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## **Choosing and changing schools in India's private and government sectors: Young Lives evidence from Andhra Pradesh**

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## Abstract

*The growth and increasing popularity of 'low-fee' private schooling across many parts of India has attracted much research and policy attention. This paper broadens the discussion by drawing attention to the increasing heterogeneity of the educational landscape in many communities. Our specific focus is on the consequences for school choices made by households across rural and urban Andhra Pradesh. The paper draws on longitudinal data for two cohorts comprising approximately 3,000 children, collected as part of Young Lives' research, together with a qualitative sub-study involving a purposively selected sample of Young Lives parents and children. Trends in school choice are discussed, as well as the factors that underlie the schooling decisions that households make as they navigate the complex school hierarchies within their communities. The paper offers new evidence of an increasing trend for households to make successive choices of school for their children, as household circumstances change and school options are re-evaluated. Household survey data from 2009 show that 16% of a sample of eight year olds had moved school at least once during the early grades of primary school, an increase from 5% of a comparable sample of eight year olds in 2002. The consequences of a dynamic and more market-driven school system are explored, and implications discussed.*

## Key words

Primary school, India, school changes, school choice, low-fee private, longitudinal

## Introduction: private schools, household choices and school changes

Recent years have seen a massive increase in both the supply of and demand for private schools across many Indian states (see Pratham, 2012 for recent data on increasing enrolment). Rapid economic growth, increased opportunities for social mobility and elevated aspirations for educational achievement have combined with disillusionment with the quality and effectiveness of government schools to fuel demand for private schools, even amongst some of the poorest families. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) shows that, overall, 28% boys and 23% of girls aged 7-10 years old in India were enrolled in private school in 2011, although there is considerable variation between states. This paper is based on research in Andhra Pradesh where 44% boys and 34% girls were enrolled in private school in 2011 (Pratham, 2012).

India has a well-established national education system, and a long running private education sector, traditionally serving wealthy and elite groups (Little, 2010). What makes current trends distinctive is that the expanding private sector is increasingly accessed by households for whom, in previous decades, the government sector was the only available and affordable schooling option. The consequence of recent trends is a wider range of schooling

options within the educational landscape of relatively poor as well as more affluent communities, which is altering the ways in which caregivers and households realise their educational aspirations through the school choices they make for their children, in many cases beginning well before children reach primary school age (Streuli et al 2011).

Private schools are formally defined in India to include those financed wholly by private fees (unaided), and others that are privately managed but publicly financed (aided). Within the unaided category, some are formally recognised and registered by government, and others are not. According to DISE data private schools make up 24.2% of the total school supply in Andhra Pradesh, of which only 3.1% are private aided, slightly below the national average of 5.2% (NUEPA, 2013), such that the majority of 'private' schools in the state depend upon the collection of user fees. In practice, the educational landscape is even more complex, notably because the private sector is distinctively heterogeneous, in terms of organisation, quality and accessibility to poor families. Many (but not all) schools in this growing private sector may be labelled "low-fee", a term coined to refer to the group of private unaided schools that specifically target traditionally disadvantaged groups<sup>1</sup> ( Srivastava et al, 2013: 4). But the growth of the sector is not limited to low-fee schools, and as this paper will show, instead includes an often highly heterogeneous hierarchy of options including those that may be 'low-fee', as well as those with somewhat higher fees but which are increasingly accessed by poor and marginalised households.

The potential role of the private sector in school systems has attracted increasing policy attention during the past decade, including from international donors looking for innovative ways to extend access to quality education (DFID, 2011). At the same time, a growing research agenda has addressed questions about how far increasing choice via an expanded private sector is compatible with the Education For All (EFA) agenda and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Tooley *et al*, 2007; Härmä, 2009; Woodhead and Streuli 2013; Woodhead *et al*, 2013); about the characteristics of private and government schools in terms of quality indicators (The Probe Team, 1999; Pratham, 2012); and whether students studying in the low-fee private sector achieve higher test scores compared to those studying in the government-provided alternative (Chudgar & Quin, 2012; Kingdon, 1996;

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<sup>1</sup> Operationalized as charging a monthly tuition fee not exceeding about one day's earnings of a daily wage labourer at primary and junior levels (up to Class 8) (Srivastava et al, 2013: 4).

Muralhidharan & Kremer, 2006). The rapid expansion of private schools across many Indian states including Andhra Pradesh is well documented. However, in many cases even low-fee private schools are still found to be out of reach of the poorest and most marginalised, including those disadvantaged by caste and/or gender (see for example Härmä, 2011, Mehrotra and Panchamukhi, 2006), and whilst the 2009 Right to Education Act attempts to address this through reserving 25% of places in private schools to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, at the time of writing, such a radical reform has yet to be fully implemented. This paper complements this existing research by focussing on the ways choices are made about children's schooling across diverse communities in Andhra Pradesh.

The concept of 'school choice' is not straightforward. The capacity of households to make choices for their children is shaped by multiple considerations: school availability; perceived quality; accessibility; and most importantly affordability, for one or more children in the household. Whilst trends in India are often framed as a choice between the government versus private sector, individual households may be faced with a much more complex array of options (especially in urban communities), including one or more government schools as well as several private schools of varying financial and/or practical accessibility. The very notion of choice assumes - to a certain extent - the making of informed decisions between viable alternatives. Where government provision is inadequate, or where alternative providers are not available, the extent to which parents can be said to be exercising choice is questionable. Furthermore, whilst sections of the rapidly growing private sector in India might be labelled 'low-fee' by the international academic literature, the fees involved are often far from insignificant to many of the households faced with deciding whether or not to join the private sector, or 'upgrade' to a 'better' private school. This situation challenges households to balance the sacrifices that might need to be made to furnish one or more of their children with what is perceived to be quality schooling, with the constraints of living in poverty and the limitations this places on the ability to exercise choice. Further, changes to the school supply itself may encourage parents to 'vote with their feet', *voicing* complaints and ultimately *exiting* from unsatisfactory institutions (Hirschman, 1978). In the context of a rapidly changing educational landscape and often constrained household resources, decision-making processes for school choice may be much more fluid than is implied by a

singular concept of 'choice'. Moreover, the basis for making a choice may change year-on-year in the face of evolving household, school and community circumstances.

To date, very little research has looked in detail at the processes driving the shift to the private sector amongst poor households by focussing on the dynamics of school choice decisions within households. One exception is Srivastava's (2008) qualitative study of parental decision-making across one urban and one rural school in Lucknow District, Uttar Pradesh. Drawing on data from 60 interviews with parents of children attending two focus schools at a single point in time, Srivastava demonstrates that parents using these schools engage in 'active choice' when making school decisions, influenced both by macro-level attitudes and beliefs toward government and private options, and more micro-level understandings of local context and school supply. At the macro-level, households using these schools viewed the two sectors as in binary opposition, with dissatisfaction with the government sector related to facilities, and crucially teacher supply, attendance and attitudes. At the micro-level parents collected information from other parents and family members on available private schools and compared characteristics such as fee structure, teacher attendance, facilities and test results (Srivastava, 2008, 198-99).

The aim of this paper is to exploit the longitudinal two-cohort mixed methods design of Young Lives to explore the complexity of decision-making around school choice for parents and children using both private and government schools in Andhra Pradesh. Specifically, the paper focuses on one notable consequence of current trends which has not yet been documented in the literature: increasing numbers of children moving between and within both government and private schools during the first grades of primary school, and the complex choices that underpin these changes of school.

## **Design & Methods**

The paper draws on quantitative data from the three rounds of Young Lives household surveys (2002, 2006-07 and 2009), alongside qualitative data from a purposively designed sub-study investigating the perspectives and experiences of a small sub-sample of Young Lives children and their caregivers. According to Greene *et al's* (1989: 258) taxonomy of mixed methods research, our approach therefore aims to 'develop' - using the results from

the quantitative analysis to inform the sample for the qualitative component - and 'expand' - using the qualitative data to extend the scope and breadth of the inquiry.

Young Lives is a four country longitudinal study of childhood poverty, which has been collecting data since 2002 from 3,000 children in two cohorts – a 'younger cohort' born in 2001/2 and an 'older cohort' born in 1994/5 - across twenty sentinel sites in Andhra Pradesh. A comparison of the Young Lives sample with data representative of Andhra Pradesh suggests that households in the Young Lives sample are slightly wealthier and have slightly better access to services than the population as a whole, but that children are broadly illustrative of the diversity of populations in the state more generally (Kumra, 2008). Data from the households of study children have been collected in three rounds thus far: in 2002, 2006-07 and in 2009. Quantitative data collection from the schools of Young Lives children was added in 2010. This paper draws specifically on quantitative data from the retrospectively collected school histories module administered at the household at Round 3, in conjunction with data from household Rounds 1 and 2 on residential location and school enrolment, to look descriptively at the incidence of school changes for each cohort.

Qualitative analysis is then used to complement the descriptive results and draw out the complex and dynamic nature of school changes during the primary years. This data comes from qualitative research carried out with a small sample of 10 Young Lives children and their caregivers in each of the three communities, which were purposively identified in the household data as having a particularly high prevalence of school changes, based on school history data in 2009-10. This paper reports evidence from interviews carried out in two of the three sites. Interviews were conducted by the experienced Young Lives India qualitative team in Summer 2011. Parents were asked to construct time lines of the educational history of the Young Lives child (adapted from the 'Life-course Timeline' described in Crivello et al, 2009:64), to which details about community and household events and the school trajectories of other children in the household were added. This timeline was then used to facilitate discussion of perceptions of the changing education sector, and the factors behind decision-making for school choice and change. We introduce evidence from these interviews via case studies of one child from each site who had experienced multiple changes of school, which we contextualise by drawing on data from the longitudinal household surveys.

## Choosing and changing schools in Andhra Pradesh: evidence from school history data

In an earlier paper we reported a marked increase in private school attendance amongst 7-8 year olds in the Young Lives sample, from 24% of the older cohort in 2001 to 44% of the younger cohort in 2009 (Woodhead *et al*, 2013), which is consistent with recent ASER data for Andhra Pradesh (Pratham, 2012). Whilst uptake of private schooling increased for all groups, children from rural areas, and lower socio-economic backgrounds continued to be under-represented amongst those accessing these private schools. Furthermore our research identified evidence of gender-linked school choices especially amongst the poorest families, with girls underrepresented in private schools; a trend that becomes more marked as children progress through schooling (see also Azam & Kingdon, 2011).

While the poorest and most marginalised groups in the Young Lives sample are underrepresented in private school enrolment (Woodhead *et al*, 2013), data from the household surveys provides an indication of the often quite low costs involved for those households that are now turning to private schools. The 2009 household survey asked about expenditure on school fees and extra tuition and provides an indication both of the levels and variability in the costs of private schooling for Young Lives households. The mean amount spent on younger cohort children attending private school is approximately 3480 Rs, (approximately \$55 per year). Approximately 30% of these households spend 1680 Rs/year<sup>2</sup> or less, which includes expenditure on extra tuition as well as school fees and suggests that many of the private schools attended by Young Lives children are within a range that includes those which could be described as 'low-fee', although the extent to which households experience these fees as 'low' is of course relative not only to income, but to household composition, community factors and much more. However, our research also draws attention to the wide range of costs to households, including a few spending substantial sums on their children's schooling.

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<sup>2</sup> This equates to a monthly rate equivalent to the daily wage rate under National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) in Andhra Pradesh (140 Rs/ day), which offers a crude indication that some of these schools may conform to the 'low-fee' definition laid out by Srivastava (2013).

Evidence from Young Lives' household surveys was extended in 2010, by carrying out a survey of the schools attended by a subsample (~950) of the Young Lives younger cohort children in Andhra Pradesh. As part of this survey these children were tracked in 2010 to the schools they had been reported as attending in 2009. This survey drew attention to the high proportion of children who changed schools during the early grades. Indeed, 18% of 9-10 year old children in the original school survey sample had changed schools during the course of one academic year (2009-10).

Alerted to this neglected consequence of school choice, we looked again in detail at the school history data collected retrospectively at the household level at Round 3 for our full, two cohort sample. Households are located in 90 communities (spread across the 20 Young Lives sites) and their location has been recorded at each survey round. Since some school changes result from household residential moves, the analysis that follows uses all three rounds of the household survey data to exclude any children who moved communities either between Round 1 and Round 2 or between Round 2 and Round 3 of the household survey<sup>3</sup>. While some of these residential moves may be partly motivated by the prospect of better schooling, their exclusion ensures our estimates offer conservative estimates of school changes that are not simply due to household relocation.

Table 1 and Figure 1 simply compare school history data for both Young Lives cohorts, up to the age of 7-8 years (i.e. 2002 for the older cohort and 2009 for the younger cohort). Only school moves that occurred since Grade 1 are included, thereby also excluding all moves linked to 'normal' school transitions (i.e. starting school, normally 5 years old in Andhra Pradesh). What is clear is that an increasing number of households make multiple, successive school choices even during children's earliest schooling. In 2002, only 4.9% of the older cohort (across both rural and urban areas) had changed schools once or more during the early primary grades. However, by the time the younger cohort had reached the same age (7-8 years) in 2009, 16.1% had already changed school once or more since first grade, a threefold increase. Not surprisingly, the highest incidence of school changes occurs in urban

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<sup>3</sup> 6.7% of Older Cohort children and 11.8% of Younger Cohort children.



areas, where there is a larger and more heterogeneous supply of accessible schools, and households generally have greater income to pay fees.

<INSERT TABLE 1 HERE>

<INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>

Disaggregating these school moves by the type of change illustrates the diversity of experience across the study sites, as presented in Table 2 which for simplicity, focusses only on the 251 younger cohort children who had moved school once during the early primary grades (an additional 20 children had moved more than once).

<INSERT TABLE 2 HERE>

In urban areas, where attending a private school is the norm, the overwhelming majority of school moves are, unsurprisingly, within the private sector (82.9%). This draws attention to the volatility of an increasingly marketised system as parents attempt to secure the best private school for their child. By contrast, in rural areas, private school supply is more limited, school changes are less common, and the types of school move are more diverse. The largest proportion of children (49.7%) move from the government to the private sector, with 38.2% of girl movers and 59.1% of boy movers making this type of shift. However, moves within the government sector were also significant, accounting for 29.0% of the rural girls who moved and 19.4% of the boys.

To better understand the decisions and processes underlying these school changes, we turn to the in-depth qualitative research carried out with a sub-sample of Young Lives parents and children. We introduce this section through case studies of children who have moved school frequently in recent years, in two contrasting communities involved in the school survey substudy, which we call Sagar and Perambalur.

## **Hard choices and frequent changes: evidence from a qualitative sub-study**

### **Changing School in urban Sagar**

Sagar is an urban area in the coastal region of Andhra Pradesh. Households in Sagar are generally better-off than other communities within the Young Lives study, although they would not be described as wealthy within the Indian context. The majority of Young Lives

children in Sagar come from less traditionally disadvantaged caste backgrounds and for most Telugu (the official language in Andhra Pradesh) is their mother tongue. Sagar is part of a district with strong education traditions, and many private schools are available. By 2009, children were still only aged 7-8, yet 31.9% of the younger cohort in this site had moved school once or more since they started Grade 1. In the majority of cases they had moved between different private schools.

Supraja is an only child, whose father works as a master stonemason. Supraja's mother has lived in Sagar her whole life. She attended a local government school, as she explained: *'...in those days there was only one school for the entire...town. Now there are more than ten schools in the same area.'* Sagar's supply of private schools is now diverse in quality and fee-structure, which, according to this caregiver, encourages parents to select a school appropriate for their *'class of people,'* underlining the notion that informal hierarchies exist within the private sector. Alongside this shift in school opportunities, Supraja's mother noted a shift in attitudes, which suggests more positive beliefs about social mobility via education:

*'in those days people's ideas were not that developed...They never believed that good education would get them good jobs and thereby a good future for their children...'* but now *'...people are not worried about their economic background or financial position... They are prepared to give up anything for the sake of their children's education.'*

Supraja's family have made substantial financial sacrifices to seek out the best private school they could afford, and she had already changed schools three times by the age of eight. Supraja originally joined the lower kindergarten (LKG) class in a private school ten minutes away by rickshaw, at a cost of 3000Rs/year (approximately \$48). Her parents selected this school because it was well-known, with impressive marks from students at the end of class 10. However, unexpected fee rises forced Supraja's parents to move her after only one year. Whilst they tried to negotiate the fee with the school, they were unable to meet the 5000-6000Rs/year (approximately \$80-95) that was now being demanded, and so they were forced to change schools.

Supraja was then moved to a less expensive private school where she studied from upper kindergarten (UKG) to 3<sup>rd</sup> class by which stage the fee was still an affordable 3000Rs/year. But school management problems and rumours of closure led all the teachers to quit and move to another newly established school. Supraja's parents had *'faith'* in these teachers who suggested Supraja move school with them, and so Supraja shifted to the newly established school for 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> class, where the fees jumped to 10500Rs/year (approximately \$165).

At the time of interview (2011), Supraja had reached class 5 and her parents were pleased with the new school, with teachers contacting parents if students were absent, and with good facilities including computers. However, her parents were concerned about the annual increases in fees, which they might not be able to afford, drawing attention to the impact on household finances, including the taking of loans:

*'(We) have to raise the money somehow and pay her school fees and later on try to clear the incurred loans. ...We spend everything on education.'*

Supraja's case is emblematic of the dilemmas faced by high aspiring but still relatively poor parents who feel that *'education...depends on our financial position'*. But Supraja's parents are willing to make the financial sacrifice because of the perceived returns: *'so she might get a good job and have a bright future.'*

### **Changing School in rural Perambalur**

Our second case study is Kavya Sri, who had also changed schools several times by the age of eight. She is growing up in Perambalur, a poor, tribal area in southern Telangana. In this site, parents typically have low levels of education and families are able to access a much smaller supply and variety of schools than in Sagar. Most (81.0%) sample children come from traditionally disadvantaged Scheduled Tribe or Scheduled Caste backgrounds, and whilst over half use Telugu as their first language, many also use a local dialect. However, the prevalence of school changes is also high in Perambalur, with 27.1% of younger cohort children living in this community since 2002 having moved school once or more by 2009.

Kavya Sri is the second eldest girl in her family, with three sisters and a baby brother. Her parents are from a Scheduled Tribe background and fall into the poorest wealth quintile in the Young Lives sample, working in cotton and chilli cultivation. Kavya Sri attended a preschool under the government's ICDS scheme (see Streuli *et al*, 2011), before enrolling in the local government primary school at Class 1. Kavya Sri was expected to contribute to household income at an early age, and her primary schooling was already disrupted by her 2<sup>nd</sup> year when she needed to combine school with working in the fields. The attendance of Kavya Sri's teacher was also unreliable, and she commented that the government school teachers '*were not teaching well,*' and were often absent, with classes instead being taken by Vidya volunteers.<sup>4</sup>

However, Kavya Sri's parents did not feel able to hold the school to account: '*what can we ask or do. We are small people... they are government teachers...*'. Kavya Sri was moved to a local private school, where she repeated 2<sup>nd</sup> class. Her parents commented that this school was mainly used by '*those who have money*' and it put a huge financial strain on their resources, with 2000Rs/year in fees to be paid (approximately \$30). On the other hand, a private school offered much greater accountability than the government sector:

*'for private schools, we pay money, we can question them... but in government (schools) the teachers come and teach for the sake of their salaries....'*

The private school was also attractive because it claimed to be 'English Medium', offering the prospect of leading to a service-sector job within India's growing economy. But Kavya Sri's parents were soon disappointed by their daughter's progress in the private school, which combined with the financial burden to force yet another move for 3<sup>rd</sup> class to a government hostel school<sup>5</sup> in a neighbouring village, her third school in as many years.

Parents in the Perambalur study look favourably on the idea of sending children to hostel schools away from home. They believe children will be encouraged to focus on study and

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<sup>4</sup> Vidya volunteers are the Andhra Pradesh equivalent of contract or 'para' teachers (see Kingdon & Sipahimalani-Rao, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Hostel schools for boys and girls are available across Andhra Pradesh. They are government-provided and are targeted at disadvantaged groups such as those from Scheduled Tribe backgrounds.

not return home during their lunch-hour, spend time looking after younger siblings, or in Kavya Sri's case, work in the fields. However, this new school was also unsatisfactory: '*what she studied there was of no use.*' Kavya Sri was moved yet again, to a second hostel school in a different village where she repeated her 3<sup>rd</sup> class. In this school no fee was necessary and '*she did not roam or come out*' (i.e. she did not leave school during school hours). In short, whilst lacking the financial resources to exit from the government sector entirely as they would like to be able to do, these parents make choices between government-provided alternatives in a quest for a better quality education for Kavya Sri.

### **Parental dilemmas in a changing educational landscape**

Kavya Sri's and Supraja's experiences clearly illustrate the increased importance of education for these families and the difficult dilemmas they face, with a range of educational pathways to negotiate, and constraints on choices which result in repeated changes of school. These two individual cases lie at the extreme end of the sample in terms of frequency of school moves. But moving school at least once is increasingly common in Young Lives' communities, as earlier sections of the paper made clear. While Kavya Sri and Supraja's circumstances and school prospects are also quite different, their parents' decision-making was shaped by very similar concerns. These can be summed up as about matching their aspirations for each of their children with the perceived school quality, relevance and crucially the affordability of available schools – both government and private. Concerns about teacher's commitment and accountability were also uppermost in their minds. In this final section, we elaborate on the key issues of school quality and affordability, drawing on the wider sample of interviews from our qualitative research in Sagar and Perambalur.

### **Quality and accountability**

Dissatisfaction with government provision as a driving force for movement was one of the most consistent sentiments expressed in virtually all parent interviews, across both sites. Government schools were judged by caregivers in both communities to be lower quality than private schools, with high reported rates of teacher absenteeism (see Kremer et al, 2006 on teacher absenteeism in India). One parent in Sagar explained that government schools fail to teach properly or regularly, as well as being '*indifferent to the plight of*

*students.*' Parents noted that lessons were not fully explained, or were taught by less qualified Vidya volunteers. One caregiver in Perambalur who was unable to pay for a private school noted that in the local government school children appeared to learn little, explaining that the class teacher attends only irregularly and that *'when they [the teachers] don't teach in government school, we take them [children] to the fields'*.

In Andhra Pradesh, the practice of teaching in Telugu is a major concern amongst high aspiring parents, who want their children to master English from an early stage. Whilst English medium is on offer in some government schools in the higher grades, one parent in Perambalur noted that in many cases the *'teaching is done by old Telugu medium teachers'*, which acts as a disincentive for re-enrolment in the government sector even at higher grades. Concern about the commitment of government school teachers as well as the quality and relevance of their teaching, is amplified in parents' minds by what they see as lack of accountability in government schools. This combines with their own lack of voice to bring about changes to the situation. Government teachers were often perceived as relatively high social status and therefore unapproachable, and as unresponsive to parents' concerns such that parents felt unable to demand change (this 'social distance' argument has been explored further by Rawal & Kingdon, 2010 in relation to caste, religious and gender-based distance between teachers and children and the impact on student performance).

For those parents able to opt for what they perceived to be better quality private schools, paying fees appeared to engender feelings of empowerment, resonating with arguments about the increased accountability of schools to fee-paying schooling 'consumers' (see for example Tooley, 2001). Parents discussed being able to question teachers and schools, in the shared understanding that they could opt out of the school, as one caregiver explained: *'for private schools, we pay money, we can question them.'* In choosing a private school parents are also attracted by a variety of different elements of quality, including the facilities on offer, the teachers' qualifications and their ability to teach in English medium, although, as we have seen from the case studies above, being called English medium is no guarantee of English competence amongst the teachers even in private schools (as also noted in Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, 2006: 424). Teaching in English medium was noted as

particularly important, being linked by caregivers to improved *'prospects'* by facilitating higher levels of social mobility (see also Härmä, 2009 and Srivastava, 2007).

### **Fees, loans and hierarchies of choice**

Parents' ability to sustain the costs of sending their child to a private school is an overriding consideration for parents in the sample, especially given that school principals are often reported to increase fees with little warning, and that costs typically rise each year as children progress through the grades. Young Lives research on this theme was carried out at a time when the fee-subsidies for disadvantaged children anticipated in the Right to Education Act 2009 had yet to be introduced. In the absence of such reforms, parents' financial capacity to sustain the costs of private schooling combined with disillusionment with the government sector is possibly the most significant single factor driving frequent school changes, both between the government and private sector and between higher and lower cost private schools.

In Sagar, the supply of private schools is large and heterogeneous and parents are able to select a private school *'depending on.... means,'* i.e. linked to their ability to pay and community background. Parents in both sites are also aware that migration to the private sector by high aspiring parents impacts on the status and attractiveness of the state sector (namely the risk of 'ghettoization' (Vasavi, 2003). One parent in Perambalur draws attention to the ways this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy:

*'...how can children of educated parents go there [to the government school]... parents of those children are ignorant... they don't know about what their child has learnt... those who have such knowledge do not send their children there'*

Better-off parents' newfound capacity to 'shop around' is expressed through the ways they position themselves as educational consumers and investors, picking and choosing from the hierarchy of schools on offer, from the least attractive government school to the highest status private school, 'upgrading' their child's school when resources permit, and downgrading when circumstances change. For example, the mother of one of Supraja's classmates in Sagar recounted the schooling decisions they made for their daughter:

*'She studied UKG, LKG, and nursery in Sribharathi and 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> class in Siddhartha. There the bathrooms were not good and ...we changed the school to Geetham*

*Concept School for 3<sup>rd</sup> class. But it was far from here and it was difficult to go by auto daily. So again we changed to Vijayawada Ravindragharati for her 4<sup>th</sup> class. There were no B.Ed trained teachers and spoken English. .... She was not at all able to speak in English. We paid the fee correctly but were not at all satisfied. So we have changed to Bhashayam now.'*

Whilst most households in Sagar have access to sufficient financial resources to make these choices, including picking and choosing amongst schools, many report making significant sacrifices, either diverting resources away from other areas of household expenditure, or taking loans. For example, one parent explained how they use a local banking group to raise loans to pay for school fees:

*'We join a chit group (local banking) and raise money. ...we raise money and take it from them in advance and pay our loan amount every month...'*

It is important to note that for this caregiver the taking of loans is not viewed lightly, explaining that it would usually only happen if *'we were in dire need of money.'* Similar comments about parents having to *'cut their bellies'* to meet costs have been reported from parents in Uttar Pradesh (Härmä 2009: 163).

In Perambalur, poorer households and a smaller community means less choice and fewer parents who are prepared or able to make the financial commitment to send their children to private school. Those parents in this community who currently, or have in the past, invested in private schooling (including Kavya Sri's) often report having taken out large loans or mortgaged items of value to meet the costs of private schooling, but this practice appears much less sustainable than in Sagar, with some parents having also been forced to change their minds and move their children back into government schools:

*'we used to borrow from others and used to pay the chits and save.... They said this year it is Rs.10000/ [approximately \$160]- next year it may be more, so I got frightened and joined him in a government school and told him to study nicely.'*

The challenges of sourcing a quality education appear amplified in poorer households when there are several children of school-going age. In slightly better-off Sagar, parents talk about sending all children in a household to the same school, giving consideration to how their



children will feel about being treated differently, as well as the practical simplicity and greater safety in sending all children to the same school. However, equal investment for all children is harder to sustain in Perambalur. In this community some parents talk about being able to afford a low fee private school for one of their children, for at least part of their education, sometimes choosing between children on the grounds of age or gender (see also Azam & Kingdon, 2011; Woodhead et al 2012). One caregiver noted that *'...we need the help of the elder son...we should provide for his studies as he has to look after us....'* Another referred to community norms for the education of girls: *'those who have money they spend and educate them [girls] and those who don't have put them in hostel [schools].'* Ultimately, the financial burden and uncertainty about income has meant that for a majority of the households interviewed in Perambalur, private schooling is simply unaffordable, despite the fact that a majority of interviewees state it would be their preference, resource constraints aside (consistent with Härmä, 2009).

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Recent decades have seen a rapidly growing private sector that is widely favoured as preferable to government schools, and is now widely accessed, including amongst many poorer and marginalised Young Lives communities in Andhra Pradesh. These trends have increased the extent and heterogeneity of school supply across many communities, creating more diverse educational opportunities, where parents with the ability to pay – or those willing to make significant financial sacrifice – can opt to exit from the government sector in search of a better quality education for their children. Even in the poorest communities where fee paying is unrealistic, parents frequently seek better alternatives for their children than the local government school.

The rapid growth in the private sector generally, is confirmed by the Young Lives sample, with an increase in private school participation rates from 24% of 7-8 year olds in 2002 to 44% of 7-8 year olds in 2009 (Woodhead *et al*, 2013). Much less well documented is the trend reported in this paper, for parents to make multiple school choices during a child's early primary years. Whereas only 4.8% of 7-8 year olds had changed school during the earliest grades in 2002, the rate of school moves jumped to 16.1% for a comparable cohort in 2009. While most of these changes are from government to private schools, or between

private schools, this paper also reports changes within the government sector amongst the poorest household seeking better opportunities for their children.

The increasing prevalence of school changes during the early grades or classes of primary school challenges the conceptualisation of school choice/ selection as a single event made at the entry point to school, which permeates much of the cross-sectional literature. Instead, it underlines the dynamism that characterises the processes involved in selecting a school, where decisions take place in contexts of rapidly changing household resources and shifting educational landscapes. At worst these may be perceived as unstable hierarchies of relatively unregulated private schools along with one or more government schools that are largely unaccountable to parents even in terms of teacher attendance.

The volatility of the situation facing families in Andhra Pradesh in terms of the number and quality of schools that are realistically accessible is clear. While this volatility offers new opportunities for some, it puts many others under exceptional pressure. Parents' ability to move between government schools, exit the government sector, choose a private school, and navigate between different private schools is shaped by many factors related to supply and demand. Parent interviews suggest they use a variety of indicators of quality to determine what is a 'good' or a 'bad' school, as they negotiate school changes for their children. Some of these moves can be seen as positive choices, to access a better quality, 'more desirable' school, while others are about disappointment that a particular school had not delivered what they promised, for example the claims of some private schools to be 'English-medium'. The challenge of affording fees is also a major reason for moving children, especially because school principals often set higher fees for each grade, and sometimes raised fees unpredictably.

Widespread disillusionment with much that is offered in the government sector is one key factor that limits in practice the exercise of a real choice. Dissatisfaction with government schools wasn't only expressed by those who had 'exited', but was also commonly felt by families using government schools, in search of better opportunities. It was clear from interview data that many of these parents would be quick to move their children into a private school if the opportunity arose. At the same time, accessing private schools that parents consider offer better quality education represents a huge burden in many cases,

which constrains the choices available and operates selectively according to household circumstances. Further, while the numbers of private schools has been increasing in rural areas, they were still inaccessible to many Young Lives study families, and unaffordable for the poorest households. In this situation, exercising 'choice' is highly constrained, or non-existent.

One issue that this research has not been able to address is the impact of choice and change on children. Whilst potentially disruptive and detrimental, for example through loss of social relationships (see Pribesh & Downey, 1999 for a discussion in the context of the USA), the implications of frequent school moves for children's well being are far from clear, since in the Andhra Pradesh context, this paper has shown that frequent school changes may indicate uncertainty of supply and household resources, but can also be seen as the expression of positive engagement on the part of families regarding children's education.

Finally, the research reported in this paper was carried out at a time when the 2009 Right to Education Act (RTE) had yet to make a significant impact on the way school choice operates within the state of Andhra Pradesh. The requirements of the Act that all private schools come under a formal registration and recognition system and that 25% of private school seats are reserved for neighbourhood children from marginalised backgrounds has potential to radically alter education opportunities. The way in which the Act is implemented, will be crucial to its impact on household circumstances, school choices and children's experiences of changing school.

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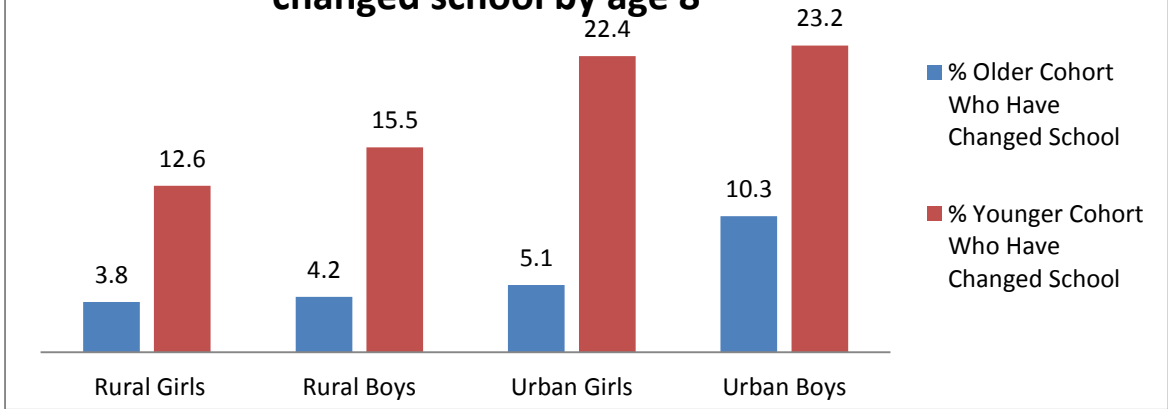
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**TABLE 1: Cohort comparison of school changes up to age 8 in Andhra Pradesh \***

	Younger Cohort						Older Cohort					
	Urban			Rural			Urban			Rural		
	Girls	Boys	Tot	Girls	Boys	Tot	Girls	Boys	Tot	Girls	Boys	Tot
<b>% No change</b>	77.7 (139)	76.9 (156)	77.2 (295)	87.4 (533)	84.5 (549)	85.8 (1082)	94.9 (93)	89.7 (96)	92.2 (189)	96.2 (328)	95.9 (323)	96.0 (651)
<b>% change once or more</b>	22.4 (40)	23.2 (47)	22.3 (87)	12.6 (77)	15.5 (101)	14.1 (178)	5.1 (5)	10.3 (11)	7.8 (16)	3.8 (13)	4.2 (14)	4.0 (27)
<b>Total</b>	(179)	(203)	(382)	(610)	(650)	(1260)	(98)	(107)	(205)	(341)	(337)	(678)

\*Reported school name and grade are used to calculate number of moves. Note that children in the sample started school at different ages, and so have been at school for varying numbers of years. The average age of enrolment in grade 1 is approximately the same for both cohorts and by age 8 89.2% of the Younger Cohort and 86.9% of the Older Cohort had between 2-4 years of schooling.

**Figure 1: Cohort comparison of children who have changed school by age 8**



**Table 2: School trajectories for younger cohort children who moved once by age 7-8**

Type of movement	Younger Cohort children who had moved once (up to age 8) (n=251)					
	Urban			Rural		
	Girls	Boys	Total	Girls	Boys	Total
<b>Government to Government</b>	2.6 (1)	2.3 (1)	2.4 (2)	29.0 (22)	19.4 (18)	23.7 (40)
<b>Government to Private</b>	10.5 (4)	9.1 (4)	9.8 (8)	38.2 (29)	59.1 (55)	49.7 (84)
<b>Private to Government</b>	5.3 (2)	2.3 (1)	3.7 (3)	10.5 (8)	6.5 (6)	8.3 (14)
<b>Private to Private</b>	79.0 (30)	86.3 (38)	82.9 (68)	18.4 (14)	11.8 (11)	14.8 (25)
<b>Other move</b>	2.6 (1)	0.0 (0)	1.2 (1)	4.0 (3)	3.2 (3)	3.6 (6)
<b>Total</b>	<b>(44)</b>	<b>(38)</b>	<b>(82)</b>	<b>(93)</b>	<b>(76)</b>	<b>(169)</b>