety-net for the poorest offers them a second-class schooling option with ill-equipped night schools and poorly-paid teachers, reinforcing a divide between those who go to formal school and those who do not.¹⁶ Given that equality of opportunity is a policy goal, the solution lies not in continuing to divide village communities by class of education, but finding a system that suits the needs of all. Participatory processes of ‘preference’ articulation need to precede or accompany consensus-building in this area, with the state committing itself to solutions that work for the most excluded.

Can aspects of education services be selectively decentralised?

A practical consideration: if school hours are to be locally determined, then the work schedules and management of teachers would need to be reviewed. At present, teachers are managed by the bureaucracy, paid out of central or state funds, and recruited at state level through computerised district-based employment exchanges. Postings and transfers are managed by district education authorities, though teachers may move between districts if compelled by circumstances. Teachers’ performance is monitored at the sub-district and district level.

Two implications emerge if services are matched with local preferences in this case. Firstly, as teachers’ timings would need to be flexible in keeping with school hours it would be essential for teachers to live in the villages to ensure that they could perform their jobs. Given the situation where most rural teachers prefer to live in small towns or big villages and commute to their village posts,¹⁷ this would be a challenge, and necessitate better investment in accommodation and facilities for teachers, as well as strictly enforcing rules regarding local residence. Secondly, this would necessitate placing teachers within more local control, to ensure accountability which may be best secured by also placing financial control at the local level. Within government, lines of authority are usually determined by control over salaries and financial resources, and hence it would be hard to see how teachers’ accountability to local communities could be secured without changing the location of financial control.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to think through broader issues relating to decentralised management of primary education services by applying questions about users' preferences to the case of rural primary schooling in a village of Raichur district. Some of the findings of the research on which this is based indicate that for UEE to be successful, there is a need to rethink the process of 'production' of education services from the viewpoint of the most excluded, incorporating livelihood concerns (in the widest sense) as well as the centrality of children to rural life-worlds, particularly in the context of poverty. Re-thinking the fundamentals would enable a more accurate perspective on users' preferences, and help set the agenda for the design of services and the structures of decentralisation that will bring services closer to these preferences.

Notes

1 A report in *The Times of India* indicates that Rs. 13.4 million of the budgets allocated for the Operation Blackboard scheme were not spent, leading to a reduction in the amount allocated for 1998–99 (8 June 1998).

2 A statistic revealed by the Union Minister for Human Resource Development in an interview with *The Times of India*, 10 June 1998.

3 Data from a UNICEF report 'In the Defence of the Child' cited in *The Indian Express*, 23 June 1998.

4 The proposal to make free and compulsory elementary education a Fundamental Right to be enforced through statutory measures through a Constitutional Amendment is in the process of being worked out by the Government of India. At present it is only a Directive Principle of State Policy (Art. 45 of the Constitution) and thus is a non-justiciable guideline.

5 Interview with Union Minister for Human Resource Development (ibid.)

6 Striking a balance between decentralisation and centralised control of education has been a long-standing quest in India and the subject of debates even in British India and newly-independent India in the 1950s (see Rai 1990 for some flavour of these debates). In fact, India's dismal progress in education in the early half of this century can be partly explained by constant shifts in control between the centre and the provinces.

7 The debate on the definition of social exclusion is rapidly growing and has largely emerged from developed countries (O'Brien et al. 1997), though it is seen to mirror closely work done in developing countries in the area of poverty, where processes of poverty are discussed not just in terms of income/consumption levels but also wider concepts such as 'relative deprivation, ill-being, vulnerability and capability' (ibid.: 4).

8 States bear most of the expenditure for education, but recently-launched schemes have considerably

increased the expenditure of the Central Government on elementary education (Government of India, 1993: 85).

9 Of course, the debate on what constitute acceptable minimum standards for education facilities is a major one, given financial constraints and management problems such as teacher absenteeism, high teacher-student ratios leading to multigrade teaching, non-availability of text-books in some cases, and so on.

10 Statistics are for 1991 (Gulati and Janssen 1997: 130).

11 Irregularly attending children tended to be from the poorer families where both parents were involved in livelihood management including migration; children from better-off families were often free to attend school all day.

12 Interview with local education administrator, 13 June 1997.

13 Interview with trainer, Block Resource Centre, Raichur District, 8 June 1997.

14 Not all villages have higher primary schools (for ages 10–14 years), and fears for girls' security (real or perceived) after puberty prevent parents from sending girls to school. This limits horizons for girls' education, and thus reduces incentives for parents to educate girls at the primary level.

15 A recent document of the Department of Education, Government of India, stated that 'Decentralisation of the education system holds out the possibility of introducing greater flexibility in the school system through measures such as shifting of school timings and adjusting the school/calendar timings to suit the local socio-economic conditions.' (1993: 48); however, the same policy document stresses at length the

importance of non-formal education as a means of bringing working children into the education net. There are many contradictions within policy which point to a rather muddled perspective on how to resolve the education-poverty problem.

16 NFE is being promoted as a system which can provide equivalent quality of schooling to children outside the formal system, enabling working children to learn at their own pace. In effect, the government is committing itself on paper to funding two systems of schooling, which does not make much financial or other sense. The commitment is far from being realised, and NFE continues to be dogged by poor quality infrastructure, including a lack of teachers. Night schools (like most primary schools) often do not have electricity, or are plagued by frequent power cuts, and are far from providing an equivalent standard of schooling

17 Interviews with teachers indicate many reasons: family compulsion, problems such as lack of suitable accommodation, and critically, poor health and education infrastructure in villages which teachers consider essential for their own children, as well as broader, status considerations.

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