

**Access to Meaningful Learning: Exploring School  
Processes as Seen Through the Eyes of Children**

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Thesis submitted to the University of Ottawa in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
MA degree in Globalization and International Development

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## **Abstract**

In India, the *Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009* (RTE Act) mandates that all private unaided schools must reserve 25% of their seats for free for socially and economically disadvantaged children. The RTE Act is intended to foster the inclusion of all children regardless of their socio-economic background. This study highlights children's accounts of their lived schooling experience at the private schools they accessed in Delhi. The data was collected using participatory methods, more specifically, from 'draw-and-talk' sessions with 16 children from marginalized backgrounds who accessed six different private schools, half of whom obtained a free private school seat (a 'freeship'). Children widely reported that teachers labelled their students and classmates labelled their peers as being 'naughty' and/or academically 'weak' or 'incapable,' raising concerns over their socialization processes. These 'designated identities' were internalized by the participants and affected how they interacted with their peers. Student-teacher relationships were widely reported to be influenced by the teachers' aggressive and authoritative nature which often led to corporal punishment. The findings suggest that while the students may become accustomed to corporal punishment, it also provoked feelings of resistance and resentment. While these findings may not be surprising, three unexpected insights emerged: a) children entering private schools on a freeship shared accounts of their schooling experience that were comparatively similar to those who entered on a fee-paying basis, b) the children did not attribute caste or gender explicitly marking their schooling experience, and c) the process of having children participate in the drawing activities was more valuable than the drawing outcomes themselves. Overall, the findings of this study suggest that the ability of the RTE Act and the potential promise of private schools to meet social justice objectives of equity and inclusion have not been fully met, even with the universalizing context of the legislation.

# Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>II</b>
<b>LIST OF ACRONYMS .....</b>	<b>IV</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 THE RTE ACT AND UNIVERSAL ELEMENTARY EDUCATION .....	1
1.2 REGULATORY IMPLEMENTATION CONTEXT.....	5
1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AIMS, AND OBJECTIVE.....	8
1.4 THESIS STRUCTURE.....	11
<b>CHAPTER 2. A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR MEANINGFUL ACCESS.....</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1 SOCIAL EXCLUSION.....	12
2.2 SOCIAL JUSTICE APPROACH TO EDUCATION.....	14
2.3 SILENT EXCLUSION .....	15
2.4 HIDDEN CURRICULUM.....	17
<b>CHAPTER 3. LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>20</b>
3.1 EXCLUSIONARY PRACTICES, DISCRIMINATION, AND UNEQUAL TREATMENT .....	20
3.2 TEACHER ATTITUDES & CORPORAL PUNISHMENT .....	23
3.3 SOCIAL INTEGRATION.....	26
<b>CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK.....</b>	<b>30</b>
4.1 CHILDREN AS SOCIAL ACTORS.....	30
4.2 PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH.....	33
4.3 PARTICIPATORY VISUAL RESEARCH METHODS (PVRM).....	36
<b>CHAPTER 5. RESEARCH DESIGN .....</b>	<b>39</b>
5.1 SELECTION & RECRUITMENT .....	39
5.2 ETHICS AND ENTRY .....	44
5.3 RESEARCH DESIGN .....	46
5.4 SECONDARY RESEARCH & POSITIONALITY.....	49
5.5 LIMITATIONS & SCHOOL OBSERVATIONS.....	51
<b>CHAPTER 6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>55</b>
6.1 OVERALL FINDINGS.....	55
6.1.1 <i>Designated Identities, Teacher Labelling, and Stigmatization</i> .....	56
6.1.2 <i>Teacher Discipline and the Provocation of Resistance</i> .....	62
6.1.3 <i>Social Distance &amp; the Comparative Experiences of Freeship and Non-Freeship Students</i> .....	65
6.1.4 <i>Giving Voice to Marginalized Youth</i> .....	67
<b>CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSIONS &amp; RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>69</b>
7.1 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS.....	69
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>ANNEX 1: ETHICS APPROVAL NOTICE.....</b>	<b>87</b>
ETHICS APPROVAL NOTICE.....	87
<b>ANNEX 3: LETTER OF INFORMATION/CONSENT.....</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>ANNEX 4: ASSENT SCRIPT FOR CHILDREN .....</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>ANNEX 5: BUILDING RAPPORT WITH STUDENTS.....</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>ANNEX 6: THEMATIC NETWORKS AND CODES.....</b>	<b>101</b>

## List of Acronyms

ASER	Annual Status Education Report
CORD	Collaborative Research and Dissemination
CPD	Continual professional development
CREATE	Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity
DISE	District Information System for Education
DPEP	District Primary Education Program
EFA	Education For All
EWS	Economically weaker sections
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
NCERT	National Council of Educational Research and Training
NPE	National Policy on Education
NUEPA	National University of Educational Planning and Administration
OBC	Other backward class
PROBE	Public Report on Basic Education in India
PVRM	Participatory visual research methods
REB	Research Ethics Board
RTE	Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009
SC	Scheduled caste
SSA	Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan
ST	Scheduled tribe

UIS	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
UEE	Universal Elementary Education
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Emergency Fund

# Chapter 1. Introduction

## 1.1 The RTE Act and Universal Elementary Education

In India, the *Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009* (RTE Act), provides a unique platform to address issues of equity within the education system. With the introduction of the RTE Act, universal primary education became a constitutional right to be universally mandated by central and state governments for the first time in the history of education in India.<sup>1</sup> Section 12 (1)(c), one of the more contentious aspects of the RTE Act, mandates that all private unaided schools must reserve 25% of their seats for free for socially and economically disadvantaged children for the duration of the elementary education cycle (Government of India, 2009).<sup>2</sup> These children are meant to have access to free private school seats via ‘freeships.’

India’s constitutional commitment to free and compulsory education was nearly 60 years in the making (Govinda & Bandyopadhyah, 2010). Several programs and policies were implemented over the years to achieve the envisioned goals. The *National Policy on Education*

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<sup>1</sup> Attempts to universalize elementary education in India existed long before the passing of the Act, and can be traced to colonial India. Post-independence, states and union territories implemented their own laws and regulations owing to the decentralized nature of education administration. The significance of the RTE Act is that it provides a uniform legislative framework under which all states and union territories are meant to implement universal education. For more discussion on the history see, Srivastava & Noronha (2014).

<sup>2</sup> A private unaided school is privately managed and owned, and independently financed. The RTE Act defines a child belonging to a “disadvantaged group” as a child belonging to the Scheduled Caste, the Scheduled Tribe, the socially and educationally backward class or a group disadvantaged by social, cultural, economical, geographical, gender, or linguistic factors (Section 2(d), RTE Act). A child belonging to a “weaker section” is defined as a child of a parent or guardian whose annual income is lower than the minimum limit specified by the appropriate government (Section 2(e), RTE Act). In Delhi, the location for this study, this amounted to Rs. 100,000/year during the data collection period.

(NPE) (1986) was an important landmark that emphasized universal enrolment, universal retention, and substantial improvements in the quality of education (PROBE Revisited, 2011). In conjunction with the 1986 policy, several schemes were launched including *Operation Blackboard* that aimed to improve facilities in primary schools and to improve retention (PROBE Revisited, 2011). In 1993-94, the multi-state district-based *District Primary Education Program* (DPEP) was implemented with the aim of universalizing primary education and improving literacy rates amongst girls and women (PROBE Revisited, 2011). In 2001, the Government of India's official program for universal elementary education entitled *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) ("Education for All" in Hindi) was also initiated. India's focus on universalizing elementary education also aligned closely with international priorities as outlined at the Jomtien, World Conference Education For All (EFA) in 1990, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) established in 2000 (PROBE Revisited, 2011).

Official data show near universal enrolment in elementary education in India (UNESCO, 2023). Data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) indicates that the gross enrollment ratio (GER) and the net enrollment ratio (NER) in India were 112.03% and 98.53% respectively at primary education level in 2023 (UIS, 2023). Despite these gains in enrolment, the number of out-of-school children and adolescents reported in 2013 was 1,722,440 and 10,608,469 respectively (UIS, 2023).<sup>3</sup>

More importantly, challenges with respect to equity, particularly for the disadvantaged, disenfranchised, and marginalized groups in society, remain an issue in the education system. As

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<sup>3</sup> UIS (2016) defines gross enrolment ratio as "the number of students enrolled in a given level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the official school-age population corresponding to the same level of education" whereas net enrolment ratio seen as the "total number of students in the theoretical age group for a given level of education enrolled in that level, expressed as a percentage of the total population in that age group."

Ramachandran and Naorem (2013) suggest, “There have been a large number of press reports about caste discrimination, community-specific exclusion, and gender-related exclusion, sexual harassment, and violence against children in schools” (p. 44).<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2008) argue that:

[S]pecial interventions and strategies have been adopted to include girls, SC/ST [Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe] children, working children, children with special needs, urban deprived children, children from minority groups, children living below the poverty line, migratory children, and children in the hardest-to-reach groups. These are indeed children who have historically remained excluded from education and are at a high risk of dropping out even after enrolment if special attention is not paid. (p. 15)

According to the District Information System for Education (DISE), in 2013, India’s central education management information system, the retention rate at the primary level for all children was estimated at 84 percent (DISE, 2014). For SC, ST, and Muslim groups however, the rates were lower at 82.93%, 68.64%, and 80.61% respectively (DISE, 2014). Official data also suggest that the average annual drop-out rate decreased from 4.17% in 2012-13 to 4.15% in 2014-15 at elementary level for all children (DISE, 2014) compared to 4.22% for SC, 8.12% for ST, and 7.50% for Muslim groups in 2014-15 at elementary level (DISE, 2014). As Lewin (2007) argues, access to meaningful learning entails, “secure enrollment and regular attendance; progression through grades at appropriate ages; meaningful learning which has utility; reasonable access to lower secondary grades...and more equitable opportunities to learn for children from poorer households, especially girls” (p. 33).

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<sup>4</sup> Notably articles published by Sainath (2007), reports and articles by Navsarjan Trust (Gujarat), annual reports by the Dalit Solidarity Network (2022), working papers by Sabharwal & Thorat (2010) of the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, and writings by Geetha Nambissan (2020).

Amidst the proliferation of private schooling in India, further research is required to examine issues of equity and inclusion within the education debate to address current gaps in the literature. India has seen tremendous growth in the number of students accessing private schools as opposed to government schools. According to Kingdon (2020), the number of private schools increased 12 times as much by 96,416 schools between 2010-2016 resulting in a 38.5% increase in enrolment. In contrast, government schools increased by 8,337 schools yet enrollment decreased by 14.5%. While the debate on the quality of education in state and private schools in India remains inconclusive, current research has focused predominantly on “school-effectiveness type studies assessing relative achievement levels in core-subjects such as mathematics and language, or comparing facilities or teacher and classroom inputs across school types” (Srivastava, Noronha, & Fennell, 2013, p. 7). The authors suggest that a social justice approach is necessary to assess the long-term access to meaningful education that looks beyond the immediate economic ability of households to access particular school types.

Such market-based solutions and privatized measures within the school effectiveness framework has been largely viewed from a human capitalist approach to education whereby policymakers and funders use a linear input-outcome model to define quality education (Tikly, 2010). Here quantitative outcomes such as standardized test scores, enrolment rates, and attendance rates are used to measure and ultimately define quality education. As Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2011) suggest, this approach narrowly defines quality education based on quantitative progress such as infrastructure and learning outcomes as the sole measure of quality. According to the researchers, the linkage between school quality and exclusion from schooling has failed to account for schooling processes as they seem to be beyond improvement measures. What is lost within the human capitalist approach and its’ emphasis on schooling outcomes is the

focus on schooling processes. As Nambissan (2009) notes, schooling processes may include curriculum, pedagogy, teacher attitudes, peer interactions as well as school rituals and practices. The scholars argue that more research examining school processes is required to better understand how school processes impact the participation and completion of basic education by children.

Given this context, this study focuses on two aspects of the RTE Act — Section 17(1) stipulating that “no child shall be subjected to physical punishment and mental harassment” (Government of India, 2009); and Section 29(2) those children should be “free of fear, trauma, and anxiety” and that learning should take place in “a child-friendly and child-centered manner” (Government of India 2009). Put simply, the RTE Act aims to guarantee “all children the right to go to school, the right to be treated with love and care, and most importantly, the right to be treated equally and with dignity” (Ramachandran & Naorem, 2013, p. 43). Understanding how these provisions are implemented at the school level in India’s private schools is essential to determining how effective the RTE Act will be in fostering inclusion and meeting its social justice objectives.

## **1.2 Regulatory Implementation Context**

The RTE Act remains contentious as some scholars have argued that marketization and privatized schooling measures raise equity concerns particularly for marginalized groups (Härmä, 2011; Woodhead, Frost, & James 2013). In its idealized form, the RTE Act is intended to foster the inclusion of all children regardless of their socio-economic background. Proponents claim that the free seats provision is an equity measure aimed at providing access to a highly stratified school system to disadvantaged learners due to in part to the insufficient capacity of the

state sector (Jain & Dholakia, 2010). Critics however maintain that the RTE Act marks the most explicit legitimization of private education without sufficient effort to improve public education (Srivastava & Noronha, 2016). Furthermore, scholars have argued that resistance from private schools and implementation gaps pertaining to the enforcement of the RTE Act continue to persist (Sarangapani, Mehendale, Mukhopadhyay, & Namala, 2014; Sarin & Gupta, 2014; Srivastava & Noronha, 2016). According to Sarangapani et al. (2014),

The private unaided schools have always controlled their own admission policy, and resisted the provision through various means, including challenging the constitutionality of the Supreme Court. But the effort was not successful since the court, in April 2012, upheld the provision and the constitutionality validity of the ACT. (p. 2)

As Sarin and Gupta (2014) suggest, resistance from private schools can be attributed to the market logic mentality and the notion that integration may devalue the reputation of the school.

Furthermore, Jha and Parvati (2010) argue that the implementation of the RTE Act is riddled with issues of accountability, financial responsibility, and ambiguity. Despite the promise to disadvantaged children to gain freeships, Srivastava and Noronha (2016) found that in the few cases the free seat provision was secured it was “linked to a high level of motivation and persistence, better social positioning, and advantageous social networks” (p. 575). While the RTE Act deems those children in free private school seats should not incur any fee charges or expenses in accessing schools, the authors found that households that had supposedly secured ‘free’ private school seats incurred significant schooling costs such as transportation, capitation fees, and private tuition. As Srivastava and Noronha conclude, early analysis of the implementation of the RTE Act raises concern over the provision of the Act as households’ experienced considerable barriers to securing a seat and admission.

Mehendale et al. (2015) found that the RTE Act had direct implications at the school

level particularly around issues regarding: “admissions, fee reimbursements and financial adjustments, school and teacher preparedness, sociocultural dynamics within schools and classrooms, peer interactions, and academic planning” (p. 43). Most notably, the researchers found that, “[T]eachers and schools were not supported to foster inclusion. Most schools considered their mandate was complete once admissions were given and hence, they were not working towards bringing fundamental changes in attitudes or pedagogies that could foster inclusion” (Mehendale et al., 2015, p. 48).

Based on the empirical study of two private schools in Delhi, Sucharita and Sujatha (2019) found that school principals and teachers held several apprehensions regarding who could access the provision and how schools and teachers facilitated social inclusion. The researchers reported that one of the main challenges which the schools encountered was the provision of freeseats to marginalized learners as advantaged households submitted forged income documents or caste certificates to obtain the freeship. School authorities reported that submitting false income certificates was a common practice to gain eligibility.

Dongre, Sarin, and Singhal’s (2022) survey study of 1642 households and interactions with parents over 2014-2019, highlighted several challenges faced by households in navigating the private school freeship application process. The study found the more resourceful households (in terms of ability to speak the official language, wealth, and education) were more likely to apply and receive admissions through the mandate. Acquiring eligibility documents for disadvantaged households, such as proof of income and residence were also seen as major hurdles in completing the application process. In addition, Dongre et al. found that even after being allotted a seat and securing admission, households continued to face several barriers such as: facing resistance and noncompliance from schools regarding admissions, having to bear non-

tuition expenditures on transport, books and co-curricular activities, and differential treatment of children from teachers and administration. As Dongre et al. report:

Despite being etched in the constitution, a mandate for inclusion need not necessarily imply one.... Negotiating this process includes gathering multiple required documents for verifying eligibility, filling forms accurately and adhering to timelines. For even those who are able to make it this far, admission through the mandate still remains an insufficient marker of inclusion.

(p. 2)

While the mandate may have increased access, Dongre et al. argue that additional expenses and fees have limited school participation and, in a few cases, (3.5%) of those attending schools through the mandate had either moved to a different school or dropped out after 1.5 years of attendance. The researchers found that collectively, these experiences and barriers to be disconcerting as they impede the realization of the intended policy benefits.

These studies point to the prevalence of resistance from private schools and the persistence of implementation gaps. Despite the universalizing context of the RTE Act, these additional application barriers and out-of-pocket costs reiterate concerns that private schools remain outside the scope of accessibility and affordability for disadvantaged households. As a result, many marginalized households fail to reap the benefits of this provision as both accessibility and affordability remain key hindrances to enrolment and continued participation.

### **1.3 Research Questions, Aims, and Objective**

This study sought to understand children's lived experiences of private schooling and investigate whether the RTE Act and the potential promise of private schools have been successful in meeting their social justice objectives of equity and inclusion. The study explores the following research questions:

1. How do children attending private schools within the context of the RTE Act characterize their everyday experience?
2. Do children who enter private schools with a freeship frame their everyday experiences differently than those who enter on a full-fee paying basis?
3. How do students experience disciplinary and exclusionary practices at school?

This MA study was guided by the aim of highlighting insights from a group of children who are largely marginalized in large-scale research. It is not intended to serve as a comparative analysis of the schooling experiences of freeship and non-freeship students.

Furthermore, this study contributes to a larger research project on the right to education in India headed by Prof. Prachi Srivastava.<sup>5</sup> The larger project designed and conducted the *Insights into Education* household survey in 2015, collected household-level data on school access, choice, and experiences from 850 households in one catchment area in Delhi. To complement the *Insights into Education* survey findings, this MA study employed a qualitative approach in collaboration from a local research partner in Delhi, Collaboration and Research Dissemination (CORD). Acting as an independent education research group, CORD was trusted in the local area and known to be working on the larger project. It was closely involved in gaining access to the local community, contacting households, and navigating the field. The data had been collected from January to February 2016. Ethics approval (file number 03–15–04) was originally granted by the University of Ottawa Research Ethics on January 5, 2016. On April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2024, I received approval to use the secondary data for the purposes of finishing the writing up of the results (see Annex 1: Ethics Approval Notice).

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<sup>5</sup> The title of the larger project is ‘The Right to Education and the Emergence of Non-state Actors: the case of India’ (2012-19). It was funded through an Insight Grant from the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

This study considered the definitions of ‘child-friendly’ learning as that which focuses on principles of inclusion, democratic participation, and child-centered pedagogy as outlined by UNICEF’s child-friendly school (CFS) model (Tikly & Barrett, 2011). Citing UNICEF (2009), Tikly & Barrett define these principles as follows:

The principle of inclusion is expressed as a child-seeking school that actively seeks out all eligible children for enrolment. The principle of democratic participation means that children, parents, communities, employers, political leaders, and others have a role in determining the structure, content, and process of education. The child-centered principle is...described as making the interests of the child central to all decision-making in education (p. 5).

Sprirakash (2009) views democratic practices as an extension of child-centered learning suggesting, “There is therefore an intimate connection between the degree of control the teacher has over knowledge transmission and the social control of subordinate groups” (p. 631). Hence, Sprirakash (2010) argues that at the root of child-friendly pedagogy, democratic practices must strive to challenge rather than reinforce social messages of control and hierarchy relayed to children.

As Ramachandran and Naorem (2013) suggest, “[e]ducation is not only about reading and writing; it is also about preparing for life. It is in this context that the issue of inclusion and exclusion, or to put it more starkly, discrimination and unequal treatment, acquires a new meaning” (p. 43). When social relations and pedagogic processes discriminate against children at the school level, these experiences are “detrimental to children’s self-esteem and self-worth...and are likely to have serious implications for their interests and motivations in studies” (Nambissan, 2009, p. 27). Yet, there is a dearth of research on children’s experiences of schooling and of inclusion and exclusion in education *from their perspectives* (Pascal & Bertram, 2009; Woodhead, 1999). This MA research helps to fill that gap.

## **1.4 Thesis Structure**

The structure of the thesis is as follows. Chapter 2 outlines the conceptual framework for the study by examining Kabeer's (2000) framework for social exclusion, introducing the concepts of the social justice approach to education (Tikly & Barrett, 2011), silent exclusion (Lewin, 2007) and the hidden curriculum (Giroux & Pena, 1983). Chapter 3 provides a selected empirical review of the literature focused on exclusionary practices, discrimination and unequal treatment, teacher attitudes and corporal punishment, and social integration. Chapter 4 will provide the methodological framework focusing on children as social actors, participatory research, and participatory visual research methods (PVRM). Chapter 5 will review the research design behind the study, the selection of research participants, an overview of the children's profiles, ethical considerations pertaining to consent, assent, and rapport, secondary research, and limitations and school observations. Next, Chapter 6 presents the research results and discussion which highlight several barriers to inclusion as voiced by the children. Finally, Chapter 7 offers conclusions and implications for future research.

## **Chapter 2. A Conceptual Framework for Meaningful Access**

This study takes the approach that inclusion and exclusion are not binary processes (Kabeer, 2000), but normatively constructed within schools and classrooms. Processes of inclusion and exclusion significantly structure children's experiences of schooling and have significant impacts on 'meaningful access' (Lewin, 2007) and learning. To better understand children's schooling experiences overall, the analytical framework will utilize the theories of social exclusion (Kabeer, 2000) and the social justice approach to education (Tikly & Barrett, 2011), as well as concepts of silent exclusion (Lewin, 2007), and the hidden curriculum (Giroux & Pena, 1983).

### **2.1 Social Exclusion**

Within the Indian context, Kabeer's (2000) social exclusion perspective provides an appropriate starting point through which questions of schooling processes and exclusion can be explored. Kabeer (2000) defines social exclusion as the exclusion of certain groups from full participation in social life. By analyzing social policy in the context of development, Kabeer argues that a social exclusion perspective can serve as "a unifying framework for analyzing the social implications of economic disadvantage and the economic implications of social disadvantage" (p.1). Building on Fraser's (1998) notion of 'bivalent collectivities,' Kabeer (2000) argues that social groups, including categories such as gender and ethnicity, can encompass interrelated forms of both economic and cultural injustice. Kabeer (2000) views caste as a bivalent collectivity whereby strategies of redistribution and recognition remain relevant.

Kabeer (2000) presents a conceptual spectrum of social exclusion marked by economic and cultural forms of injustice. According to Kabeer (2000), economic injustice results from

exploitation, marginalization, and deprivation whereas cultural injustice stems from “social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication” (p. 4). As Kabeer (2000) suggests, “(Cultural forms of injustice) are manifested in the ways in which dominant social groups invisibilise, seek to impose dominant values, or routinely devalue and disparage certain categories of people” (p. 4). While economic and cultural forms of injustice are interrelated, Kabeer (2000) argues that each form merits a different strategic response. As Kabeer (2000) states,

Where disadvantage is largely economic, disadvantaged groups are likely to mobilize around their interests, and to formulate their demands in terms of redistribution. Where disadvantage is largely valuational, mobilization is more likely to be around the question of identity and demands to be formulated in terms of recognition. (p. 9)

In addition, Kabeer identifies three different forms of exclusion, building on the work of Luke (1976), Parkin (1979), and Fraser (1989): (a) institutional bias, (b) social closure, and (c) unruly practices. Luke (1976) defines institutional bias as a “predominant set of values, beliefs, rituals, and institutional procedures (‘rules of the game’) that operate systematically and consistently to the benefit of certain persons and groups at the expense of others” (cited in Kabeer, 2000, p. 20). According to Parkin (1979), social closure occurs when, “social collectivities seek to maximize rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle of eligible” (cited in Kabeer, 2000, p. 21). Building on Fraser’s (1989) work, Kabeer defines unruly practices as “the gaps between rules and their implementation which occur in practice in all institutional domains” (p. 92). In this context, unruly practices can shape how the provisions of the RTE Act are being implemented at the school-level. They can also shape the overall schooling experience of disadvantaged groups within the classroom. Thus, the unofficial norms produced by social interactions within a school culture can allow for unruly

practices to act as exclusionary practices that deviate from the intended vision of the RTE Act.

## **2.2 Social Justice Approach to Education**

To address the issue of social exclusion within education, Tikly and Barrett (2011) propose a social justice approach to education quality by drawing on the work of Fraser (2008) and Sen (1999). Tikly and Barrett frame the social justice approach by first drawing on Fraser's three dimensions of social justice: (a) redistribution, (b) recognition, and (c) participation. Redistribution refers to access to resources whereas recognition aims to acknowledge the concerns of marginalized groups. To address issues of redistribution and recognition, Fraser (2008) argues that participation should provide marginalized groups the opportunity to voice their concerns and shape the decision-making process. In this light, children would be seen as social actors capable of participating in the decision-making that shape their lived experience.

Secondly, Tikly and Barrett (2011) draw on Sen's (1999) notions of capabilities. According to Sen (1999), capabilities are the opportunities that individuals have to realize different 'functionings' that they may have reason to value. Hence, Tikly and Barrett (2011) emphasize that capabilities deemed of value by children as well as parents, communities, and governments should be defined through a process of dialogue and public debate at various levels. Like Tikly and Barrett, Lewin (2007) views capabilities as an essential component of achieving 'access to meaningful learning' which should lead to transformations in capabilities that are linked to the knowledge and skills that can enhance the opportunities for social mobility.

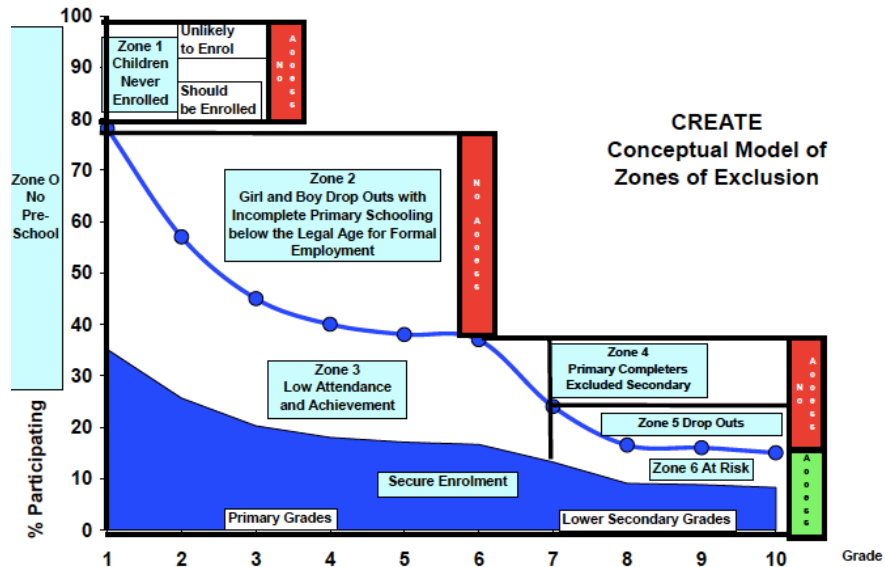
Tikly and Barrett (2011) focus their social justice approach further by drawing on three dimensions: (a) inclusion, (b) relevance, and (c) democracy. First, the inclusion dimension focuses on the access that different individuals and groups have to quality education. This dimension focuses on the quality inputs and needs of marginalized groups. Secondly, relevance

is defined as being, “concerned with the extent to which learning outcomes are meaningful for all learners, valued by their communities and consistent with national development priorities in a changing global context” (p. 10). A key aspect of this dimension focuses on issues of relevance as they pertain to curriculum and use of linguistics. Finally, the democratic dimension draws on Fraser’s (2008) call for participation and Sen’s (1999) call for public debate. Here, the democratic dimensions serve as a platform to question the political debate on education quality and to further promote Fraser’s call for ‘participation parity’. In the context of this study, focusing on issues of inclusion, relevance, and democracy are important considerations for exposing social hierarchies and inequities in the classroom.

### **2.3 Silent Exclusion**

To re-conceptualize access to meaningful learning beyond initial enrolment, the Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE) identifies six zones of exclusion (Lewin, 2007). As depicted in Figure 1, the cross-sectional model presents several stages of the schooling cycle to convey participation and to locate those who are losing or have lost access in the standard education system (Lewin, 2007).

**Figure 1: Access and Zones of Exclusion**



Source: Lewin, 2007, p. 587

To gain a deeper understanding of social exclusion within the realm of education, this study focuses on Zone 3 or the zone of ‘silent exclusion.’ According to Lewin (2007), “[c]hildren remain formally in school may be silently excluded if their attendance is sporadic, their achievement so low that they cannot follow the curriculum, or if they are discriminated against for socio-cultural reasons” (p. 23). As Govinda and Bandyopadhyah (2011) note, the term ‘silent exclusion’ is often used to portray those children who are physically present in class but endure experiences of repetition, long absenteeism, low learning achievements, and little cognitive gain.

Notions of ‘silent exclusion’ as identified in CREATE’s Zone 3 have been widely reported in India (Nambissan, 2009; Ramachandran & Naorem, 2013). Several researchers argue that the overall poor quality of learning, coupled with discriminatory and exclusionary practices, have pushed children out of the formal learning process leaving many children vulnerable to dropping out or having learned little after eight years of schooling (Lewin, 2007; Nambissan,

2009; Ramachandran & Naorem, 2013).

## 2.4 Hidden Curriculum

Processes of inclusion and exclusion can be largely affected by the hidden curriculum, and therefore, merit further analysis to understand children's schooling experiences and access to meaningful learning. Skelton (1997) defines the hidden curriculum as the "set of implicit messages relating to knowledge, values, norms of behaviour and attitudes that learners experience in and through educational processes" (p. 188). As Millei and Raby (2010) argue, there is an embedded conflict between democratic/progressive and traditional/authoritative ideals in the school structure and its disciplinary practices (cited in Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012). These ideals, imbued with power, are further reinforced by the hidden curriculum. Critical scholars like Giroux and Pena (1983) argue that schooling dynamics embedded within the hidden curriculum are detrimental to social integration, social justice, and equality and therefore aim to reproduce broader societal structures.

According to Apple (2004), the hidden curriculum can be used to explore the various implicit mechanisms in the school system that aim to exclude marginalized groups from privileges preserved for the dominant classes (cited by Zhang and Luo, 2016). As Zhang and Luo (2016) state, "Exposing the implicit practices, procedures, rules, relationships, and structures embedded in the daily routines and instructions of the hidden curriculum is crucial for understanding the mechanisms of social injustice in school settings" (p. 218). Furthermore, the hidden curriculum reinforces compliancy with authority rather than deliberative democratic participation (Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012).

The hidden curriculum, as Nambissan (2008) argues, also shapes gender identity.<sup>6</sup> As Nambissan states, “There are surprisingly few studies on education of girls in India and barely any systematic focus on school and classroom processes which include the curriculum, pedagogy, teacher attitudes, peer interaction as well as institutionalized rituals and practices” (p. 191). Based on a review of the literature she concludes that gender is contextualized within schools and pervades classroom processes specifically in relation to the hidden curriculum of teacher attitudes and peer interaction. For instance, according to Manjrekar (2003), the ‘code’ of ‘gender appropriate behaviour’ is embedded within the hidden curriculum and communicated informally by the larger schooling culture (cited by Nambissan, 2008). Likewise, Rathnam’s (2002) study of primary school Dalit children in Tamil Nadu, found that gender identity was reinforced by gender specific chores as the girls were made to do ‘light’ chores and the boys were made to do chores that required ‘strength’ (cited by Nambissan, 2008).

As Kumashiro (2000) notes, schools can also be considered a space where ‘othered’ students are treated in harmful ways through both the specific actions and inactions by teachers, staff, and peers. Othering in turn can encompass cultural and racial ambiguity, labelling and categorization, hierarchical power dynamics, and limited access to resources (Borrero et al. 2012). The researchers argue that groups that have power maintain their status through protective actions that distance themselves from those who are marginalized.

How a child’s identity is shaped may also contribute to their notion of ‘self-concept.’ According to Lee and Anderson (2009), students interpret and develop identities based on

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<sup>6</sup> Colonialism introduced a binary purview to gender leading to notions of perversion and criminality against gender diverse populations. The stigmatisation of gender has since become fixed into law and cultural norms. Literature about LGBTQIA+ youth in India remains sparse (Shankar et al. (2022)).

self-perceptions as well as “salient aspects of social context, such as social political ideologies, histories, and structures that are often beyond the control of an individual” (p. 181). As Sfard and Prusak (2005) suggest, designated identities are products of collective storytelling and are essential to learning outcomes as such identities can act as self-fulfilling prophecies (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Thus, a students’ self-perception and their ideas of others’ perceptions can affect their confidence and motivation to learn (Hoff & Pandey, 2006). Consequently, Hoff and Pandey’s (2006) experimental study of discrimination, social identity, and discrimination in India found that discrimination could also have long-lasting effects by reinforcing beliefs of inferiority. Hoff and Pandey argue that the mechanisms of discrimination operate in part within the individuals who are being discriminated against. They suggest that an individual may alter his behaviour if his/her social identity is publicly revealed. As Hoff and Pandey (2006) conclude:

If publicly revealing the social identity of members of this group increases their negative thoughts about themselves and their distrust, their lack of confidence affects their learning and their willingness to bet on their success, which keeps them from achieving outcomes comparable to those of high castes, which validates the discriminatory ideology and reproduces the effects of discrimination over time. (p. 211)

In this context, the hidden curriculum can shape a students’ experience and the inclusive nature of their schooling environment. The implicit messaging that students received from their peers and teachers can also shape the learner’s identity while reinforcing discriminatory beliefs. Thus, a focus on the hidden curriculum is an important consideration for better understanding the social interactions at the schooling level particularly for marginalized groups.

## **Chapter 3. Literature Review**

The literature review begins by exploring issues of exclusionary practices, discrimination, and unequal treatment within the schooling experiences of marginalized learners. Second, such exclusionary practices as demonstrated through teacher attitudes and the use of corporal punishment are examined. The literature review concludes by addressing issues of inclusion from the perspective of social integration of children of different social and economic backgrounds within the classroom.

### **3.1 Exclusionary Practices, Discrimination, and Unequal Treatment**

For many marginalized learners, their schooling experience is characterized by discrimination and exclusionary practices. As the PROBE Report (1999) suggests, social discrimination can exist in various forms from teacher attitudes, peer interaction, and to the merits and delivery of the curriculum itself. Several studies have reported teachers imposing discriminatory views towards children of schedule caste backgrounds resulting in children eating and sitting separately and being tasked with menial chores along caste and gender norms (Nambissan, 2009; PROBE 1999, Ramachandran & Naorem, 2013). Studies have also reported that children of scheduled caste backgrounds were labelled as being ‘stupid’ or academically incapable (Balagopalan & Subrahmanian, 2003; Hanna & Linden, 2012; Morrow & Singh, 2014) or as ‘raw’ with low intelligence and poor manners (Kumar et al., 2020). Such discriminatory practices highlight the challenges that marginalized learners face in terms of their socialization, peer interactions, and overall schooling experience.

Nambissan’s (2009) study of 234 households in Rajasthan found that Dalit children were effectively silenced out of fear. They would strategize to sit quietly in the back rows, afraid of

being scolded or insulted were socialized early on by identifying themselves in terms of caste. As Nambissan (2009) states:

Integral to the socialization process is the learning of ones jati/caste identity – children learn who they are, whom they should interact with, and other social practices that are formed by hierarchical caste relations...A regular practice in school is that of teachers calling children by their ‘caste name’ or ‘son of caste’ (p. 22).

Evidence from the *Young Lives* household survey and school survey data from Andhra Pradesh found teachers’ discriminatory views on social positioning, caste, and/or class may affect children’s ability to regularly attend school and meet school expectations (Morrow & Singh, 2014). Hanna and Linden (2012) found that teachers discriminated against students from lower-caste groups while grading exams by randomly assigning child ‘characteristics’ (for example, age, gender, and caste). Similarly, Balagopalan and Subrahmanian (2003) found that teachers imposed negative traits on the supposed academic capabilities of children of scheduled caste backgrounds which framed not only their self-concept as learners but also influenced their relationships with non-scheduled caste peers.

Ramachandran and Naorem’s (2013) qualitative study of inclusive and exclusive practices in schools across six states (Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan) found that gender- and caste-based discrimination was exemplified in various ways throughout the school day. The researchers observed a clear hierarchy of tasks from menial to educational whereby teachers often assigned tasks based on criteria of gender and perceived academic abilities as influenced by class and caste biases. Hence students from upper caste groups were seen as bright and eligible of more prestigious responsibilities whereas students from lower caste groups were assigned menial tasks in keeping with the expected gender norms. The intersection of gender- and caste-based discrimination was perhaps best exemplified in the

assignment of home-like chores at school. According to Ramachandran and Naorem (2013):

With the tasks that involved home like-chores such as filling water for teachers, making tea, washing teachers' lunchboxes, there was an overwhelming preference for girls especially from the forward castes or OBC. In tribal areas where almost all the children belonged to the ST category, teachers asked any girl to do the task (p. 48).

Ramachandran and Naorem (2013) also found that in all states, children seemed to sit and play within their own 'kind'. Such overt forms of discrimination may point to the widening social distance between teachers and children from extremely poor families as suggested by Ramachandran's (2005) study on teacher motivation. As Ramachandran (2005) states, "Social attitudes and community prejudices play an important role in determining the ability and willingness of teachers to empathize with children" (p. 2142).

Kumar et al.'s (2020) survey study of 400 freeship students and interviews with five private-school principals found that freeships students faced discrimination at the private schools these children accessed due to a 'significant cultural clash'. According to Kumar et al., the principals reported that the teachers had difficulty dealing with the two groups of students as the freeship group were deemed to be 'raw' with a lack of manners and etiquette as well as 'low intelligence and emotional quotient'. Furthermore, the survey results indicated 60-70% of respondents agreed that freeship students faced discriminatory practices ranging from teachers being less attentive to them, receiving more punishments, and having fewer opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities.

These studies highlight the pervasiveness and extent of discriminatory and exclusionary practices that marginalized children faced as part of their schooling experience. Such studies raise broader concerns regarding classroom learning, socialization, and the long-term implications of marginalized learners being pushed out of the schooling system.

### 3.2 Teacher Attitudes & Corporal Punishment

Addressing teacher attitudes is seen as a key factor in determining schooling outcomes (Galab et al., 2014; Singh & Sarkar, 2015). The relationship between teachers and students as characterized by corporal punishment also raises concerns as the use of such discipline remains prevalent in India (Cheruvath & Tripath, 2015; Dehadray, 2019; Morrow & Singh, 2014).

Children were beaten for various reasons and the rate of corporal punishment was reported to be higher in private schools (Morrow & Singh, 2014). Corporal punishment was issued at higher rates and greater severity to children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Dehadray, 2019).

Furthermore, Cheruvath and Tripath (2015) found that teachers perceived corporal punishment to be a useful tactic to maintain classroom punishment. Poor teacher attitudes and the extensive use of corporal punishment may in turn push children out of the schooling system.

Singh and Sarkar's (2015) investigation of quality teaching, based on *Young Lives* data from Andhra Pradesh, highlighted several factors that emerged as important determinants of student outcomes. These included: (a) the proximity of teacher's residence to the school, (b) teacher's professional qualifications, (c) teacher's attitude towards schools and students, and (d) teaching practices. According to Singh and Sarkar (2015), a positive teaching attitude coupled with a positive interpersonal relationship between teacher and students were vital aspects of teaching and learning.

Based on the school component of *Young Lives* in Andhra Pradesh, Galab et al.'s (2014) study of classroom processes reaffirms the need to address teacher attitudes. The study examined the interaction of the teachers and the students, interaction between the students, the presence and absence of teachers, the activities of teachers and students, and the children's attitudes towards schooling as key components of the learning process. Galab et al. (2014) reported that:

Half of the children admitted that their classrooms are full of noise and not suitable atmosphere for learning; over one fourth observed that their class teacher never questions them if they do not bring their books and pencils; over one third pointed out that their class teacher does not attend school; noticed incidences of physical punishments by the teacher and about 60% of children admitted that their teacher was always late for class (p. 37).

Based on classroom observations, the researchers reported the teacher shouting at or scolding children in about 42% and 25% of the private and government schools respectively. The researchers also noted that the teachers used a cane / stick / ruler to intimidate the children in about 16% of private schools and 11% of government schools. In addition, it was noted that half of the teachers observed did not encourage the students when they completed their work correctly irrespective of school type. Galab et al. (2014) concluded that, such findings illustrate the ‘callous’ attitude of teachers and support the needs to harness the right school atmosphere and the child-friendly attitude of teachers.

Kacker et al.’s (2007) survey study of 18,000 children representing 13 states in India found that 65% of school-going children reportedly faced corporal punishment with 15% of the reported cases involving serious physical injury, bleeding, or swelling. The most common form of corporal punishment reported involved slapping, kicking, beating with a stick, and being pushed and shaken, respectively. Furthermore, Cheruvalath and Tripathi’s (2015) pilot study that surveyed 160 secondary school teachers from public and private schools in both rural and urban areas found that some teachers still perceive corporal punishment is necessary to maintain discipline in the classroom. However, the researchers also note that some teachers suggest that corporal punishment is ineffective in deterring students from misbehaving: “corporal punishment

will cause the child to become more arrogant and undisciplined. It will inject the idea that violence is an accepted means of controlling others” (Cheruvath and Tripathi, 2015, p. 131).

Evidence from the Oxford *Young Lives* household survey and school survey data found that corporal punishment was widely used in schools in Andhra Pradesh even though the practice is legally banned (Morrow & Singh, 2014). As Morrow and Singh (2014) state:

India is riddled by huge divisions based on caste, class, and socio-economic status, and violence against the powerless by those in power is rampant. This extends to schools where teachers in a position of power do not hesitate to ‘control’ children (p. 1).

The researchers found that 63 percent of children in the school survey reported that their teachers used corporal punishment, with a higher rate of incidence within private schools. Reasons for being punished included absence (through work, illness or attending family celebrations), missing classes, not doing homework, not reading well, making mistakes, getting poor marks in exams, not wearing their uniform, not having the right equipment, and not paying the teacher for extra lessons. Morrow and Singh (2014) argue that some children opted to drop-out of school because they were subjected to corporal punishment.

Dehadray’s (2019) study of caste-based discrimination in the form of punishments issued at private schools of varying managements in Pune, Maharashtra found a marked difference in the severity of punishments for socially disadvantaged groups. Punishments were classified into four categories: 1) inflicting pain by directly touching the body, 2) holding uncomfortable positions and forcing to be engaged in humiliating activities, 3) mental harassment, and 4) other punishments (for example, punishments that create discomfort or ridicule the child). For all types of punishments categorized as inflicting pain by directly touching the body and physically strenuous positions, the proportion of punishments issued were reportedly higher for the disadvantaged students. The report also found that disadvantaged students faced more verbal

abuse such as scolding and insults. According to Dehadray (2019), these negative experiences of exclusion and discrimination operate as a ‘push factor’ leading to a high dropout rate of scheduled caste and schedule tribe students.

Despite the universalizing and inclusive context of the RTE Act, these studies suggest that corporal punishment remains a prevalent part of the schooling experience for many marginalized children. For many teachers, corporal punishment is seen as an acceptable tool to maintain classroom discipline and exert control over students. As a result, the impact of corporal punishment may serve to push marginalized learners out of the schooling system.

### **3.3 Social Integration**

Few studies have explored the interface between national policies, political discourse, and the reality of schooling experiences of children at the ‘ground-level’ (Griffiths, 2000; Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012; Zhang & Luo, 2016). Griffiths’ (2000) study of children’s experiences of primary schooling in Mauritius highlighted some of the discrepancies between policy rhetoric and the reality of children’s schooling experiences. Despite the universalizing legislation, Griffiths argues that children’s accounts of their schooling experience indicate that learning opportunities were limited due to authoritarian teacher practices. Zhang and Luo (2016) study on the schooling experiences of migrant children in Beijing assessed the implementation of government policies to allow migrant children to attend urban schools. The researchers found that the hidden curriculum led to the marginalization of migrant students based on three aspects of exclusion: (a) access to school, (b) in-class participation, and (c) peer interaction. Zhang and Luo (2016) conclude that:

To translate the policies into reality and bring about true integration of rural migrant children in urban schooling, it is important for the Chinese urban schools and educators to consider poignant

questions related to the basic educational rights of migrant children in school access and participation. They also need to engage in with the hidden curriculum embedded in the everyday school practice, which reflects the power and hierarchies in the larger society and rationalizes exclusionary treatment towards the migrant children. (p. 231)

Thornberg and Elvstrand's (2012) study of school democracy in Sweden as set out in the Swedish Education Act found limitations such as the school process of suppressing children's voices and the inconsistent application of rules set out by the teacher. As Thornberg and Elvstrand (2012) state, "As long as such obstacles and limitations implicitly operate as a hidden curriculum in schools, pupil participation is unlikely to be successful even when national laws and school democracy are in place" (p. 52). Collectively, these studies while different in context, highlight the need to assess how universal legislation, such as the RTE Act, are mediated by children in their everyday schooling experiences and interactions (Lafleur & Srivastava, 2019). As Lafleur & Srivastava (2019) note, these patterns are more likely to be revealed when children's perspectives are centred in the research.

A closer look at social integration, particularly at the peer-to-peer level, remains a point of interest within the RTE context. Studies found that both teachers and fee-paying parents raised concerns over social integration (Gilbertson & Dey, 2023). Others found that teachers held long-term apprehensions suggesting that social distancing would only widen as the learners aged (Sucharita and Sujatha, 2019). In terms of peer relations, Sucharita and Sujatha (2019) argue that from the children's perspective, they are too young to realize social differences across peer groups. Others however have argued that children began to differentiate themselves along class lines at an early age (Joshi, 2020). Rao (2020), on the other hand, reported that social integration benefited the wealthier learners.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted at three elite private schools in Lucknow, capital of Uttar Pradesh, Gilbertson and Dey (2023) found that teachers and fee-paying parents were more skeptical. Rather than viewing the freeship students as being ‘rich in knowledge’, teachers viewed freeship students as having poor language skills, lacking support with homework at home and having impolite manners. As for the views of fee-paying parents, Gilbertson and Dey state, “[They] did not see integration as a way for their children to learn from working-class children...and some felt integration could have negative effects for their children, expressing concerns like teachers’ about language, behaviour and parental support” (p. 304).

Sucharita and Sujatha’s (2019) study reported that while the private school teachers expressed a positive attitude towards disadvantaged groups, they held several apprehensions about the long-term implications of the provisions and expressed concerns over the impact of the provisions on the children in their later years. According to Sucharita and Sujatha, the teachers worried that the children would begin to compare themselves by way of material benefits or begin to feel inferior due to class difference. However, from the children’s perspectives, Sucharita and Sujatha noted the “children were beyond the realities of exclusion and segregation, they mingled with all the children and developed proximity with those whom they could relate, irrespective of whether they belong to non-EWS or EWS category” (p. 324).

Whether children can differentiate themselves based on social backgrounds remains contested. Joshi (2020) found that children as young as 6 years old were able to differentiate themselves by socio-economic status and concluded that this would grow wider with age. In addition, Joshi found that the freeship students were less likely to cite non-freeship students as their friends, suggesting a lack of social integration in classrooms. The survey results found that while there were no signs of complete segregation in social networks, freeship students were

friends with primarily other freeships students while non-freeship students cited other non-freeship students as friends. Trends in test scores revealed that students who obtained a freeship scored significantly lower than non-freeship students. However, freeship students who had a higher share of non-freeships friends obtained higher test scores, suggesting that the provisions may have a positive influence on learning outcomes for freeship students.

There is some evidence that social integration positively benefits advantaged students. Rao's (2019) study on social integration found that disadvantaged learners positively shaped the social behaviours and academic outcomes of advantaged students. The study found that having disadvantaged classmates made wealthy students more prosocial, generous, and egalitarian and less likely to discriminate against poor students and more willing to socially interact with them. To note, the study focused on the wealthy students rather than the marginalized group of children. And secondly, the research focused on an earlier policy change (prior to the RTE Act) that forced elite private schools in Delhi to offer freeships to disadvantaged students.

The effectiveness of social integration particularly at the peer level remains a point of interest. How children see themselves in comparison to their peer groups can serve to either foster a deeper sense of belonging or threaten to harness further marginalization. However, there remains a dearth in the literature exploring children's perceptions of their schooling experience in terms of both teacher and peer relations.

## Chapter 4. Methodological Framework

The methodological framework begins with a focus on children as social actors. Second, I describe participatory research and particularly, participatory visual research methods (PVRM).

### 4.1 Children as Social Actors

Due to an increasing emphasis on children's rights, Shamrova and Cummings (2017) argue that participatory action research with children and youth has shifted from being a rarely used approach in research to becoming a trending research option. While quantitative methods framed by positivist traditions have contributed to an overall understanding of young people's lives and have played a significant role in shaping policies, Greene and Hill (2005) argue that such methods may be inappropriate for understanding the uniqueness of children's experiences. Furthermore, Yorke and Swords (2012) question the relevance of child poverty findings that have shaped policy development due to the exclusion and under-representation of children in the research. As Crivello, Vennam, and Komanduri (2012) state, "[Children's] knowledge and experience should therefore be considered a valuable source of information for the design and evaluation of policies and programs, aimed at improving their lives and the life chances of children marginalized by poverty" (p. 234).

For example, shortly after the start of the Oxford Young Lives longitudinal study of child poverty, which began as a quantitative study to track 12,000 children in Peru, Vietnam, India, and Ethiopia, it was apparent to the research team that qualitative research would be required to supplement the survey data (Crivello et al., 2009)<sup>7</sup>. According to Brock and Knowles (2012), the

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<sup>7</sup>Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have an estimated population of 85 million inhabitants (7% of India). Being one of the first States to initiate fiscal reform and institutional restructuring,

analysis of the quantitative data often highlighted research areas that were more conducive to qualitative research: “This multidimensional and multi-method approach is producing a unique dataset, which situates children’s experiences of poverty to the people around them, and the sociocultural context institutions, services, and policies that shape their lives and opportunities” (p. 20). Young people offer a distinct vantage point from which to investigate the effects of poverty (Crivello et al., 2012; Woodhead, 1999). As Crivello et al. (2012) state,

Children’s concerns, explanations, and experiences of the effects of poverty may differ from those of adults, and children often have distinct roles and responsibilities within their families for managing hardship and risk related to household poverty (for example, caring for siblings, carrying out essential household chores, working for pay, going to school). (p. 218)

Thus, ensuring that children are recognized as social actors capable of participating in the decisions that shape their lives continues to gain prominence.

Drawing from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1991), the discourse on children’s rights has shifted towards a child-centred approach to research (Pascal & Bertram, 2009; Sime, 2008; Yorke & Swords, 2012). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1991) states:

Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views should have the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting that child, and that the views of that child should be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (Article 12).

According to Sime (2008), ranges of participatory initiatives and consultations have been used to engage young people to express their concerns over matters that directly affect them. As Roberts

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Andhra Pradesh made for an interesting case for the Young Lives study. For more discussion on the Young Lives survey design and sampling see Galab et al. (2014).

(2002) and Bruce (2005) suggest, the participation of children in research enables children to make choices, express their opinions, and gain a positive sense of self (Pascal & Bertram, 2009). Furthermore, Miller (1997) argues that child participation forges values of citizenship and democracy (Pascal & Bertram, 2009).

While UNCRC was integral in promoting children's rights, the acceptance of children as 'social actors' is rooted in Paulo Freire's theory of 'dialogic pedagogy' and the development shift towards participatory rural appraisal. In his seminal, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1972) pioneered the concept of dialogical pedagogy as a "non-hierarchical, dynamic, and transformative process of learning" (cited by Literat, 2013, p. 86). Freire's theory emphasizes the role of 'teacher as learner' and the 'learner as teacher' as being a mutually transformative process that aims to 'liberate' those who have been 'silenced'. Dialogical pedagogy was exemplified by Freire's work with children in the *barrios* of Lima, in the 1970s. As part of his research on literacy, Freire asked the children to photograph their perceptions of exploitation. While several children took photographs of landlords and policemen, one picture depicting a nail on the wall made no sense to adults. Amongst the children however there was a strong consensus that the nail represented exploitation. As it turns out, the nail served as a hook that children rented to hang their heavy shoeshine equipment overnight at local businesses in the city (Singhal & Devi, 2003). Hence, by providing the participants with the cameras themselves, the visual means of production shifted from researcher to subject signaling a significant shift from traditional visual methods prevalent in anthropology, sociology, and psychology (Literat, 2013; Singhal & Devi, 2003; Young & Barrett, 2001). As Singhal and Devi (2003) suggest, the visuals become truly participatory, "when the subjects play the main role in the making of the visuals, and interpreting them for a researcher, policymaker, or concerned citizen" (p. 6). In terms of

access to meaningful learning, this approach enables children to become social actors capable of voicing insights on policies that largely shape their lives.

## **4.2 Participatory Research**

Participatory research draws from Freire's work on dialogical pedagogy and principles of participatory rural appraisal. Maguire (1993) defines participatory research as "a process of community-based investigation, education, and action for personal and structural change" (cited in Wang et al., 1996). As Lykes (1997) suggests, participatory research is committed to actively involving community members in the participation and investigation of their own social reality. Furthermore, participatory research entails 'participatory communication' and 'participatory poverty assessment.' Singhal (2001) defines participatory communication as a "dynamic, interactional, and transformative process of dialogue between people, groups, and institutions that enables people, both individually and collectively, to realize their full potential and be engaged in their own welfare" (cited in Singhal & Devi, 2003, p 2). Participatory poverty assessments, however, aim to engage and empower participants throughout the research process with the end goal ideally leading to action (Harpham, Nguyen, Huong, Long and Tran, 2005). As Harpham et al. argues, participatory methods offer a multi-dimensional way of assessing child poverty that goes beyond the traditional assumption that poverty solely encompasses a lack of materials as measured by income or consumption.

To achieve a multi-dimensional assessment of child poverty, many researchers use a combination of participatory methods. As Green and Hill (2005) suggest, the most appropriate method should reflect the purpose and nature of the research and the needs and skills of the participants involved. When it comes to children under the age of five, the 'Mosaic' approach has been positively received as a diverse multi-faceted research strategy. This approach promotes

the combination of multiple participatory tools for children including the use of cameras, tours, mapping, and bookmaking (Clark, 2005). The name ‘Mosaic’ as Bertram and Pascal (2000) suggest, “refers to the drawing together [of] pieces from different sources to create a complete picture of children’s perspectives” (p. 253).

Studies in South Africa (De Lange, Olivier, Geldenhuys, & Mitchell, 2012), in Vietnam (Harpham et. al., 2005), in Bolivia (Punch, 2002), in Rwanda (Veale, 2005), in Uganda (Young and Barrett, 2001), and in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, the Philippines, and Central America (Woodhead, 1999) combined participatory research methods to access marginalized groups across diverse settings. Young and Barrett’s (2001) study of street children in Kampala, applied a multi-method participatory approach to allow the strengths of individual methods to compensate for the limitations in others. The researchers conducted their study by incorporating mental and ‘depot’<sup>8</sup> mapping, thematic and non-thematic drawings, daily timelines, and photo diaries to explore the experiences of children, aged nine and 17, living on the streets of Kampala. By applying thematic and non-thematic drawings based on ‘safe’ and ‘dangerous’ places, Young and Barrett found that visual methods were used as a catalyst for deeper communication. As Young and Barrett state:

Several themes, based on the daily activities undertaken by street children, emerged from the analysis of the drawings.... The results suggest that: leisure; work, and activities, especially collecting rubbish, scrap and carrying luggage; eating; stealing; and sleeping are important daily activities for street children. (p. 145)

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<sup>8</sup> Depot is a colloquial term used by street children in Kampala to refer to the place where they sleep. Each child ‘lives’ at a specific depot. Which effectively replaces the conventional ‘home’. Depot mapping is activity whereby children draw a map outlining where they sleep each night.

When several visual methods are employed, Young and Barrett argue that the triangulation of data can prove to be highly effective.

In rural Bolivia, Punch (2002) explored children's everyday lives by combining drawing, photography, diaries, and worksheets. In rural Rwanda, Veale (2005) investigated children's experiences of reintegration after the genocide by applying participatory methods such as social mapping, story-games, drawings, and drama. Likewise, in rural Vietnam, Harpham et al. (2005) combined household wealth rankings, cause and effect trees, focus group discussions, Venn diagrams, and mobility maps to explore adult's and children's perceptions of the causes and consequences of child poverty. This research in turn, was used in preparation for the larger Young Lives longitudinal study of child poverty. In South Africa, De Lange et al. (2012) applied Halder and Waerdahl's (2009) use of 'teddy diaries' to explore children's experiences of rural life. The application of teddy diaries involves circulating one teddy bear and one diary amongst a class of students whereby each child is given the opportunity to take the teddy bear home and to write and draw in the diary.

Woodhead's (1999) study explored children's perceptions of child labor using a combination of conventional quantitative and qualitative techniques coupled with participatory research methods. The study involved over 300 children, aged 10-14, from four regions including Bangladesh, Ethiopia, the Philippines, and Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua). As Woodhead states,

At the heart of the protocol are a series of semi-structured activities and games focusing on key themes in children's lives. Many are based around locally produced picture cards which children can compare, sort and rank, yielding a combination of individual and group responses. (p. 31)

The use of participatory approaches across diverse social and cultural context aligns with Bertram and Pascal's (2009) notion that there is no one single approach or method that works

best. Researchers should critically reflect on their role, assumptions, and choice of methods and applications (Punch, 2002). Furthermore, Woodhead contends that interventions should be “context-appropriate, culturally sensitive, locally sustainable, and child-centered” (p. 28).

### **4.3 Participatory Visual Research Methods (PVRM)**

Freire’s dialogical pedagogy inspired educators, visual sociologists, and anthropologists to engage marginalized groups using visual research (Burke, 2008). Referring to the old saying, ‘a picture is worth a thousand words,’ Mitchell, Theron, Stuart, & Campbell (2011) point to the power that images can potentially invoke. As Mitchell et al. (2011) state: “[Images] broadcast pressing and social messages in irrefutable ways. They give voice to the voiceless...encourage expression, and demand attention” (p. 26). According to Kaplan et al. (2011), images have the potential to represent, engage, and influence in ways that go beyond traditional means of research.

Typically, participatory drawing entails participants ‘drawing and talking’ or ‘drawing and writing’ to draw out the meaning embedded within their drawings. Participatory drawing is seen as being both inclusive and interactive in nature. In accordance with Freire’s dialogic pedagogy, the hierarchy between subject and researcher is removed (Literat, 2013). As Literat (2013) states,

Because of its co-constructed design, which enables the participants to take charge of framing their own realities in an expressive and personally relevant manner, this strategy holds a vast potential to stimulate individual and community empowerment through the facilitation of self and collective efficacy. (p. 89)

Wetton & McWhiter (1998), early proponents of PVRM with children, noted that children could convey emotions visually that they could not express within an oral or written manner (cited in Literat, 2013). As Literat states:

Through the process of visual conceptualization and the reflective discussion of these images in the context of their production, participants are given an expressive channel to voice their inner stories, as well as an active empowering stake in the research study. Furthermore, because of its playful nature and its lack of dependency on linguistic proficiency, this research method is especially suitable for work with children and youth across a variety of backgrounds and cultural contexts. (p. 85)

While participatory drawing can be quite a versatile research tool, it also has limiting factors. Punch (2002) argues that drawings should not be assumed to be a ‘natural’ tool to use with children as the process relies on the child’s actual and perceived drawing abilities. Some children, according to Punch, are inhibited by their lack of artistic skills. Furthermore, rather than creating imaginative and exploratory drawings, children tended to reproduce familiar images commonly learnt from the blackboard or textbooks. Thus Literat (2013) argues that future research on participatory drawing should focus on understanding “the efficiency of this methodology at varying age levels, in concordance with the development of cognitive and visual abilities” (p. 87).

Limiting factors such as validity, generalizability, and lack of documentations raise concerns over the use of participatory drawing. Since participatory drawing relies heavily on visuals rather than textual narratives, Silverman (2001) argues that validity is often difficult to prove as findings are widely based on interpretation (Literat, 2013). Within a cross-cultural context, the misinterpretation of drawings is further amplified. Hence, the researcher must be cognizant of the fact that drawings are a product of the individual’s cultural background.

It is widely recognized among researchers that the generation of ‘summative reflective discussion’ are key to PVRM for participants to highlight the subtler and ambiguous aspects of the images. Working particularly with children necessitates this approach due to the imaginative and creative nature of children’s visual depictions (Lerat, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2011; Young & Barrett, 2001).

Collective methods are techniques used to gather views and information that is discussed by a group of respondents. Veale (2005) argues that collective methods draw on participatory research principles that aim to facilitate and analyze a group with shared meanings, interests, or experiences. As such, Veale argues that collective methods are particularly suited to working with marginalized groups of children who share common experiences. Furthermore, Boyden and Ennew (1997) argue that focus group discussions with children can help break down the unequal power relations between adults and children as child respondents outnumber the adult researchers. Boyden and Ennew (1997) also propose that children often find it easier to interview each other rather than be interviewed by an outsider. Interviews by children can provide high-quality data as children often keep secrets from adults. Collective methods however may deter some respondents from speaking freely due to fear of mockery or fear of conflict with other group members (Boyden and Ennew, 1997). As Heeks (1999) suggests, participative groups and processes tend to replicate their cultural and political contexts (Veale, 2005). Hence broader political, cultural, and social realities should be addressed to ensure that all participants regardless of status participate equally.

## Chapter 5. Research Design

This study draws on a dataset that I collected in January & February 2016 under Ethics Certificate # 03-15-04. The study utilized participatory methodologies by drawing on the Oxford Young Lives research design and fieldwork guidelines (Boyden & James, 2014; Crivello et al., 2013; Tekola et al., 2009). Specifically, this study involved a series of participatory ‘draw and talk’ sessions coupled with interviews. The following section outlines: 1) selection and recruitment, 2) ethics and entry, 3) research design, 4) secondary research, and 5) limitations and school observations.

### 5.1 Selection & Recruitment

Children were recruited from households in two urban neighborhoods (colonies) in one catchment area that were already surveyed for the *Insights to Education* household survey in Delhi. Each colony was selected based on the diversity of socio-economic residences and government and private provisions. Based on classifications issued by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), Site A was deemed to be relatively better off compared to Site B. The criteria used to assess socio-economic status involved: (a) physical infrastructure such as lane width and drainage, (b) social infrastructure such as parks and location of government schools, and (c) economic status of residences such as plot size of homes and household possessions.

To identify potential children to participate in this study, the criteria for selection included: (a) children seven to 10 years of age, (b) freeship students enrolled in private unaided schools, (c) non-freeship students enrolled in private unaided schools, and (d) an equal number of boys and girls. First, an anonymized and coded copy of the survey data was provided to filter and identify households with freeship students between seven and 10 years of age. Secondly, to

narrow the sample size, preference was given to older children who were between eight and 10 years of age due to concerns that the younger children may have a shorter attention span or limited vocabulary (Punch, 2002). Next, the schools that these freeship students attended were identified to match non-freeship students who accessed the same private school. At no point was I provided with the master database or raw uncoded data. Only when the potential participants were identified in the anonymized coded databases, did CORD assist with providing additional details for households to be contacted to participate in this study.

Tables 1 and 2 present details on the 16 children who participated in the study and descriptions of their interests. This is followed by a short discussion of their family structures. Pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity and were informed by my supervisor who shared the cultural background of the participants. The children included: (a) four boys who were freeship students, (b) four girls who were freeship students, (c) six boys who were non-freeship students, and (d) two girls who were non-freeship students. Of the 16 children, only two were identified as belonging to general caste (GC) groups, 13 to scheduled caste (SC) traditionally the most marginalized, and one to other “backward caste” (OBC) groups (see Table 1 and 2 below).

10

<b>Table 1 Children’s Profiles (Non-Freeship)</b>					
<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Caste</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>Description</b>
Anu	F	8	SC	School B	Learning how to read and to tell time using a clock. Enjoys playing football and cricket at school with her friends. Felt special in class when asked to distribute papers and additional tasks.
Kartik	M	8	SC	School B	Reported to have nine different teachers. Enjoyed playing football, badminton, and cricket. Attended additional tutoring sessions on weekends.

<sup>10</sup> The Hindu caste system divided society into a five-fold hierarchy. “Backward Castes” are official groupings recognized in the Constitution of India as historically disadvantaged (Singh et al, 2018).

Kunal	M	10	SC	School B	He was learning about electricity and spoke proudly about the time he made a volcano and a model windmill. He liked to play a traditional sport known as <i>kabaddi</i> . <sup>11</sup> He had a younger brother with special needs who reportedly was not enrolled in school.
Rakesh	M	10	SC	School E	Spoke proudly of his school competitions highlighting his love of chess in particular. At school, Rakesh was learning about scientists like Thomas Edison and various animals.
Sai	M	9	SC	School D	At school, he reportedly enjoyed playing football with his friends and took yoga and music classes. The parents were very engaged in the interview process, asking questions regarding the purpose of the research, and engaging in conversation. They reported to own several properties nearby and traveled to other parts of India. He had a younger sister. Parents noted they tried to treat each child equally and requested that the younger sister recite a poem.
Shobhana	F	8	SC	School C	The mother reportedly left the family. The auntie was quite directive with her: telling her to sit properly, to use her manners, and to speak up.
Sonny	M	8	SC	School C	Studied topics such as light, sound, and force. He enjoyed judo, dancing, and drawing. Expressed concern over a friend who was commonly teased at school for being a slow learner.
Yash	M	8	SC	School F	Enjoyed school but not interested in drawing. His teacher gave him a sticker with a black star indicating that the picture he made in class was done poorly. He did not want to draw during the research activities but participated in interviews.

**Table 2: Children's Profiles (Freeship)**

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Caste	School	Observations
Deepa	F	9	SC	School E	Enjoyed class trips and class parties where the students' purchased treats at the school canteen. Spoke openly of kids at school who were being teased. Helped her friend with her studies. Math class was her favorite as she received good marks.

<sup>11</sup> Kabbadi is an Indian sport played with two teams of consisting of 7 players each. Offensively the attacking player with individually attempt to reach out the baulk line against a defensive squad of all seven players. For further details see, The Indian Express 2013.

Naveen	M	10	GC	School A	Spoke favorably of teachers who were caring and encouraging. Sadly, lost his mother to illness during the research process.
Nikita	F	8	SC	School A	Served as class monitor, described herself as one of the brighter students in the class. Auntie described her as a fast learner. Mother described her as an extrovert, confident, and vocal. Wants to become an actress or teacher as she plays 'teacher' at home with her brother.
Parth	M	8	SC	School D	Class monitor. Considered himself to be a good storyteller. Noted that his teacher praised him for his handwriting. At school, he enjoyed racing with his friends, playing <i>Hide and Go Seek</i> , or a game of catch. Enjoyed dance, drawing, and music class.
Raj	M	9	SC	School C	Enjoyed doing yoga and playing games like <i>Dog and Bone</i> with his friends. A lemonade making competition organized by his science teacher stood out as one of his favorite experiences at school.
Rohit	M	8	GC	School B	Lived in a multi-family unit with his grandparents. At school, he enjoyed celebrating <i>Diwali</i> and <i>Independence Day</i> . He played football with his friends and counted on them for help if his work was incomplete.
Shreya	F	9	SC	School G	At school, she enjoyed doing yoga and physical training and was learning to type using a computer. She enjoyed studying with her friends. All students reportedly ate lunch by themselves at their own desks.
Tanvi	F	10	SC	School F	Spoke openly against the class monitors. During the initial interview with her mother present, she spoke openly about her schooling experience. More hesitant in the follow-up interview with her father present.

The freeship group had a mix of caste status compared to the non-freeship group, which was only comprised of schedule caste groups. While surprising, it may be reflective of the attractiveness of private school freeships across a range of social groups. As Srivastava and Noronha (2016) note, some relatively 'better-off' households may access freeships by capitalizing on social networks and by under-reporting on household income.

In terms of family structures, the units varied. There were some children who lived in multi-family units. There were other families, like Naveen and Shobhana, who did not have their mothers. Overall, the households were welcoming. Deepa and Rakesh's parent offered snacks and refreshments as family interactions were informal and easy-going. Other families, like Sai's parents, were very much engaged with the interview process, asking questions about the research, and engaging in conversation. In contrast, interactions between Tanvi and her father as well as Shobhana and her auntie were more formal. During the research process, the field assistant and I could observe the children interacting with family members and their siblings and other children in the neighborhood. While brief, the research process provided an opening into their distinct lived experience.

Naveen, a 10-year-old freeship student, came from a family identifying as general caste. His family life depicted some of the hardships and realities that children from economically disadvantaged households may face. Naveen shared a room in a multi-family unit. At the time of the initial interview, his mother was resting on a mattress on the floor. At the foot of the mattress was a two-burner stove sitting next to a pile of dishes and a set of cooking utensils hanging from the wall. Naveen suggested we could climb the bamboo ladder and conduct the interview on the roof. Rather than risk a fall, we agreed to conduct the interview sitting on the floor of the doorway. A few weeks later, while returning to Naveen's house for a follow-up interview, he was standing next to his older sister in the doorway with his head freshly shaven, a sign of respect indicating the passing of a family member. That day we learned that Naveen had lost his mother who had been ill for some time. This illustrates some of the difficult life circumstances that some of the children had faced.

## 5.2 Ethics and Entry

This MA research project was granted ethics approval from the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board (see Annex 1: Ethics Approval Notice). In the larger Insights to Education research study, roughly 400 households<sup>9</sup> were surveyed in each colony. Households that participated in the Insights to Education household survey had been informed that they may be contacted for future research activities. Hence, consent was sought afresh meaning that a small number of households from the larger survey were approached to participate in this subsequent study.

With CORD's assistance a local field research assistant with the appropriate linguistic and cultural competencies, along with experience of working with children, was selected to serve as an interpreter. This field assistant also collected household survey data, and thus, had intimate knowledge of the broader research study, participating households, and the study site. In the field, I was accompanied and led by the research assistant who led the conversation regarding recruitment followed by the approved protocol and script. The field assistant also acted as a translator helping to explain the study to the parents/guardians and children. This helped to overcome language barriers and ensure trust, as some of the households had also interacted with the research assistant before. I did not approach households on my own as per the ethical protocol, and or practical considerations of language. To further protect the child participants, only my thesis supervisor, the field assistant, and myself had access to the data. Furthermore, the interpreter signed a confidentiality agreement as per ethics protocol for this study (see Annex 2: Confidentiality Agreement).

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<sup>9</sup> Households had at least one child four to 14 years of age. A household was operationalized in the survey as including 'all adults and children who eat meals and that cook together in the same kitchen.'

The parent/caretaker and the child were informed of the purpose of the study and what the child's contribution would be to the overall project. A letter of information/consent (see Annex 3: Letter of Information/Consent) was explained verbally to convey this information and verbal consent was sought from the parents. The letter of information/consent was translated into the local language of Hindi. Due to the presumed lower level of literacy amongst the parents/caretakers, written consent was deemed to be inappropriate. Additionally, written consent usually conveys a level of mistrust in the cultural milieu particularly with parents with limited literacy skills and lower power differentials. Thus, verbal consent was sought, although the households were provided with the script to keep for future reference.

Assent from the children was gained after households agreed (see Annex 4: Assent Script for Children). Before the start of each draw-and-talk session, a simplified script was used to gain assent that addressed: (a) the purpose and process of the session, (b) the voluntary aspect of the child's participation, (c) issues of confidentiality and anonymity, and (d) ongoing consent. Children could refuse to participate in any activity. Parents and other family members were usually present during the draw-and-talk sessions.

To ensure participants felt comfortable speaking freely, they were informed that they would not be identified by name in the study. To protect the confidentiality of the personal information and responses gathered, an encryption system whereby important information, such as the household and children's names and that of the school was used. Thus, the name of the child or the names of their classmates, teachers, principal, or school would not appear in any report, publication, or presentation resulting from this study.

### 5.3 Research Design

The study adapted and integrated participatory drawing techniques based on the Young Lives research design and fieldwork guidelines (Boyden & James, 2014; Crivello et al., 2013; Tekola et al., 2009). For the pilot study, four children, aged seven to 10, participated in the pilot study to test the research methods and the receptivity of the households towards further engagement. While Punch (2002) argues that drawing should not be assumed to be a ‘natural tool’, the intent of the pilot study aimed to assess how suitable the drawing activities were for the children. Secondly, the pilot study provided an opportunity to assess the appropriateness of the interview questions and vignettes and to determine if the extent of discussion would be sufficient to establish common themes. It was apparent from the pilot study, that it would take time for the children to open up. Hence, modifications were made to the sequencing of the questions to help make the children feel more at ease in the beginning. Data collected from the pilot study was not used in the analysis.

16 children participated in the draw-and-talk sessions. The original idea was that each child would complete three research activities that integrated drawing activities with semi-structured interviews over the span of three household visits. The first drawing activity involved children drawing a picture of their favorite teacher. In the second drawing activity, children were asked to draw happy moments at school, particularly activities they enjoyed with their friends. For the third drawing, children drew a picture of their classroom to help gain insight into their school environment and the different activities they engaged in.

‘Summative reflective discussions’ (Literat, 2013) were integrated to allow children to explain the meanings behind their drawings. The drawing activities helped guide conversations and create openings for further discussion. The interview portion of the draw-and-talk sessions

followed a semi-structured format on a broad set of topics, including: the classroom environment, peer relations, and teacher interactions. The open-ended structure allowed children to respond more naturally, making the interview process less intimidating. Children were asked several questions such as:

- What are some of your classes/subjects at school? What are some things you are learning about at school? What are some different activities you might do in class? What do you enjoy most about school? How do you feel about school overall?
- What are your teachers like? How does your teacher treat other students? How do you feel about asking for help? What kind of tasks does the teacher assign to students at school?
- Can you tell us about your friends at school? What are some activities that you like to do with your friends? Can you tell us about how your classmates treat each other at school?
- How does the teacher discipline the students? How do you feel when this happens?

Interviews also involved discussing ‘vignettes’ (Crivello et al, 2013), i.e., opening storylines and hypothetical scenarios, to elicit information about schooling experiences, such as:

- If a new student arrived at your school, how would the other students treat them?
- If you were the teacher, what would you do differently?
- If there was one thing you could do more of at school, what would that be?

When working with the children, building trust and understanding was essential. In most cases, it took time for the children to feel at ease. Each session began with an icebreaker to help build rapport (see Annex 5: Building Rapport with Students) and was followed-up with debriefing sessions with the field assistant. Rapport was built over several stages: apprehension, exploration, cooperation, and participation (Di-Cicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). During the

initial ‘apprehension stage’ the goal was to get the children to talk. Hence, the initial questioning was designed to be broad, open-ended, and essentially non-threatening to help put the child at ease. Second, the ‘exploration phase’ involved a sense of learning, listening, testing, and sense of bonding and sharing. Mindful of this stage, I could gauge the child’s sensitivity to different areas of schooling processes and offer encouragement for their drawings regardless of how well the pictures turned out. Next during the ‘cooperation phase’ I took the opportunity to clarify certain points and came back to topics that may have been too sensitive to ask in the beginning. Finally, during the ‘participation stage’ the drawing activities helped to facilitate the discussion

Of the 16 children who participated in the draw-and-talk sessions, six children (three freeship and three non-freeship students) who were deemed to be more vocal and receptive were selected to participate in the follow-up semi-structured interviews. These helped in gaining further insight into such topics as: (a) classroom management and disciplinary strategies, (b) teacher-student relationships and teacher-attitudes, and (c) student-student relationships and interactions with classroom monitors. While the children did not participate in additional drawing activities, I referred to their previous drawings and comments to guide the conversation.

Debriefing sessions with the field assistant after every research activity were essential to validating and consolidating insights, particularly with regards to family dynamics. Audiotapes and fieldnotes were transcribed for data analysis. A preliminary exploratory analysis was conducted to obtain a general sense of the data. The final analysis was conducted manually, applying Attride-Stirling’s (2001) stages of qualitative analysis to identify thematic networks. In the first stage, the data from the transcripts were organized into meaningful text segments using a coding framework. The coding framework was largely based on corporal punishment, physical punishment, isolation, bullying, labelling, authority of class monitors, collaborative learning,

play-based activities, academic supports, and positive teacher attitudes. Once all the text had been coded, themes were identified from the coded text segments. The identified themes were organized into thematic networks based on child-friendly pedagogy, inclusive peer relations, hidden curriculum, exclusionary teacher practices, and social exclusion amongst peers. These themes were summarized into larger, unifying themes based on exclusionary and inclusionary schooling processes. The thematic networks and codes are highlighted in Annex 6. Thematic Networks and Codes.

#### **5.4 Secondary Research & Positionality**

According to Heaton (2008), secondary analysis involves the re-use of pre-existing data as a means of verifying earlier research findings. While scholars have expressed concerns over the use of secondary analysis, the issues have been raised when the primary data is shared and conducted by researchers not involved in the data collection (Heaton, 2008; Ruggiano & Perry, 2019). Concerns have also focused on the ethical issues of confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent when the data is shared. In this case, as the primary researcher, I had to revisit my own self-collected data. The reanalysis involved reexamining the data to verify the findings of the primary study. This involved reviewing the field notes, transcripts, and the analysis of thematic networks. Ethics approval to conduct secondary research (file number S-04-24-10269) was granted by the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board (see Annex 1b). This process also allowed me to reflect on my own positionality.

While the intention of this study was to give voice to a group of marginalized children, I had to be mindful of my own inherent power imbalance and social relations. In terms of positionality, I had to reflect critically on my power and privileges as an English-speaking male foreigner. To address the power dynamics, I tried to integrate reciprocity into the interview

process (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). For instance, parents/guardians would often ask about schooling in Canada, and based on my knowledge as a teacher, I could exchange information in a reciprocal process. Second, as a relatively younger man I had to quickly adapt to cultural and gender differences. I was advised by the field assistant to remain discreet and refrain from making eye contact with women, particularly during the initial household approach. For example, in one case, the mother of one of the children who participated in the study, asked us to conduct the interview on the front steps rather than inside the house.

To adapt my positionality, I recall trying to establish a non-dominant relationship when working directly with the children (Warming, 2011). To do so, I reiterated to the children that the intention was to learn from them and that their feelings were important. While the children were probed with questions, they were not second guessed, and the findings present the children's insights as they reported them. As Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) note, in creating a research context that encouraged children to shape the research, I had to be prepared for the research to develop in unexpected ways. For example, one child reported that he didn't want to participate in the drawing activities but was still open to answering questions.

Overall, the secondary research provided an opportunity for me to refamiliarize myself with the initial data collection, to review emerging literature, and to refine the findings of the study. Inherent within this process, I was also able to reflect on my positionality and reflect on the family dynamics and my interactions with the children. Although the primary data collected for this thesis was collected in 2016, the findings are still relevant as there remains a dearth in the literature exploring the interface between educational policy, political discourse, and the reality of children's schooling experiences, particularly within the context of the RTE Act. To address

that gap, this study aimed to document children's experiences from their perspectives and give voice to a group of children who have been marginalized in large-scale research.

## **5.5 Limitations & School Observations**

Conducting research in a foreign country that I had not been to before, led to several challenges pertaining to language barriers and cross-cultural barriers. To alleviate these issues, I depended highly on my field assistant to act as a co-researcher. As Harris et al. (2013) state, "The 'interpreter-as-co-researcher' role combines several tasks: interpreting, co-constructing meaning with the researcher and participant through data collection, organizing study logistics, and acting as a cultural ambassador" (p. 1408). Prior to conducting the interviews, we would review the questioning and practice the interpreting process ahead of time. Likewise, during the interview and post-interview debriefing sessions the research assistant offered helpful information that clarified cultural nuances based on her local knowledge of Indian culture. For instance, the field assistant would offer insights into national holidays, children's activities, or her own personal schooling experiences. In addition, she would offer feedback to improve my questioning techniques for the next interview. I also relied on my field assistant to help access the research community which was located about one hour from Delhi by public transit. Given the time of year, I had a relatively short-time frame between after-school hours and sunset to conduct the research activities during day-light hours.

Working with children also created several challenges. Like Pain and Francis (2003), the participatory methods were limited by several factors: (a) brief responses and limited information, (b) brief relationships with the researchers, (c) the presence of others affecting personal accounts, and (d) inherent power relations. As expected, the children displayed a wide range of personality types. Some appeared shy, quiet, and introspective by nature while others

were much more outspoken, confident, and eager to participate. In most cases, it naturally took time for the children to open up and feel at ease. Furthermore, it was important to simplify the language used. At times, questions had to be reworded or rephrased for the child to comprehend despite previous piloting.

Second, as researchers, we had brief interactions with the children rather than sustained relationships. As noted above, while my original idea was to conduct three household visits with each child participating in the study to build relationships of trust, CORD advised that it was too intrusive. As such, I had to conduct the three research activities during one household visit as opposed to three. Hence, I had limited time to build rapport and trust with the children and parents/caretakers. An opportunity to further build rapport and trust may have helped the children feel more at ease and encourage them to open up further about their schooling experiences. Similarly, the children may have felt inhibited in talking about such issues in the presence of family members. In most cases, participants lived in multi-family households. Hence, the presence of the research team often stirred a sense of ‘commotion’ as several curious ‘onlookers’ would sit-in on the interview session. In many cases, family members would interfere or disrupt the interview process. To address this issue, I would invite the other children to draw as well to help keep them occupied. In addition, the field assistant was very adept at kindly reminding the parents that the aim of the research was to draw on experiences directly from the children themselves.

One major limitation in this study draws on the fact that it was not possible to conduct classroom observations since schools did not give permission. The initial research plan was designed to conduct non-participant observation at two private schools. Ramachandran and Naorem’s (2013) qualitative study across six-states in India reveals the prevalence of

exclusionary practices at school. As they suggest, issues of exclusion were prevalent during mid-day meals, school functions, and morning assembly. Other points of exclusion included access to water and washrooms, participation in school activities, the assignment of roles and responsibilities, seating arrangements and issues of punishment and discipline.

The initial research design intended to gain access to the school sites by obtaining permission from a ‘gatekeeper’ (Creswell, 2002) such as the school principal. Several phone calls were made to the selected schools to arrange a meeting with the principal. In most cases, messages were left and promises of a callback did not materialize. Emails were also sent to the school informing them about the research and requesting a meeting, including a letter of permission outlining the pertinent information regarding the study. As communication by phone and email was ineffective, attempts were made to visit the schools in person. Timing, however, proved to be problematic. The study coincided with Delhi school closures as Jat community protesters seized the Munak canal in response to drinking water shortages (BBC News, 2016). In the end, permission to the school sites could not be obtained. Further time constraints in the field meant that this aspect of the study could not be conducted even though the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board had granted ethical clearance.

There are other reported experiences of difficulty in gaining access to schools for research in India. Political issues around the RTE Act are said to be contributing to this (Mehendale et al., 2015). As Mehendale et al. (2015) state, “Given the fact that Section 12(1)(c) has been a contentious provision and still a subject of litigation in the courts, accessing private schools for collection of data was not easy” (p. 46).

As such, I was not able to triangulate the children’s responses by observing events at the school. Despite this setback, I took several steps to validate the findings during the research

process. I conducted follow-up interviews with six of the children, which provided an opportunity for participants to provide further clarification over their schooling experiences. Secondly, I held a debriefing session with the field assistant after each interview to discuss any cross-cultural cues or personal biases that may have been evident during the interview process.

In summary, while the research did not go exactly as planned, as I report in Chapter 6, I was able to collect rich data from the participants, nonetheless.

## **Chapter 6. Results and Discussion**

To assess whether the idealized principles of inclusion embedded in the RTE Act are being met, this chapter presents prominent themes reflective of the children's schooling experiences of the private schools they accessed. First, the chapter provides an overview of the findings. Second, the chapter explores in-depth issues, such as: a) designated identities, teacher labelling, and stigmatization, and b) the effects and prevalence of corporal punishment and the provocation of resistance. Third, the chapter discusses the notion of social distance to address the similarity of accounts between freeship and non-freeship students and the absence of caste and gender as explicit markings of their schooling experiences. Lastly, the chapter explores the importance of children as social actors within the framework of participatory drawing as a means of furthering insights across the quality education debate.

### **6.1 Overall Findings**

Overall, the findings in this study suggest that the ability of the RTE Act and the potential promise of private schools, to meet social justice objectives have not been fully met, even within the universalizing context of the legislation. Children attending private schools within the context of the RTE Act characterized their everyday schooling experience as being largely shaped by pervasive practices of labelling, stigmatization, and corporal punishment. Such pervasive practices are impeding the spirit of the RTE Act in the private schools these children accessed.

A serious commitment to inclusion requires a learning environment where self-worth and belonging are centralized as envisioned by the RTE Act. However, the children's accounts of their everyday experiences widely reported on the pervasive labelling of their peers as being

‘naughty’ and/or academically ‘weak’ or academically ‘incapable’ by teachers and classmates raises concerns over socialization processes. These ‘designated identities’ were reinforced by teachers and through peer interactions and the role of class monitors. Such labels were internalized by the participants and affected how they interacted with their peers. These students were reported to be ostracized by their peers and faced disparaging teacher attitudes, often leading to physical and corporal punishment. While students experienced exclusionary and disciplinary practices at schools, the findings suggested that students may become accustomed to corporal punishment and that such discipline provoked feelings of resistance and resentment. Furthermore, student-teacher relationships were widely reported to be influenced by the teachers’ aggressive and authoritative nature.

While these findings may not be surprising, three unexpected insights emerged. First, contrary to initial assumptions, children entering private schools on a freeship shared accounts of the schooling experience as being comparatively similar to those who entered on a fee-paying basis. Secondly, the children did not attribute caste or gender as explicitly marking their schooling experience. Third, in terms of participatory research, the findings highlight the value of children as social actors and emphasizes the need to recenter the learner’s voice to further advocate for the affective indicators of quality education as a key part of understanding inclusive schooling processes. The research activities also suggests that the value of participatory drawing as a process may be of more value than the actual drawing outcomes themselves.

### **6.1.1 Designated Identities, Teacher Labelling, and Stigmatization**

From an idealized perspective, the privatized measures of increasing schooling access through freeships, was seen as an equity measure to create inclusive spaces across private

schooling. As Section 29 of the Act notes, education inclusion requires an environment fostering self-worth and respect. However, the children widely reported the pervasive labelling of students by teachers in their schools. Such labelling in turn can act as a form of othering whereby students are marginalized and seen outside the norm to maintain the inherent power dynamics of the classroom.

According to Lee and Anderson (2009), students interpret and develop identities based on self-perceptions as well as “salient aspects of social context, such as social political ideologies, histories and structures that are often beyond the control of an individual” (p. 181). As Sfard and Prusak (2005) suggest, ‘designated identities’ are products of collective storytelling and are essential to learning outcomes as such identities can act as self-fulfilling prophecies. According to Sfard and Prusak, designated identities can expand learning opportunities as narratives of one’s repeated success may evolve into stories of special aptitudes, gifts, or talent. On the other hand, designated identities may limit learning opportunities as narratives of repeated failure evolve into stories of slowness, incapacity, or permanent disability.

Balagopalan and Subrahmanian (2003) found that the teachers’ perceptions of children’s identities as learners, particularly if attached to lower caste affiliations can hinder learning opportunities. Thus, students’ self-perception and their ideas of others’ perceptions about themselves can affect their confidence and motivation to learn (Hoff & Pandey, 2006). Consequently, Hoff and Pandey (2006) argue that students may internalize negatively framed social identities which can lead to persistent discriminatory effects over time.

Contrary to initial assumptions, the children did not raise labelling by caste affiliation or gender by teachers or peers in how they or others were identified. This was unexpected given the preponderance of research highlighting caste-based and gendered schooling practices in India.

(Nambissan, 2009; Ramachandran & Naorem, 2013). While forms of caste or gender labelling may have occurred, the children in this study did not report them as part of their everyday schooling experience. The children's accounts on these points may have been influenced by various factors including the presence of family members during research activities, the limited ability to decipher caste-based and gender-practices in the classroom, or efforts from the school to minimize such practices.

On the other hand, children widely reported labelling of their peers as being 'naughty' and/or academically 'weak' or academically 'incapable' by teachers and classmates raising concerns over socialization processes. The findings in this study suggest that children labelled as 'naughty' were reportedly characterized by their teachers as aggressive and disruptive *by nature*. Such practices, as Sinha and Reddy (2010) note may lead to some children being pushed out of the school system as opposed to dropping out. Thus, stigmatization may have deleterious effects on a child's wellbeing, self-concept, and future educational outcomes.

Children in this study reported the following behaviours when describing peers who were labelled as 'naughty': fighting, hitting other students without reason, talking aloud, blaming others, and preventing others from completing their work. Those peers labelled as 'naughty' were often viewed with a negative connotation:

The ones who misbehave, they fight, they don't study, and they hit each other....I don't like these kids...They disturb the class and they disturb the teacher. (Anu, non-freeship student, School B)

The other kids don't particularly like them. We find them strange as they don't do their work and keep us from completing our own work. So that's why we don't like them. (Parth, Freeship, School D)

According to Sai, a non-freeship student at School D, the students would act out particularly when the teacher was out of the classroom. These acts including drawing on the blackboard, running out of the corridor, kicking over water bottles, making paper airplanes, fighting, and playing games. As Sai noted, the teacher would be irritated with the class noise given there were 48 students in the class (as illustrated in Figure 2 below). As a result, the teacher would make the students put their heads down for the entire period. Sai's mother interjected and noted that there were in fact 52 students in the class making it difficult for the teaching to manage student behaviour.



**Figure 2 Sai's Classroom**

'Naughty' peers were often socially excluded by their peers. The stigma was further reinforced by teachers who implicitly accepted these social interactions. Several children reported that the 'naughty' students were commonly hit by teachers. Parth claimed that the teacher's response would be to scold and hit these students. Such behaviour reportedly led to further stigmatization, resulting in some students playing by themselves or eating their lunch alone in isolation.

There's one child who's always up to some mischief or he's always roaming around in the class. He doesn't sit on his chair properly so he's the child who gets picked on most by the teacher.  
(Parth, freeship student, School D)

He added:

There are some kids that no one plays with...These are the kids who trouble others. They don't let us complete our work and they also take our belongings...They trouble everybody. There are three kids who trouble everyone. The three of them play together but not with the others. (Parth, freeship student, School D)

'Naughty' students were also reportedly characterized as submitting late work, working too slowly, refusing to listen in class disobeying the teacher and not being interested in their studies generally. While students labelled as 'naughty' were often seen as academically 'weak', their behaviours were viewed as the hinderance to their academic success.

The ones who are naughty, they don't complete the work they are given. Instead, they start fighting or start being naughty or they get up to some mischief. So that's the reason why they're also weak. (Yash, non-freeship student, School F)

According to Kartik, a non-freeship student at School B, the students who misbehave refuse to listen or to obey their teachers and they hit others for no reason.

Some children reported that teachers commonly labelled students as academically 'weak'. Kunal a non-freeship student at School B noted that the teacher acted rudely towards the 'weak' students. He noted that there were many kids who did not perform well in their studies. Kunal also reported that at times his teacher blamed the parents for the poor performance or disruptive behaviour of his classmates, saying that they spoke rudely about the parents and made disparaging remarks regarding their intelligence. While 'naughty' students were seen as academically 'weak' in part due to their disruptive behaviours, there were other students who were labelled as academically 'incapable'.

Students labelled as academically 'incapable' were often characterized as slow learners. Kunal referred to these weaker students as duffers. Rakesh, a non-freeship student at School E,

described one ‘weak’ student who was often teased in class. According to Rakesh, the boy was “scared of a peacock feather...so the kids would take a feather and scare him.” He added that everyone ate lunch together except for that child. Those students who were labelled as academically ‘incapable’ faced further social exclusion as they were reportedly bullied or hit by their teachers:

There is this one child who is very [slow]...he can’t even add or subtract basic things so everybody, all the kids trouble him and they slap him and hit him. (Raj, Freeship student, School C)

While the labelling of students was based on academics and behaviour rather than caste affiliation or gender, the othering of select students may have served to indirectly suppress the class as a whole to reproduce social relations. Othering students who were outside the norm in terms of behaviour or academic performance may have served as a warning to students as a means of perpetuating the power structure in the classroom. Such pervasive practices could have been used by teachers to maintain discipline based on fear and ridicule regardless of caste or gender. These power dynamics were also reflective in the role of class monitors.

The collective narrative of labelling learners as ‘weak’, ‘incapable’ or ‘naughty’, was further reinforced by classroom interactions with class monitors. In this role, peers had conferred added authority within the classroom setting. Of the 16 children, four were class monitors at different schools: Parth, Nikita, and Raj (freeship students) and Kunal (non-freeship). According to Kunal, he was selected based on a rotational position while the others reported that their selection had been based on specific academic reasons. Kunal noted the class monitor would keep track of the students who misbehaved, and when the teacher returned, those students would be hit. He noted that he enjoyed being class monitor as he could exercise some authority over his peers and ensure that the students were quiet and listening in class. Likewise, Nikita reportedly

enjoyed being class monitor as she was able to keep the class quiet and exercise authority over the students with the teacher's support.

Children reported that class monitors were assigned various tasks such as: assisting the weak students, managing the naughty ones by addressing unruly behaviour, handing out punishments, checking uniforms, and maintaining orderly lines during morning assembly. Maintaining discipline in accordance with accepted classroom/school practice seemed to be a classroom monitor's main role. Kartik, a non-freeship student at School B, explained that if a student was talking or making noise in class, the class monitor would write their name on the blackboard. Parth, a freeship student at School D, was reportedly responsible for telling the students to keep their head down between periods or when their work was completed. Most children accepted the authority conferred to class monitors. However, Tanvi a freeship student at School F, was openly critical of class monitors who took advantage of their status. She added that the class monitors enjoyed the fact that they could "show attitude to the other kids...to please their friends," and resort to hitting students who misbehaved.

### **6.1.2 Teacher Discipline and the Provocation of Resistance**

While Section 17(1) of the RTE Act (2009) bans the use of corporal punishment and Section 29(2) stipulates that learning should take place in a child-friendly and child-centered manner (Government of India, 2009), corporal punishment remains a prevalent part of the schooling experience for many children in India (Morrow & Singh, 2014; Orgando Portela & Pells, 2015). Ogando Portela and Pells (2015) analysis of quantitative data of the *Young Lives* study found that the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana had the highest prevalence rate of physical punishment compared to Vietnam, Peru, and Ethiopia. In their sample, eight out of 10 children in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana reported being punished at age 8, and about

one-third at age 15.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the researchers argue that corporal punishment was the foremost reason reported by children as being the first cause for disliking school. Likewise, Morrow and Singh (2014) found that 63 percent of children aged 9 to 10 in the school survey reported that their teachers used corporal punishment, with a higher rate of incidence occurring within private schools.

Children in this study widely reported that corporal punishment was used in the classroom for various reasons including students acting out, submitting incomplete work, or for working too slowly. Kunal a 10-year-old non-freeship student at School B, spoke openly against the use of the corporal punishment at his school. When students had incomplete work or were naughty, Kunal cited that the teacher would “take the skin, the ruler...and hit them on the hand.” Children’s accounts also reported that corporal punishment often led to feelings of fear and sadness, suggesting that such forms of punishment negatively affected their wellbeing. Anu, a non-freeship student at School B, explained that her teacher hit students when she got angry, provoking fear. Anu added that the principal also hit students with a stick. She relayed her own experiences of sadness when her teacher hit her friend. Such experiences affected the students’ views of their teachers. Several children said they disliked teachers who displayed authoritarian, aggressive, and punitive behaviours. Kartik, a non-freeship student at School B, reported that his least favourite teacher often hit the students, making it difficult to concentrate in class. Kunal, a non-freeship student from the same school, had a low perception of one teacher as she often reportedly shouted in class, scolded, and berated the students for not completing their work.

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<sup>12</sup> Ethiopia had the second highest rate of physical punishment. In their sample, four in 10 children (age 8) and one in eight children (age 15) were subjected corporal punishment. In Peru, three in 10 children (age 8) and one in 15 (age) were subjected to corporal punishment. In Vietnam, one in five children (age 8) while only a few boys and girls reported being subjected to corporal punishment.

Likewise, Raj a freeship student at School C, expressed disdain for one teacher who resorted to corporal punishment. As Raj stated, “Most students do not like the English teacher, the few who like her are the ones who do not get hit.” There were also students like Rakesh (a non-freeship student at School E), who spoke favorably of teachers who refrained from scolding or resorting to corporal punishment (see Figure 3 below).



**Figure 3 Teacher Relations & Classroom Management**

For example, he explained that the students felt comfortable with their General Knowledge teacher as she treated the students fairly. As Rakesh explained, his teacher was once angry with him for drawing pictures during class time. Although the teacher took away the pictures, she also provided an explanation which he accepted to be fair.

In terms of corporal punishment, there is a preponderance of literature suggesting that aggressive disciplinary strategies may be counter-productive and perpetuate unruly behaviour (Cheruvath & Tripathi, 2015; Hyman & Snook, 2000; Miller, Ferguson, & Byrne, 2000). According to Miller et al. (2000), teacher behaviour such as shouting, unfair treatment, rudeness, and picking on students may serve as factors that provoke student resistance and rebellious behaviour. Hyman and Snook (2000) argue that physical and verbal assault from teachers may be counter-productive and work to erode rather than to enhance school safety. They state,

“Unnecessarily harsh and punitive disciplinary practices against students create a climate that contributes to school violence” (Hyman & Snook, 2000, p. 489). Likewise, Cheruvalath and Tripathi (2015) argue that corporal punishment is an ineffective way of controlling student behaviour as it causes students to become more undisciplined.

In this study, several students noted that corporal punishment had a negative effect on student behaviour. Sonny, a non-freeship student, at School C, noted that his teacher would resort to physical and corporal punishment if the students worked too slowly or failed to study. As he noted, the students were afraid of being hit but their behaviours would not necessarily improve. He stated “Hitting necessarily does not ensure that the students are better...they in fact become worse. They become more irritable.” Similarly, Kunal a non-freeship student at School B, noted that children become accustomed to being hit and no longer take it seriously. According to Kunal, some students who get hit will retaliate by insulting the teacher.

While the RTE Act aims to create an inclusive learning environment free from fear, trauma, and anxiety, the children in this study widely reported on the use of corporal punishment at the private schools they accessed. Like labelling, the children did not associate corporal punishment with gender or caste. Unsurprisingly, teachers who displayed authoritarian and aggressive behaviours were often viewed negatively by the students leading to feelings of fear and sadness. Furthermore, the children reported that corporal punishment often provoked resistance and rebellious behaviour from the students being hit.

### **6.1.3 Social Distance & the Comparative Experiences of Freeship and Non-Freeship Students**

For children entering private schools on a freeship, contrary to initial assumptions, their accounts of everyday experiences were comparatively similar to those who entered on a fee-

paying basis. The children in this study largely looked forward to going to school and reported on several positive aspects of their schooling experience from playing games and sports with friends, to participating in school celebrations, and competitions. As illustrated in Figure 4, Rakesh a non-freeship student at School E, drew a picture of a class competition that involved creating a poster about the water cycle. According to Rakesh, he enjoyed class competitions as he considered himself to be one of the stronger students in the class.



**Figure 4 Poster Competition**

Likewise, the children described their teachers as being encouraging, empathetic, and having a sense of humour. They had strong feelings about their teachers and were impacted by their behaviours towards them and their classmates. Yet, they also expressed dislike towards teachers who were seen as authoritative, aggressive, or punitive. Both freeship and non-freeship reported widely on the use of pervasive practices such as labelling and corporal punishment.

One reason for the similarity in accounts may have been the over-representation of children from schedule caste groups. Hence, the social distance between freeship and non-freeship students may have been mute as all the children were from the same neighborhood, with similar caste affiliations, and coming from relatively lower-working class families. The private schools that they accessed were medium-fee schools as opposed to being elite where one could expect the social distancing to be more distinct. It may also be assumed that the children were

too young to perceive their social distance but that may change as students age (Sucharita & Sujatha, 2019). Based on these considerations, my sense is that the freeship and non-freeship students were more alike than different.

#### **6.1.4 Giving Voice to Marginalized Youth**

Within the context of the RTE Act, research documenting children's experiences from their perspectives attending private schools is limited. From an equity perspective, there are only a few studies highlighting children's accounts of inclusion within the classroom (Joshi, 2020; Rao, 2019; Sucharita & Sujatha, 2019). To address that gap, this study was guided with the aim of privileging insights from a group of children who are marginalized in large-scale research and whose voices are rarely heard despite the policy changes affecting them. Giving voice to the issue from the children's perspective can provide additional insight into the schooling experience as a means of assessing the inclusive spirit of the RTE Act and reveal insights that have not received adequate attention in the literature.

While the 'draw and talk' sessions were used to highlight the children's schooling experiences, my experience suggests that the process of having children participate in drawing activities was more valuable than the outcomes of the drawings themselves. Like Literat (2013), the drawing activities helped to serve as an entry-point to build rapport with the children and family members. In addition, having the children participate in drawing activities helped keep the children engaged and interested. As Mitchell et al. (2011) spoke to the power of images, the drawings that the children created were overly simplified. Like Punch's (2002) critique of participatory drawing methods, the children in this study were largely inhibited by a lack of artistic abilities while some voiced a disinterest in drawing. Furthermore, the draw and talk activities did not level the power dynamics as I had initially thought as there were typically more

adults than children in the room. While the draw and talk sessions were an important part of the methodology, the drawings were not as central to the findings—as the conversations and openings from the drawings offered more insights than the actual drawings themselves.

While the quality education debate has largely been framed by policymakers and funders, the human capital approach to education has narrowly defined quality education in terms of indicators based on measurable outcomes. In contrast, this study contributes to the quality education debate by highlighting the accounts of the learners themselves who in contrast did not speak to test scores, infrastructure, and enrollment rates, but the affective indicators of learning based on teacher-student relationships and peer interactions. If decision-makers valued such affective indicators as voiced by children, the emphasis of creating inclusive learning spaces and positive relations would better serve all children, particularly those who are marginalized. As this study indicates, the living conditions, family dynamics, and stories of illness and death, highlight the struggles that children can carry into the classroom and further the call for equity measures in the classroom to be taken seriously. This small-scale study provides a glimpse of how quality education can be redefined from an inclusive lens when the perspective of children as social actors is prioritized.

## **Chapter 7. Conclusions & Recommendations**

This chapter begins with a summary of the key findings in this study followed by recommendations for future research and policy-makers.

### **7.1 Conclusions and Future Research Implications**

India's RTE Act compels private schools to set-aside 25% of their seats for free for disadvantaged children. While seen as a market-based solution, the RTE Act remains contentious. The idealized principles of inclusion embedded in the RTE Act are intended to serve as an equity measure and to provide marginalized students the opportunity to access and engage in a child-friendly learning environment inclusive to all learners. However, the findings in this study suggest that the ability of the RTE Act and the potential promise of private schools to meet their social justice objectives have not been fully met, even within the universalizing context of the legislation.

The findings suggest that children attending private schools within the context of the RTE Act characterized their schooling experience as being largely shaped by teachers labelling students as 'naughty' and/or 'weak' or 'incapable' as a pervasive practice. These 'designated identities' (Sfard & Prusak, 2005) were reinforced by teachers and through peer interactions and the role of class monitors. Such labels were internalized by the participants and affected how they interacted with their peers. These students were reported to be ostracized and faced disparaging teacher attitudes, often leading to physical and corporal punishment.

In terms of how students experienced disciplinary and exclusionary practices at school, the findings further suggest that students may become accustomed to corporal punishment and that such discipline provoked feelings of resistance and resentment. Such discipline also affected

the children's views of their teachers. These pervasive practices are impeding the spirit of the RTE Act in the private schools these children accessed.

While these findings may not be surprising, three unexpected insights emerged. First, contrary to initial assumptions, children entering private schools on a freeship shared accounts of their schooling experience as being comparatively similar to those who entered on a fee-paying basis. Several factors may account for the muted social distance. For example, the children had similar caste affiliations, came from relatively lower-working class families, and lived in the same neighborhood. Rather than attending elite schools, where one could expect the social distancing to be more prevalent, these students accessed medium-fee private schools. Based on these factors, my sense is that the freeship and non-freeship students were more alike than different.

Secondly, the children did not attribute caste or gender as explicitly marking their schooling experience despite the prevalence of caste-based and gendered schooling practices in India. While such practices may have occurred, the children in this study did not report them as part of their everyday schooling experience. Several contributing factors include the presence of family members during research activities, the limited ability to distinguish caste-based and gendered practices at school, or efforts from the school to minimize such practices.

Third, in terms of participatory research, the research activities suggest that the value of participatory drawing as a process may be of more value than the actual drawing outcomes themselves. During the research activities, the process of participatory drawing helped the children, and their family members feel at ease. However, the participatory drawing activities did not fully level the power dynamics. Some children also lacked an interest in drawing or the

ability to draw well. While the drawings helped to create openings for conversation, they did not play a more centralized role in the findings contrary to my initial hypothesis.

This study further contributes to the quality education debate by highlighting the value of children as social actors and the need to recenter the learner's voice to further advocate for the affective indicators of quality education. Considering the living conditions, family dynamics, and stories of illness and death, this study highlights the struggles that children carry. Given the socioeconomic environment of the children's backgrounds, this study recenters the focus on the affective indicators of quality education to meet the social justice objectives within the framework of the RTE Act and to further the call for inclusion measures in the classroom to be taken seriously. If a human capital approach dictates how we measure quality education, as defined by policymakers and funders, the emphasis on inputs and outcomes will continue to fall short of ensuring that inclusive processes and pedagogy are in place to foster a sense of belonging and self-worth for all children.

To further address equity concerns in education, this study highlights the need for broad-scale, long-term participatory research addressing the schooling experiences of children and their normative interactions between teachers and students and amongst peer groups. Longitudinal participatory research with children would serve to analyze the prevalence of exclusionary practices throughout the course of a student's schooling experience. More importantly, it could provide insights into the impacts of silent exclusion and the hidden curriculum and how these factors may contribute to pushing children out of the formal learning process.

Future research should also focus on marginalized students accessing elite private schools where the social distancing between students would be more prevalent. Such analysis would uncover further patterns of inequality as it pertains to the socio-economic background, gender,

and ethnicity of marginalized students. Furthermore, the impact of labelling, stigmatization, and corporal punishment as it relates to the schooling accounts of freeship and non-freeship may become more distinct.

Lastly, from a policy perspective, teacher training that develops inclusive teaching strategies and child-friendly pedagogy is acutely needed. Given the prevalence of caste and gendered-based schooling practices in India, coupled with the exclusionary and disciplinary practices highlighted in this study, training should equip teachers with classroom management strategies that promote conflict resolution, empathy, and equal treatment of all students. These priorities would help to bridge the gap between access, marginalization, and inclusion within the context of private schooling and the universalizing legislation of education for all students.

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# Annex 1: Ethics Approval Notice



**File Number:** 03-15-04

**Date (mm/dd/yyyy):** 01/05/2016

Université d'Ottawa University of Ottawa

Service de subventions de recherche et déontologie Research Grants and Ethics Services

## Ethics Approval Notice

### Social Science and Humanities REB

#### Principal Investigator / Supervisor / Co-investigator(s) / Student(s)

<u>First Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Role</u>
Prachi	Srivastava	Social Sciences / Others	Supervisor
Michael	Lafleur	Social Sciences / Others	Student Researcher

**File Number:** 03-15-04

**Type of Project:** Master's Thesis

**Title:** Access to Meaningful Learning: Exploring School Processes as Seen Through the Eyes of Children

**Approval Date (mm/dd/yyyy)                      Expiry Date (mm/dd/yyyy)      Approval Type**

01/05/2016

01/04/2017

Ia

**(Ia: Approval, Ib: Approval for initial stage only)**

**Special Conditions / Comments:**

NA

N/A2 550, rue Cumberland, pièce 154 550 Cumberland  
Street, room 154 Ottawa (Ontario) K1N 6N5 Canada Ottawa,  
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File Number: 03-15-04

Date (mm/dd/yyyy): 01/05/2016

Université d'Ottawa University of Ottawa

Service de subventions de recherche et déontologie Research Grants and Ethics Services

This is to confirm that the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board identified above, which operates in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement (2010) and other applicable laws and regulations in Ontario, has examined and approved the ethics application for the above named research project. Ethics approval is valid for the period indicated above and subject to the conditions listed in the section entitled “Special Conditions / Comments”.

During the course of the project, the protocol may not be modified without prior written approval from the REB except when necessary to remove participants from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) pertain to only administrative or logistical components of the project (e.g., change of telephone number). Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes which increase the risk to participant(s), any changes which considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project and safety of the participant(s). Modifications to the project, including consent and recruitment documentation, should be submitted to the Ethics Office for approval using the “Modification to research project” form available at: <http://research.uottawa.ca/ethics/submissions-and-reviews>.

Please submit an annual report to the Ethics Office four weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to request a renewal of this ethics approval. To close the file, a final report must be submitted. These documents can be found at: <http://research.uottawa.ca/ethics/submissions-and-reviews>.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Office at extension 5387 or by e-mail at: [ethics@uOttawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uOttawa.ca).

**Signature:**

Hoda Shawki

Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research

For Barbara Graves, Chair of the Social Sciences and Humanities REB

## CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE | CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

**Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number**

S-04-24-10260

**Titre du projet / Project Title**

Access to Meaningful Learning:  
Exploring School Processes as  
Seen Through the Eyes of  
Children

**Type de projet / Project Type**

Thèse de maîtrise / Master's  
thesis

**Statut du projet / Project Status**

Approuvé / Approved

**Date d'approbation (jj/mm/aaaa) / Approval Date (dd/mm/yyyy)**

18/04/2024

**Date d'expiration (jj/mm/aaaa) / Expiry Date (dd/mm/yyyy)**

17/04/2025

### Équipe de recherche / Research Team

**Chercheur /**

**Affiliation**

**Role**

**Researcher**

École de développement international et mondialisation / School of

Chercheur Principal /

Michael LAFLEUR

International Development and Global Studies

Principal Investigator

École de développement international et mondialisation / School of

Susan SPRONK

International Development and Global Studies

Superviseur / Supervisor

**Conditions spéciales ou commentaires / Special conditions or comments**

## Annex 2: Confidentiality Agreement

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Confidentiality Agreement to be signed by all interpreters / research assistants</b></p>
--

Project title: Access to Meaningful Learning: Exploring School Processes As Seen Through the Eyes of Children

Principal Investigator: Michael Lafleur

I, (\_\_\_\_NAME\_\_\_\_), am participating in the above-referenced project (the Project) in the capacity of interpreter and will have access to data collected during the course of the Project. I hereby agree:

1. To keep all information shared with me (Confidential Information) strictly confidential. I further agree not to reveal any such Confidential Information to any other person, firm, corporation, company, or other entity unless specifically authorized to do so in writing by the Principal Investigator of the Project.
2. To use the Confidential Information only for the purposes of the Project and not for any other purpose unless authorized to do so in writing by the Principal Investigator.

3. To return all Confidential Information provided to me in any form to the Principal Investigators when I have completed my tasks. If the Confidential Information is not returnable, I will erase or destroy any such Confidential Information, including, without limitation, information stored on a computer hard drive or on a USB data storage device, and will confirm in writing its erasure or destruction to the Principal Investigator.
  
4. These obligations of confidentiality will continue after my participation in the Project has ended.

---

Interpreter/Research Assistant (Date)

---

(Principal Investigator) (Date)

## **Annex 3: Letter of Information/Consent**

Dear Parent/Guardian

Mike Lafleur is a master's student in the School of International Development and Global Studies at the University of Ottawa in Canada. The study is for my thesis and my thesis supervisor is Dr. Prachi Srivastava. Dr. Prachi Srivastava is an associate professor in the School of International Development and Global Studies at the University of Ottawa. Mike will be working closely with the local research partners from the Collaboration and Research Dissemination (CORD) India.

The thesis is entitled, "Access to Meaningful Learning: Exploring School Processes as Seen through the Eyes of Children". The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of school children within Delhi, and to better understand how classmates and teachers may affect how children feel about themselves. I am interested in learning about how your child [Insert Name of Child] feels about their school and their relationships with classmates and teachers. The study will combine methods such as drawings, interviews and a possible observation period at your child's school.

In order to learn more about your child's schooling experience, your child will be asked to draw pictures about their life at school. Once the drawings have been completed, your child will be asked to talk about their pictures. There will be three drawing sessions. Next, your child will be invited to participate in an interview. During the interview, your child will be asked

several questions about their schooling experience. The interview will also involve your child discussing different storylines to learn more about your child's relationships with classmates and teachers. Each drawing session and the interview is expected to last about 40 minutes. Each activity and the interview will be audio recorded with your permission and your child's permission. The drawing sessions and the interview will be conducted at your home at a time and date agreed upon by you and your child.

The third aspect of this study involves observation. Two schools with the largest enrollment of participant learners will be identified. If your child is selected to participate in observations, you have the right to refuse your child's participation at that time. Permission will be sought from the school principal and teacher. In this case, it may be revealed to the school principal and teacher that your child is participating in the study.

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board. While your child will be asked to discuss their schooling experiences in which they engage in on a daily basis, this may entail your child talking about schooling experiences that may cause your child to feel upset.

In order to minimize these risks, your child will be reminded at the start of each activity, that if s/he feels uncomfortable answering any of the questions they are under no obligation to give a response and can stop the conversation at any time without fear of consequence. Secondly, your child will be reminded that s/he can refuse participation in the study at any time without fear of consequence. Thus, your child's participation is voluntary and your child is free to

withdraw at any time and for any reason without repercussion. If your child chooses to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of the withdrawal will be removed from the project records and will be destroyed.

In the presence of your child, with the assistance of a field researcher from CORD, we will explain the study to your child using child-friendly language and answer any questions your child may have. We will also seek verbal assent from your child and record their response.

Possible benefits for your child may include the opportunity to express themselves through a visual format. While there may be no other direct benefit, your child's thoughts and opinions may broaden the quality education debate by highlighting the views and experiences of children themselves. For participating in this study, your child will receive one package of pencil crayons, one drawing pad, and one pencil sharpener. If your child chooses to withdraw from the study, your child will still receive these items.

Be assured that the information that your child shares will remain strictly confidential. Likewise, any information collected during observations will remain confidential. The contents will be used only for the purpose of data analysis to conduct a report. A different name will also be used for your child, the names of your child's school, classmates, teachers, and principal.

Following the submission of my thesis, all written and recorded data will be kept for the suggested minimum five-year period after which it will be securely destroyed.

I understand the terms of the study. I have been informed of my right to free and informed consent. I accept for my child to participate.

If I have any questions or concerns, I may contact Michael at [Insert Local Number] or by email at [Insert Email Address], or Dr. Prachi Srivastava at [Insert Number] or by email at [insert email address]. I may also contact CORD at [insert phone number] or by email at [insert email address].

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of the study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5, Tel.: (001)(613) 562-5387, Email: [ethics@uottawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uottawa.ca).

This is my copy and is mine to keep.

## **Annex 4: Assent Script for Children**

- My name is Mike and this is (insert name of interpreter) S/he will interpret for us.
- We want to find out how children, like you, feel about going to school. We also want to know how classmates and teachers may affect how children feel about themselves. How you feel is important and we want to learn from you. By learning from you, I hope to help other children have a positive time at school.
- We would like you to draw pictures about your life at school. Once you have finished drawing your picture, I will ask you to talk about it. There will be three drawing activities. I will keep your drawings but I promise to return your drawings to you. Next, we will ask you questions about your life at school.
- We will meet four times on four different days for a short time only. In order to remember what we talk about, we will use an audio recorder. We will meet at your home at a time and date that works for you and your parents/caretakers.
- I will not use your real name, so I can describe what you say without anyone knowing it was you. Also I will not use the real names of your family, the community where you live, your school, classmates, teachers, and principals.

- What you say will be between us. It will only be shared with my research supervisor. I will not tell your family, classmates, teacher, or principal what you tell me.
- I may also come to your school to see how you get along with your classmates and your teacher during different activities throughout the school day.
- Before we begin, if there is ever a time when you want to end the discussion, just let us know and we will stop. If there is ever a question you do not want to answer or an activity you don't want to do, you don't have to. It's completely up to you.
- Before we get started, do you have any questions that you would like me to answer?  
*Answer the questions.*
- Would you like to continue to participate in the study? *Record the consent.*
- To thank you for your participation, you will receive a pack of pencil crayons, a drawing notebook, and a pencil sharpener.

## Annex 5: Building Rapport with Students

Stage	Goals	Research Practice
Apprehension	To ease the child into talking.	<p>Presented the child with a cartoon drawing of myself as a means of an introduction.</p> <p>Presented the child with pencil crayons and sketch pad.</p> <p>Encouraged the child draw a picture of their choice.</p> <p>Initial questions were designed to be simple and non-threatening.</p> <p>What school do you go to? What grade are you in?</p> <p>Do you have a favourite colour?</p> <p>Can you tell us about a friend at school?</p>
Exploration	To develop a sense of learning, listening, and testing. To bond and share.	<p>Mindful to gauge the child's sensitivity to different areas of school processes and encouragement.</p> <p>Offer encouragement towards their drawings.</p>
Cooperation	To clarify understandings and to return to more sensitive areas.	Follow up on more substantive issues when the researcher felt the child was opening up.
Participation	To co-direct discussion and synthesize understanding.	Drawing activities helped to facilitate the conversation.

## Annex 6: Thematic Networks and Codes

Organizing Themes	Basic Themes	Codes
Inclusive Schooling processes	Child-Friendly Pedagogy	Play-base Activities (games, competitions, experiments) Positive Teacher Attitudes (empathy, encouragement, dialectic, equitable treatment) Collaborative Learning (group projects, teamwork)
	Inclusive Peer Relations	Academic Support (peer tutoring, helping with homework / missed work) Social Inclusion (displays of empathy, playing together)
Exclusive Schooling Processes	Hidden Curriculum	Labelling (naughty, academically weak, academically incapable) Authority of Classroom Monitors (uniform checks, behavior management, issuing punishments, academic support)
	Exclusionary Teacher Practices	Corporal Punishment (hitting with stick, hitting with hand) Physical Punishment (standing for long periods, standing with hands over mouths, keeping heads down) Authoritative / Disciplinary Roles (shouting, scolding)
	Social Exclusion Amongst Peers	Isolation (playing alone, eating alone) Bullying (teasing, hitting others, name-calling) Disturbing the Class (disrupting the class, running out of the corridors)