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Poonam Batra

## Quality of Education and the Poor: Constraints on Learning

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### Abstract

Poverty and educational research rarely view schooling experiences and identities of children as tied in to the socio-economic conditions and associated social milieu as worthy of attention, as both view poverty as a mere barrier to educational access. This paper argues that simplistic connections between educational provisioning and poverty miss the more important idea embedded (but unheeded) in the construct of ‘capability deprivation’ – that of foregrounding the criticality of educational process. Empirical accounts reveal the dominant school ethos to be one where children of the poor are perceived with stigmatised identities and treated as non-epistemic entities. Hence, children of the poor are excluded from learning not because of the absence of conditions necessary for enabling participation and learning but because of the presence of conditions of capability deprivation that are found to characterise the everyday classroom. It is argued that a collusion between the manner in which quality of education and its relationship with poverty is conceptualised and positioned in the era of market-based reforms, sets the conditions for the production of capability deprivation.

**Keywords:** Poverty, quality of education, capability deprivation, marginalised, teacher perception, educability, educational reform, learning.

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## Quality of Education and the Poor: Constraints on Learning

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### *Introduction*

Poverty theorists have for a long time argued that developing human capacities through a concerted focus on basic education is a significant way to reduce poverty. The role of education in reducing poverty has been emphasised since the mid-1980s. In this frame, poverty has been defined in economic terms rather than as a measure of 'social disadvantage'. Drawing upon the human capital theory, it has since been emphasised that education is a critical instrument in reducing poverty. Investment in education is assumed to develop valued human capital which in turn enables the economic growth of a nation, leading to poverty reduction.

This view has been criticised for ignoring larger socio-structural factors that are known to be responsible for maintaining the 'cycle' of poverty. Failure to confront the structural dimensions of poverty and inequality has led governments to institute focussed policies and programmes with targets to alleviate some of the disadvantages children from impoverished environments face. For instance, international donor initiatives and major state policy in India and other countries have focused on various measures to attract and keep children in school. Some of these schemes, such as the mid-day meal scheme have played a critical role in providing nutrition supplements, increasing school enrolments and retaining children in schools.

Absolute poverty poses absolute constraints on learning as such children are unable to attend school due to severe conditions of hunger and malnutrition. Relative poverty creates conditions where children experience multi-dimensional poverty: hunger, inadequate nutrition and ill health; poor housing conditions, sanitation and water; and a neglected environment. Unless children have all these in equal measure, conditions of poverty impact their socio-psychological environment and therefore opportunities to learn.

With the increasing recognition of human development indices in assessing a nation's progress since Mahbubul Haq's Human Development Report (UNDP, 1998), the human capital perspective was enlarged to include the idea of people's capacities and choice leading to differential emphasis and trajectories. Sen (1999) emphasised the need to view poverty within the frame of human capabilities rather than in terms of income alone. In Sen's view, 'poverty can be sensibly identified in terms of capability deprivation; the approach concentrates on deprivations that are *intrinsically* important, (unlike low income, which is only *instrumentally* significant)' (1999: 87). Capability deprivation refers to deprivation of opportunities, choices and entitlements, and therefore includes the idea of freedom. Nussbaum (2011) proposes the view that the capabilities approach is also concerned with social injustice and inequality, especially because entrenched discrimination and marginalisation results in 'capability failures'. The key to reduce poverty even within the frame of capability deprivation is seen to be physical provisioning of education for the poor. The assumption is that policy measures such as access to schooling, the provision of school choice and a central legislation that ensures the right to free and compulsory education, are necessary and sufficient conditions to help overcome capability deprivation.

This paper argues that simplistic connections between educational provisioning and poverty miss the more important idea embedded (but unheeded) in the construct of ‘capability deprivation’ – that of foregrounding the criticality of the educational process.

To begin with, the capability deprivation frame offers the possibility of developing a more nuanced understanding of how poverty may operate in the educational space. Two aspects emanating from poverty research are worth engaging with: one, that processes in the classroom and the school that promise to develop capability are often projected in an over simplistic manner, ignoring the complexities of the educational process and, two, it is assumed that enquiry into the educational process is the sole preserve of educators. Questioning this, scholars have argued that poverty research is noticeably blind to research that has consistently demonstrated how schooling is more inclined to reinforce socialisation processes rather than challenge power relations that maintain inequities in society (Stromquist, 2001).

Educational research too has, for long, held the view that poverty essentially acts as a barrier to schooling. Issues related to inequity, exclusion and inclusion in education have been examined; but very little attention is paid to the processes that influence teaching and learning in schools where children of the marginalised study. It is often assumed that provisioning of education enables poor children to attend school, learn and develop capacities and skills. This however has not been the case. Educational policy initiatives have continued to pay limited attention to the school and the classroom where capabilities are assumed to be developed and honed.<sup>1</sup> Several testing initiatives<sup>2</sup> across the country have demonstrated consistently poor performance of elementary school children in basic literacy and numeracy skills. It can therefore be argued that provisioning alone, without adequate engagement with the underlying processes of education that may foster or create further disadvantage, proves to be an ineffectual instrument of reducing poverty. This calls attention to the longstanding need for poverty and education researchers to work together to re-examine the relationship between poverty and education (Rose and Dyer, 2008).

To take this argument further, a subtle and significant distinction needs to be established between the term ‘educational deprivation’ and the term ‘capability deprivation’ which scholars have tended to use interchangeably.<sup>3</sup> While educational deprivation is likely to conjure up an image of deprivation in terms of access to a school, capability deprivation inevitably draws our attention to the everyday experiences of the poor, the marginalised, in school. It foregrounds educational process as the site where capabilities are most likely to develop. This distinction makes it incumbent on policymakers to move beyond mere provisioning of education and to ensure that children participate and learn. Hence, the site of education induces an ineluctable engagement for the researcher as much as the policymaker.

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<sup>1</sup>This is despite the fact that the curriculum discourse in India post NCF 2005 has repeatedly drawn attention to the microcosm of the everyday classroom and the need to prepare teachers to speak to that.

<sup>2</sup>ASER (2015) has revealed little improvement in children’s learning achievement levels in the last ten years. Other examples are the NCERT survey and surveys conducted by private organisations such as Education Initiatives, based in Ahmedabad.

<sup>3</sup>Tilak (2005), for instance, uses the term ‘educational deprivation’ and argues how income poverty and educational poverty are mutually reinforcing.

The capability approach frame can be drawn upon to challenge yet another entrenched view – the view that poverty is essentially an individual condition. In an attempt to revive the ‘culture of poverty thesis’ of the late 1960s and early 1970s, more recent empirical research by Payne(2005) portrays the poor in monolithic and stereotypical terms of values and behaviours, arguing that poverty is no excuse for low performance. Critiquing Payne’s research, Ng and Rury (2006) contend that efforts to educate poor children by locating the problem of poverty within the individual without regard to the larger social context in which they live, are mis-directed.

It is evident, so far, that both educational research and poverty research fail to capture the dynamics of deprivation as both view poverty as extrinsic to the process of education. Micro-level narratives, analysis of processes of schooling, teaching and learning are required to understand how poverty influences and shapes children’s experiences in school.

Having established the significance of viewing education of the poor in the extended frame of capability approach, the central argument of this paper is that conditions of capability deprivation are being engendered in the classroom every day, and that these pose severe constraints on learning for children from disadvantaged backgrounds; in particular, children of the poor. Primary field data and existing ethnographic accounts of classrooms have been drawn upon to argue how conditions of capability deprivation are being engendered in the everyday classroom.

The primary data has been gathered using semi-structured interviews with two groups of teachers prepared through two distinctly different pre-service teacher education programmes. The methodology used is elaborated in the section following the policy narrative on measures of reform and the quality debate. Secondary sources comprise of available ethnographic accounts of classrooms of select government schools attended by the poor in the hope to learn.

The argument is built using four dominant narratives that are seen to construct the everyday experiences of children from poor and deprived homes: (a) a policy narrative that seeks to create major shifts in educational thinking reflected in measures of reform and the quality debate; (b) a narrative of teacher perceptions and beliefs about children of the poor and their education; (c) a narrative of reforming children as the chief aim of education; and (d) a narrative of viewing children as ‘non-epistemic’ entities. Woven together, the narratives lend credence to the argument that conditions of capability deprivation, posing severe constraints on the learning of children of the poor, are indeed being fashioned in the classroom every day. The paper also highlights possibilities of a ‘counter-narrative’ that emerges from teachers who are deliberately prepared to engage with the complexities of diverse social and economic realities. Though the ‘counter-narrative’ is not the subject of this paper, it points to the need to subvert processes that encumber the intellectual agency of teachers as a way to address the tension between education and social structure within the challenges of a market-based economy.

### *Educational Reform and the Quality Debate*

The need to focus attention on issues of diversity amongst learners and on the prerequisite of preparing teachers to enable all children to learn assumed significance in the curricular discourse over the last decade, as a means of enhancing quality in Indian classrooms. Questions of knowledge and learning and the epistemic identity of children have taken centre-stage. Educators are being prompted to view children, foremost as learners, whose social identities are

acknowledged and experiences drawn upon to engage critically with socio-cultural and economic realities. Here, the aim and process of education converge and advance in considerable harmony. This discourse is accepted as formal state policy on school curriculum and the curriculum to prepare and develop teachers.<sup>4</sup>

Policy enforcement, however, is seen to lay renewed emphasis on large-scale testing as a means of enhancing quality of teaching and learning in schools. There is a growing belief and advocacy that frequent assessment of learning outcomes is necessary to effect quality education.<sup>5</sup>No attention is being drawn to the fact well known to educators, that poor learning achievements in the primary school is directly related to the quality of teaching–learning environments and the presence or absence of opportunities to learn. This lack of attention to the processes of education is a direct consequence of the trajectory educational reform has taken, including the assumed relationship between poverty and education, elaborated earlier in this paper.

Educational reform in India since the mid-1990s—the first phase of liberalisation—focused on increasing access to schooling, fulfilling the demand for teachers by hiring professionally unqualified teachers<sup>6</sup> and making provisions for frequent in-service training. Most of these training programmes were designed to ‘motivate’ the ‘unmotivated’ teacher, as this was perceived to be the key to ensure quality education. Towards the end of a decade of such reforms, learning achievement levels showed little improvement and commissioned research concluded that teachers were responsible for the poor quality of education despite the huge amounts invested in ‘motivating’ a cadre of ‘unmotivated’ teachers. Continuing efforts at placing the onus of poor learning outcomes on school teachers led to the growing anti-teacher discourse, followed by a spate of policy measures to ensure teacher accountability and efficiency. Examining curriculum and pedagogic processes that prepare and support teachers were not even entertained as possible areas of engagement and intervention with regard to the quality debate.

On the intervention of the Supreme Court via the Justice Verma Commission on Teacher Education (GoI, 2012),<sup>7</sup> several fundamental flaws that plague the system of preparing teachers were identified. In its articulation of the kind of teacher required to teach children in their formative years, the Commission in its report draws attention to the classrooms in which

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<sup>4</sup>The National Curriculum Framework (for school education) (NCF), 2005 and The National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE), 2009.

<sup>5</sup>It is important to note that the most recent ASER (2015) Report advocates privatising school education by asserting that the Government of India’s *‘neglect of learning outcomes* has definitely contributed to a growing *divide* in every village and community *between those who access private schools or tutors, and those who do not*’ (Chavan, 2015: 4). Yet, the state-wise analysis of ASER data (by its own admission), shows that ‘controlling for other factors reduces the government-private school learning gap considerably in all states ... (and therefore) a smaller proportion of this gap is actually attributable to private schools themselves’ (Wadhwa, 2015: 20).

<sup>6</sup>Para-teacher is a term that refers to a cadre of school teachers hired to meet the demand for teachers. Para-teachers do not have any professional pre-service qualification and are paid consolidated salaries of amounts less than one-third of regular teachers’ pay. Large numbers of para-teachers continue to pose a major challenge to providing quality education in several state government-run schools across the country.

<sup>7</sup>In May 2011, the Supreme Court constituted a high-powered Commission under former Chief Justice of India, Justice J.S. Verma, to address complaints of widespread malpractice, policy distortions and regulatory conflicts. See GoI (2012).

opportunities for learning are relinquished every day. The quality debate is struggling to bring the focus back on this important aspect of school education which has virtually lost its significance in the cacophony of advocacy for frequent testing to ensure quality education in the era of market-based reforms.

Locating ‘educative experiences’ at the heart of quality education and the expanded understanding of poverty as capability deprivation foregrounds the significance of turning attention to how children of the poor experience schooling. This, however, has not captured the imagination of either educational researchers or policymakers. Poverty theorists, too, rarely view schooling experiences and identities of children as tied in to the socio-economic conditions and associated social milieu as worthy of attention. Moreover, the simultaneous revival of the educational agenda in the era of reforms as framed in economic competitiveness rather than social justice has changed the very aims of education. Hence, the growing perception and belief that education should be about skill development, and in itself has little potential to enable social transformation, dominates current conceptions of quality education.

There appears to be collusion between how poverty and quality of education are conceptualised and positioned in a market-based economy. This is seen to shape the educational agenda of contemporary India. Viewed in the framework of ‘delivery’, quality education is posed as a system of efficiency and accountability measures, best standardised through regular testing of learning outcomes and technology-oriented solutions to the problem of teaching and learning. In this frame, the process of education is left vacuous and essentially unaddressed.

Equally important is the recognition that the dominant view of poverty as a barrier to education has led educational research to majorly focus on how poverty impacts learning. Some of these impact studies attribute the poor performance of children on basic tasks of literacy and numeracy to lack of resources, poor health and lack of home support – conditions associated with poverty. Poverty is thus taken to be a given – a factor outside the realm of schooling and one which impacts learning outcomes rather than shapes the everyday quotidian of the school. This also explains why such little effort has been made to investigate how children of the poor experience poverty in school.

### *Examining Conditions of the Production of Capability Deprivation*

The central argument of this paper, that children’s learning is severely constrained by conditions of capability deprivation, engendered in the everyday classroom, derives from a meticulous analysis of teacher interviews and ethnographic classroom accounts. Together, the field presents a coherent picture of a school and classroom setting in which opportunities to learn are forsaken every day.

Primary data was gathered to examine teachers’ views about children– especially those who come from backgrounds of poverty–their learning and capacities to learn. Teachers teaching in elementary grades for over a decade were interviewed over a period of two months. Two groups of teachers were interviewed – those who have undergone pre-service teacher education through the two-year Diploma in Education (DEd) offered by the District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs), state institutions based outside the university system (henceforth referred to as Group 1); and those educated through a four-year integrated, inter-disciplinary Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEEd) programme offered in undergraduate colleges of liberal arts and

sciences(henceforth referred to as Group 2). The aim was to explore whether teachers prepared differently develop alternate views of children from diverse backgrounds, and their learning. A total of 82 elementary school teachers<sup>8</sup> teaching in 10 state-run corporation schools<sup>9</sup>across Delhi were interviewed.

Although both programmes prepare teachers for teaching at the elementary level, there are distinct differences in their curriculum and pedagogical approach. The two-year DEd programme offered by DIETs is typically designed to view children through the lens of universal characteristics and their education through techniques of pedagogy as derived from the basic principles of behaviouristic psychology, following the colonial model of training teachers. The four-year BEEd programme, on the other hand, views education as located in the larger socio-cultural, political and economic context in terms of understanding children, childhood and education; and evolving appropriate pedagogies through engagement with subject knowledge, and inter-disciplinary perspectives on learners, processes of learning and aims of education; relying on theories of socio-constructivism and critical pedagogy. Responses from teachers were sought on several issues related to children's participation in school, their performance in class, engagement with processes of education and it's connect with the larger socio-economic context of the children they teach.

Teacher responses were sought on specific classroom situations related to issues of children's work in the classroom, how they conduct themselves in school, teachers' pedagogic approaches and teacher-student interactions. The majority of children taught by these teachers came from poor homes and marginal social communities. Teachers were asked simple questions around everyday occurrences such as: why do children come late to school; why do children show little interest in classroom activities; why do girls and boys segregate themselves during assembly and other classroom activities? In each case, teachers were asked to think of ways in which they have handled or would handle such situations in class and the school. The second set of questions related to specific errors that children make in solving mathematical problems, tasks of reading, writing and their pace of completing given tasks. Teachers were asked to reflect on their pedagogic strategies - how they would adapt them to enable children to recognise errors and seek support to correct them, to read and write with fluency and to feel comfortable learning at their own pace. The third set of questions required teachers to reflect on specific aspects of the pre-service teacher education courses that provided them opportunities to develop professional capacities and sensibilities. Responses of teachers were analysed to reveal their views on poverty, the poor and their education, and their capacities to learn.

Teacher orientations, beliefs and assumptions revealed through primary data find resonance in the ethnographic accounts of classrooms studied by various researchers. Accounts of three specific ethnographic studies conducted in select state-run schools in Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal (Majumdar and Mooij, 2011) and Delhi (Iyer, 2013; Dalal, 2014) were examined. The aim was to understand teacher orientations and assumptions about children from poor and socially

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<sup>8</sup>Teachers were selected on the basis of the pre-service teacher education programme they had been educated in. Fifty teachers had qualified with a Diploma in Elementary Education (DEd) offered by DIETs and thirty-two teachers had qualified with a Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Teacher Education (BEEd) offered by select constituent colleges of the University of Delhi.

<sup>9</sup>The majority of teachers interviewed were teaching in the corporation-run primary schools while others in composite state government-run schools of Delhi.



disadvantaged backgrounds and their capacities to learn through classroom observations and expressed views.

The following section presents qualitative accounts of classrooms that reveal how teachers' unquestioning and entrenched views on poverty, their views about learners from poor and marginalised homes, and their views about knowledge and learning shape the classroom discourse. Analysis highlights how the poor continue to be marginalised from processes of learning despite having access to schooling.

### *Teachers' Perceptions of the Poor, the Disadvantaged, and their Learning*

Some of the key observations with regard to how teachers view children of the poor provide an insight into how schooling is experienced by these children. Data gathered from two groups of teachers reveal significant differences in perception, views, conceptions and dispositions towards children and their education. It is argued that these differences in turn significantly influence the ways in which children experience schooling. The views of teachers of both groups presented below have been analysed to understand how this is so.

#### ***DOMINANT PERCEPTIONS, CONCEPTIONS AND DISPOSITIONS***

The dominant tendency of teachers from Group 1 was to view children as lacking in something. For instance, most believe and assume that children who come late to school are disinterested in school and do not value time and studies. Most teachers think that punitive measures are necessary to coerce children to come to school on time, such as complaining to their parents and punishing them in school. Some teachers even said that there should be a method of imposing a fine as penalty on children who come late to school. Even where teachers reflect on the possible role of extraneous factors beyond their control that could compel children to arrive late to school, their responses were generic and sweeping, attributing such behaviours to family background, unpleasant atmosphere at home, lack of support and families' disinterest in their children's education. The majority of teachers are of the view that children are lazy, have bad habits and are disinterested, explaining students' perceived truant behaviour as something internal to them. The best ways to deal with such behaviour, teachers said, was to 'tell parents' that they need to be serious about their children's education and inform them about their children's truant behaviour; and to counsel students as a corrective measure. Teachers whose responses came across as 'sensitive' in actual effect reflect a patronising attitude towards children from poor and marginalised families, reaffirming the conviction that such children require 'corrective' measures. On probing how teachers would enable children to get more involved in school and classroom activities, most referred to the need to reform them through counselling. Some teachers expressed the need to make teaching more 'child-centred', a 'term' commonly used by teachers but a 'praxis' rarely witnessed in real classrooms.

Teachers of Group 1 continually doubt children—even those who may have had genuine difficulty in completing classroom tasks—asserting that they fail to perform because they do not value school, do not practice enough at home, lack concentration, have bad habits and often disrupt the class. Teachers could not provide a single instance of a pedagogic approach that worked or that required modification and was adapted to suit the needs of children who may not have the academic support required to complete school tasks. Ethnographic accounts reveal that as a matter of routine and in the name of disciplining children, teachers often isolate such

‘undisciplined’ (read ‘non-performing’) children from the mainstream activities of the classroom, deny them the pleasure of participating in games and other fun activities by way of punishment, and keep them busy in meaningless tasks of ‘copying’ from the blackboard or the textbook. ‘Class monitors’ are ‘used’ to institute a system of regular ‘surveillance’ and are given a free hand to reprimand and hit children on the instructions of the teacher and the headmaster (Iyer, 2013).

Any diversity amongst children in terms of the pace at which they complete a task or how they complete it is seen through the lens of individual ability. Children are classified as ‘intelligent’ and ‘dull’ where the ‘dull’ are further labelled as ‘slow learners’. Many teachers did not hesitate to refer to ‘non-performing’ children as lazy, inattentive, even unscrupulous, and immoral. Teachers expect little participation from children who they label as ‘slow learners’ and in a sense have given up on them.

Another dominant view amongst teachers is that the family backgrounds of such children fail to provide conditions that are conducive to learning. Teachers carry preconceived notions about the effects of deprivation; openly attributing children’s ‘non-performance’ and ‘indiscipline’ to the illiterate parent and their poor economic conditions. In a major ethnographic research undertaken in four countries of Latin America, Avalos (1986) had argued that explanations for failure could be traced to the teachers and the school conditions they create; and that school failure is produced within schools.

Recent testimonies of parents and children from economically weaker sections (EWS<sup>10</sup>) in several private schools across India reveal that schools intimidate parents, complain about their children’s ‘dirty habits’, ask for additional fees for extra-curricular activities and often exclude them from sports or other activities of the school on the ground that they are entitled to ‘tuition fee’ waiver alone. It is no surprise that despite the enactment of a central legislation – the Right to Education (GoI, 2009) – in India over four years ago, debates with regard to the provision of reservation for EWS children in private schools continue to place the onus of integrating these children on them and their families rather than view it as the responsibility of school management.

Attitudes and dispositions of teachers towards the marginalised seem to be consistent with their overall stereotypical frame of thinking, which has cultural sanction as well. On the question of gender, for instance, most teachers hold the view that constituting groups on the basis of gender is a ‘natural’ thing to do. This has the concurrence of parents as well as the school, which also follows the ‘correct’ policy of seating girls and boys separately. Teachers do not feel the need to question this as they perceive it to be a ‘natural’ part of ‘socialisation’. Some teachers voiced politically correct statements such as ‘teachers should treat boys and girls equally’ with little realisation that these were inconsistent with their expressed views that separate seating for girls and boys is a ‘natural’ disposition of ‘Indian’ culture and tradition.

Persuaded by the entrenched belief that children need to be ‘reformed’, teachers often justify constant verbal abuse and frequent beating of children. The National Council for the Protection of Child Rights Studies (2009) reveal how children too have internalised the view that beating is good for them. As argued by Sarangapani (2003), the value congruence between teachers and students legitimises social control as the key function of education where teacher authority is

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<sup>10</sup>RTE, 2009 provides for 25 per cent reservation for children from the EWS category in all private schools.

perceived to have legitimate power. Teachers exercise authority by ‘controlling their learning environments, restricting their movements and expression with the aim to improve their ‘performance’ in school. ‘Performance’ denotes a range of ‘expected’ behaviours, apart from doing well in class tests.

Most children’s errors in tasks of writing, reading and mathematical operations are attributed to cognitive ‘deficiency’ and disinterest. The appropriate strategy to deal with children’s poor performance in teachers’ view would be to use methods of drill and repeated practice. Some felt that frequent testing would be a good way to ensure that children do not repeat mistakes. Hidden in this view is the conviction that there are ‘correct’ ways of doing things, whether it is to pronounce words ‘properly’, solve arithmetical problems or behave as children, learners, boys and girls. Creative writing too, teachers say, should be assessed in terms of correctness in the formation of letters, correctness of content and spelling. Even where teachers acknowledge that differences in dialects may explain why children pronounce words differently, they continue to hold the belief that this difference indicates poor cognitive grasp and needs to be corrected; and can be corrected through regular practice and daily tasks of dictation. Often, teachers attribute children’s inability to read and comprehend meaning to their being lazy and inattentive. Delays in learning are attributed to differences in age, cognitive levels and ‘IQ’, which according to many teachers is hereditarily determined.

Teachers’ conceptions about children from marginalised communities portray the poor in stereotypical terms of values and behaviour, thereby contributing to the positioning of poverty and associated behaviours as an individual condition. This understanding is part of the constructed discourse of the in-service programmes for teachers since the late 1990s that aimed to address ‘hard-spots’ of learning amongst under-performing children in state-run schools.

Ethnographic accounts<sup>11</sup> reveal that children are acutely aware of the teacher’s lack of confidence in them. Hence, they may be physically present in the classroom but are excluded from all classroom processes. The casual nature of classroom processes is particularly observed in poorer and more educationally backward areas and it is within the school that children learn their place in the social hierarchy at large (Majumdar and Mooij, 2011). Immersed in an ambience of everyday exclusion, children seem to be learning from teachers that they are not capable of learning and that they themselves are responsible for failing to perform.

### ***CHANGING PERCEPTIONS, CONCEPTIONS AND DISPOSITIONS: SHAPING THE POSSIBLE***

Teachers of Group 2—educated to engage with diversity in the everyday—were found to appreciate social and individual differences; share ways of encouraging children to participate; create fearless and non-threatening learning environments and opportunities for peer learning; and reach out to parents to ensure a continuity of positive experiences between the home and the school. For them, enquiry into children’s errors facilitates an understanding of their world and thinking patterns and creates a compelling need for epistemic engagement with children and conceptual knowledge. They question the prevalent notion of the ‘educability’ of children from disadvantaged contexts, and acknowledge the larger responsibility of educators in enabling social justice.

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<sup>11</sup>These accounts were based on observations gathered from classrooms in state government-run schools in Andhra Pradesh. See Majumdar and Mooij (2011) for detailed classroom accounts and the analysis offered.

Teachers are acutely aware of the lack of opportunities that impede the learning experience of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. They recognise that children struggling with the standard language of the school are at a considerable disadvantage not because they lack in cognitive capacities but because they are coerced into making meaning using an alien language. They speak about the need to relate school knowledge to their social milieu and personal experiences; make teaching plans keeping in mind their contexts and needs. A candid sharing of these teachers suggests that many notions they held about children from poor and marginalised communities were systematically challenged during their pre-service education. Several activities involving field experiences and theoretical engagement compelled them to reflect on their socialisation, repeatedly acknowledge and counter their own stereotypes. They spoke about the change they experienced in themselves – learning to take initiative, connect with the lives of children, question their own notions and biases, understand problems from different perspectives, learn to trust themselves, and express their arguments logically and with confidence.

These teachers believe that the onus of finding solutions to the problem of frequent absenteeism amongst children also lies with the teachers who could reach out to children to understand their everyday compulsions, often emanating from harsh socio-economic conditions, and involve them in school activities by making teaching-learning a worthwhile experience. Teachers acknowledge that many children arrive late to school because they are disinterested, but this disinterest they attribute to possible unattractive and irrelevant teaching-learning materials and pedagogic approaches that often make school learning a meaningless experience for them. Many were of the view that difficult socio-economic circumstances may keep children engaged in domestic chores, including looking after younger siblings. Some gave examples of how the demands of schooling and its systemic structures compel teachers to view children as severed from their socio-economic and cultural environment. The consequence of this, they say, is the risk of rendering the formal school curriculum incomprehensible.

With regard to questions about children's errors and their inability to read and write with facility, teachers expressed a more nuanced understanding of the specific issues related to subject matter. For instance, they analysed children's errors in mathematics with specific reference to concepts and sub-concepts that children need to engage with. They could discern the difference between conceptual and procedural knowledge and the need to design learning activities based on this understanding. They reflected on the need to adapt curriculum sequencing and alter pedagogic strategies to address the specific cognitive needs of children who were seen as lagging behind. The solutions offered by these teachers lay in problematising the issue at hand and then looking for appropriate strategies related to curriculum design and pedagogy.

On evaluating creative writing, teachers gave priority to children's expression of ideas and their originality; addressing the structure and rules of language without denigrating children and their home language. Teachers foregrounded the importance of involving children, ensuring their participation by creating non-threatening and accepting learning environments. Encouraging talk in the classroom was flagged by them as a necessary pedagogical strategy in the development of language facility. On questions of the varying pace of learning, teachers were of the view that learning experiences would need to be adapted for children at different levels of learning. Whether children came from poor backgrounds or diverse abilities, the response of teachers indicated sensitivity, a sense of agency and competence in creating appropriately designed learning experiences.

Group 2 teachers are convinced that gender differences are socially constructed. Hence, in their view, the school and teachers have a crucial role in enabling gender equality. This, they felt, must be addressed by way of school policy; for instance, involving children in tasks not stereotypically associated with girls or boys and engaging with parents so as to consciously challenge processes of socialisation. In contrast, Group 1 teachers accept gender differences as ‘naturalised’, as part of socialisation at home and in society and therefore do not warrant change. Most teachers indicated helplessness, stating that not only does it have the sanction of society; it is also an expectation of school authorities that teachers actively discourage girls and boys to interact or sit together in class. Group 2 teachers who have engaged with questions of gender in school and society during their preparation to become teachers, take the initiative to bring change in formal school environments: they talk about it in class, evolve strategies to break contrived spaces that separate girls and boys in school and express this as an important aspect of their professional development. These teachers are convinced that socialisation patterns of gender, class or caste need to be brought into the classroom for dialogue, enquiry and reasoning. Having engaged conceptually with social diversity, including gender, faith, language, caste and class, they feel equipped to understand the nuanced unfolding of these in the classroom.

Field accounts illustrate that teachers who engage with the complexities of diverse social reality, develop insight into the lives of diverse people. They learn to introspect, reason, think critically and reflect, call into question hierarchies and inequalities by voicing their concerns, expressing dissent and reaching out to make a difference. While acknowledging that poverty creates limiting conditions, they do not see these conditions as determining how children learn and behave. Seeking to design educative experiences that draw all children in the processes of learning can also be attributed to the dispositions these teachers develop of valuing children from diverse contexts, relating to them as epistemic selves and having faith in their capacities to learn.

Ethnographic accounts of schooling resonate with views teachers hold about the poor and the marginalised, their social milieu, abilities and inabilities, and provide substantive evidence to the argument that conditions which impede children’s learning are engendered in the everyday quotidian of the classroom. So far, the paper has argued that this view dominates the narrative of teachers in classrooms where the poor come to learn. Underlying this view are two deeper narratives: that of reforming poor children as the chief aim of education—manifest in the everyday culture of schooling; and the construction of a totalitarian disbelief in the epistemic identities of children of the poor. Substantive evidence from classroom accounts, juxtaposed with the views expressed by teachers, makes this a compelling argument.

### *Reforming Children as the Aim of Education*

Several teachers believe that children who fail to perform are ‘cognitively deficient’, even ‘uneducable’. Teachers also attribute ‘non-performance’ of children to a lack of application of mind and hard work and inadequacies in their parental and community backgrounds. Therefore, the aim of education, in their view, is to change behaviours using coercive methods to ‘make’ children perform. Iyer (2013) gives a lucid account of how teachers are routinely preoccupied with the need to ‘reform’ children. This they attempt to do through a strict regimen of everyday rituals in school. Biased and negative behaviour of teachers towards children, frequent corporal punishment, and the sheer negation of children’s identities are the usual norm – creating a classroom feared by most children, especially the marginalised.

A recent ethnographic study of a state-run school<sup>12</sup> comprising migrant and non-migrant families illustrates how children's experience of schooling is largely shaped by their specific class positioning. Teachers were observed reminding children of their lower-class status during all major activities in school, including the distribution of incentives such as uniforms and money. Teaching appeared to be dominated by efforts to 'discipline' children, subjecting them and their communities to verbal insults. Lack of discipline amongst children, their poor performance and frequent disruptions within the school were attributed to their social milieu. It was common to observe teachers 'demeaning children's work', 'ridiculing cultural difference', being openly 'disdainful about their expressed aspirations', and 're-inscribing social identities' (Dalal, 2014).

The classroom ethos unfolded in these ethnographic accounts and the views expressed by individual teachers indicate how teachers construct the understanding that the chief aim of education is to 'reform' children. This idea of reform leads teachers to fastidiously control the way children behave, the way they talk, walk or play. The school is constructed by teachers as a space where children from poor backgrounds and marginalised communities ought to be reformed to become 'clean, orderly, disciplined and obedient'. This understanding of teachers rooted in middle class values finds legitimacy in universalistic theories of child development and learning promulgated through teacher training programmes. Teachers often view the children they teach from the lens of an 'ideal child' and an 'ideal childhood'. The dominant perceptions teachers develop about children and their communities lead them to create a culture of exclusion and marginalisation of the poor. The dynamics of poverty hence shapes social relations between the teacher and the taught in a manner that produce and reproduce experiences of deprivation.

### *Children as Non-epistemic Entities*

Most 'failures' of children in terms of non-performance were attributed by teachers to inadequacies inherent in them, their parental and community backgrounds and social milieu. Children's errors are viewed as deficiencies in individual children, indicative of degrees of 'educability'. Dalal (2014) notes that children are continually referred to as belonging to a certain community, gender, caste, religion or class and are rarely addressed as learners.

The negative attitudes towards children, the lack of faith in their abilities to learn and the everyday focus on their class and social identities reveal that children are viewed as 'non-epistemic' beings. Viewing the classroom as a social and relational space, Majumdar and Mooij (2011) argue that the kind of relationship children share with teachers and the kind of interactions they have, shapes classroom processes – involving or excluding children from processes of learning. For instance, when teachers attribute lack of performance to aspects inherent in children and their social milieu, they provide sanction to class inequalities. Teachers are also seen to demean the poor backgrounds of children even while transacting text lessons. Dalal (2014) observed that during the teaching of a lesson in environmental studies (EVS), the text—written with the intention to include the experiences of children in the classroom discourse—was instead used to humiliate the backgrounds of children. The examples given below illustrate this.

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<sup>12</sup>This ethnographic study is the work of a doctoral student who spent a year and a half in a state government-run primary school to investigate how children's identities are manifested and constructed in the everyday processes of the school. See Jyoti Dalal (2014)

*The chapter 'Duniya Mere Ghar Main' (The World in my Home) from the NCERT EVS text engages with issues of gender, honesty, caste divide and sexual abuse. The text is written in a manner that seeks the participation of children, encouraging them to talk about their experiences. The first part of the chapter deals with a common scenario at home where a fight breaks out over the remote control of the television. The teacher reads the text and the questions that are aimed at engaging children in a conversation are as follows: Kya tumhaare ghar main kissi cheez kolekar jhagde hote hain? (Do you have such fights at home?). Several children give mixed responses. The teacher ignores all of them and pronounces her judgment on the children and their families: 'Tumhare gharon main to har cheez pe jhagde hote hain. Jhagdon ke alawa hota kya hai tumhare gharon main?' (You people fight on anything and everything. What else do you do other than fight?)*

*She moves on to the third section of the text which encourages children to be sensitive and truthful. The text alludes to the integrity of Pilloo maami, who pays the correct amount of money for an ice cream even though the shopkeeper asks for a lesser amount. The teacher reads the question given in the textbook: Kya aap aisa karte ho? (would you also do such a thing?). This time too she answers on her own: Nahi karte ho. (No, you don't do this). Abhishek intervenes: Haan madam haan. (Yes madam, we do). Dismissing him she says: Tu to bilkul bhi aisa nahi karta. Mujhe nahi lagta tumhare muhalle mein koi bhi baccha aisa hai jo kabhi aisa karega.'(You definitely cannot do this. I do not think there would be even one child in your neighbourhood who would do such a thing).*

This classroom episode highlights how teachers tend to essentialise the values and behaviours of children who come from poor families. Teachers' orientations towards these children are driven by the stereotypical assumptions they hold about them and about poverty.

As argued elsewhere, an overwhelming emphasis on archaic concepts of the psychology of learning and individual differences during pre-service training constructs a frame within which students are perceived as dull, lazy and 'uneducable' even as they struggle with alienating aspects of school environments – be it the language or an irrelevant school curriculum. Concepts of 'slow learners' and 'low IQ', rampantly used in contemporary Indian classrooms, are 'naturalised' in the amalgamation of a folk and entrenched 'practical' discourse of pre-service teacher education (Batra, 2014).

Scholars who advocate that the rights discourse must engage with the discourse on 'identity, representation and recognition as it applies to discussions on education' (Majumdar and Mooij, 2011: 183) strengthen the argument that mere enactment of the right to education does not ensure that children will participate and learn. Primary research evidence and classroom accounts presented in this paper help to take this argument further: that children are excluded from learning not because of the *absence* of conditions necessary for enabling school participation and learning but because of the *oppressive presence* of conditions of capability deprivation commonly observed in schools which children of the poor attend with hope. The most important among these is teachers' refusal to accept these children as being capable of engaging and learning. The dominant school ethos appears to be one where children of the poor and the marginalised are perceived with stigmatised identities and not recognised as epistemic entities.

There is a need to understand why teachers' discourse about social and economic differences and children's specific learning needs continues to remain unchallenged and where are the possibilities for change. Views of teachers educated to engage with questions of diversity,

knowledge, learner and learning in interdisciplinary frames, discussed earlier, provide some insight into how this challenge could be addressed.

### *Conclusion*

This paper begins with the argument that poverty research as well as educational research fail to capture the dynamics of how poor children experience schooling. Poverty research is insensible to social research that demonstrates how inequities are reinforced in the classroom. Dominant educational research on the other hand, remains guilty of viewing poverty as a mere barrier to education and hence fails to enquire into how poverty shapes the everyday classroom.

Primary data gathered from teachers and ethnographic accounts of select state classrooms, makes a compelling case for viewing the education of the poor and the marginalised in the expanded framework of capability approach, including how being poor shapes school experiences. Empirical accounts reveal how the poor continue to be marginalised from processes of learning despite having access to schooling. The dominant school ethos is one where children of the poor are viewed from a deficit perspective. Teachers' lack of faith in the educability of poor children and their entrenched views on what education must offer them excludes them from opportunities to learn.

Thus, conditions of capability deprivation are created in the everyday classroom. It is argued that collusion between the manner in which the quality of education and its relationship with poverty is conceptualised and positioned in the era of market-based reforms sets the conditions for the production of capability deprivation. The thrust on a universalised, standardised and outcome-based discourse of education redefines the very purpose of education, shifting the educator's gaze away from the classroom process. Precluding a focus on what happens inside the classroom renders teaching-learning processes irrelevant for research and meaningful policy intervention.

The consistently poor performance of children on tasks of basic arithmetic and reading (ASER, 2015) warrants the need to examine the processes of teaching and learning. The bulk of the children who underperform may well be those who attend school with aspiration but who are unyieldingly excluded from processes of learning within the space of learning. Capability deprivation, it is argued, is a direct consequence of exclusion that plays out in classrooms. Informed by the perspective of social justice and equality, the capabilities approach evinces the criticality of the educational process. Further research would be required to examine how the collusion between the conceptualisation of poverty and quality education threatens to dilute the 'right to education' by institutionalising mechanisms that maintain conditions of capability deprivation in schools for the poor and marginalised.



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