

The Experiences of First Generation Learners During Transition from a Government School to a Private Inclusive School in a Tribal Region of Maharashtra, India

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Abstract.

This chapter reports a study of school provision for first generation learners in a tribal community in Maharashtra, India. The chapter considers how a group of children transferred from a government school provision of poor quality into a new and inclusive privately funded school with a more child centred approach. It examines issues relating both, to access and the quality of education available to meet the needs of first generation learners.

The main aim of this study was to investigate educational opportunities and the challenges of this change in provision from the perspectives of children and their parents. This study used qualitative research methods including semi-structured interviews and observations to investigate the experiences of ten children, and to identify processes and structures that support or hinder the students from achieving their educational goals. The research recognised the complex nature of the circumstances and responsibilities the children have towards their families and how these influence and impact on their learning and progression through their school years.

The research study gathered generic data to identify good practice and areas needing improvement to help students successfully complete statutory schooling. Finally, using Capability Approach Theory as a normative framework for the study, it allowed researchers to gain insight into the effectiveness of the support structures set up for students as they

progressed through their schooling; such as provision of a relevant and varied curriculum, counselling for students, the positive attitude of teachers working with these children and support for parents to understand and navigate the school system.

This study provides unique insights into the needs of first generation learners by presenting their own voices as a means of articulating their experiences through a process of transition.

Key Words.

First generation learners, India, scheduled tribes, inclusion, transition

Introduction

Context and background

This chapter reports research conducted into the experiences of a group of first generation learners during transition from a government school to a well-resourced private school in a tribal region of Maharashtra State, India. The research considered issues of access and the quality of education provided to students from an economically disadvantaged rural community and the impact of change, through the development of new educational opportunities. The study interrogated approaches to promoting education for all; in particular the methods adopted to meet the needs of first generation learners. The application of Sen's capability approach used in an educational setting enabled the researchers to look beyond the economic value of education and simplistic interpretation of school attendance as a human right (Unterhalter and Brighouse, 2007). The main purpose of the research reported was to investigate educational opportunities and the influence of socio- economic factors and change

following transition from a state government school to a well-resourced private school from the perspectives of children and their parents.

In common with many Asian countries, the Government of India, as a signatory to international agreements (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 1994; 2000; 2015), has developed a national education policy, which aims to promote a more equitable and inclusive approach to education (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2009). Over the past fifty years, a range of initiatives aimed at addressing the needs of learners from disadvantaged and marginalised communities have been adopted, including the Integrated Education of Disabled Children [IEDC] (Ministry of Welfare, 1974), and the Project for Integrated Education for the Disabled [PIED] (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1987). However, with the passing of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act [RTE] (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2009) a clear intention to identify disadvantaged groups that have often been excluded from mainstream education provision, can be seen to have influenced the most significant legislation in respect of promoting inclusive education to date. The RTE defines “compulsory education” as an obligation of government to ensure attendance and completion of elementary education to every child in the six to fourteen years age group.

Acknowledging that many children in India continue to have difficulties accessing quality education, the RTE Act identifies disadvantaged groups including those from scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, socially and educationally backward classes or those placed at disadvantage as a result of social, cultural, economic, geographical, linguistic, gender or other factors, as being in need of increased support and attention (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2009 page 2). Because of this legislation a number of initiatives introduced by both State Governments and private enterprise have been

implemented in order to achieve the objectives of increased educational opportunities for all learners. These initiatives include the introduction of a quota system whereby a mandatory provision to provide 25% reservation of school places for disadvantaged children in private schools has been introduced.

The imposition of a quota has been highly controversial and was challenged in the Supreme Court by representatives of the private school sector (Dutta and Khan 2016). The opponents of the quota argued that they had established a market-based right to education founded on priorities associated with academic learning outcomes, parental choice and school autonomy and that government interference and the imposition of a quota was likely to erode the rights of parents who had chosen to send their children to fee paying schools (Gorur and Arnold, 2020). The objections were overruled and therefore the obligation of private schools to accept children from disadvantaged communities has been upheld. However, this section of the RTE remains contentious. Juneja (2014) suggests that education in India has been characterised by long held customs of social stratification and that traditions of privilege based upon a caste system have been jealously guarded by a privileged elite. As a result of this long-established form of discrimination, it has inevitably been difficult to implement the requirements of the RTE without significant opposition. The deployment of complex admissions procedures and the segregation of disadvantaged children from their peers once enrolled (Juneja 2014; Choudhary 2014) have resulted in many children being unable to gain their entitlement to schooling. Gorur and Arnold (2020) describe a significant discrepancy between the expectations of national government and the state-level implementation of the requirements of the RTE Act, which has “damaged efforts to organise the rights-based social world and given ammunition to opponents of the RTE Act to argue against its implementation” (page 11).

There are instances in which the management of private schools have made significant efforts to ensure that previously marginalised children are provided with appropriate access and learning opportunities, though inclusion remains a largely ill-defined concept in the Indian education system (Rose, Doveston, Rajanahally, and Jament, 2014). This chapter describes the findings from research into one such initiative led by private enterprise within a remote rural community by exploring the experiences of the young people and their families most closely affected by this system.

Locating the research

The study discussed in this chapter was conducted in Maharashtra State, which is located in the western peninsular region of the country and is the second-most populous state, and third-largest state by area in India. Research was conducted with a purposive sample from a tribal community within Maharashtra where the local language is Marathi (one of the authors is fluent in this language). The families within the sample are described officially as belonging to scheduled caste and scheduled tribes with an average family income below \$3.50 per day, which officially classified them as living below the poverty line. The adults who participated in the research worked as daily wage labourers, their income coming from construction work, fishing, or food gathering from adjoining forests. The majority were not literate but had completed four years of primary schooling. Less than 10% of adults in the area had completed Secondary schooling.

Data were collected during field work from an NGO run school for rural children in an area about a hundred kilometres from the closest city in Maharashtra state. This school was built by a construction company, which was developing a new holiday town in this rural belt. This construction project has been controversial, with concerns about procurement of land from tribal farmers who had been granted it by the Indian State. Additional concerns

have been expressed over potential harm to the environment by deforestation and quarrying in a UNESCO World Heritage Site known for its evergreen tropical forests. In response to negative publicity surrounding these issues, the construction company as a part of its corporate social responsibility strategy, provided funding to an international charitable organisation to start a school in the area for the children whose families had been displaced from their homes to clear the area for development of the holiday village. The NGO that manages the school has a philosophy of providing education to underprivileged children and has schools in several parts of India and in other countries. They have adopted a holistic approach to supporting children, which in addition to providing education ensures the social welfare of children through the provision of meals and health care.

The students who were enrolled in this school lived in the local villages and had previously had access to education through a local Zilla Parishad (state government) school. At the time of the fieldwork undertaken for this research there were approximately 100 pupils on roll at the newly built private school, all of whom had made a transition from the state funded school. A staff of eight well-qualified teachers and a number of specialists who provided lessons in music, physical education and art, and support for pupils with special educational needs had been appointed to the school, which follows the Maharashtra State Board examination syllabus and its associated curriculum. Some members of the local community who had their children enrolled at the school were deployed to provide additional classroom support.

Methods

Research Design:

The study used qualitative research methods within an ethnographic framework, including semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations to investigate the

experiences of ten children aged 10-14 years. The participants all of whom were currently enrolled in the non-government organisation (NGO) run school, had transferred from the Zilla Parishad School two years earlier. A set of individual case studies based upon the experiences that were being investigated were developed and enabled comparisons to be made in respect of the individual experiences of students. The research focused on contextual factors related to the differences of provision made in the Zilla Parishad and NGO schools, and the perceptions and attitudes of students and families towards education through data collected from first generation learners, their teachers and their parents. This enabled the researchers to construct narrative case studies (Elliott 20025) to understand the experiences of individuals in this period of critical change in their lives. In order to observe and study the children in their natural setting, it was decided to approach this set of individual case studies ethnographically (Le Compte and Boulder 2010). As a result of its remote location, spending extensive periods of time in the community being studied was not feasible therefore, an ethnographic approach based upon short term field visits rather than ethnography in its truest sense was used in this research (Dennis and Huf 2020).

Data Collection Procedures

Semi structured interviews were designed for use with three sample groups, these being students, parents and teachers. Questions were designed to avoid jargon and be easily understood, starting with questions about the present educational situation and moving on to others related to past experiences and aspirations for the future. Factual questions were interspersed with those seeking opinions throughout the interviews. All interviews were conducted in Marathi the local language of the community, though some respondents also spoke Hindi. (See table 1 below)

TABLE 1**Interviews conducted**

STUDENT	GENDER	INTERVIEW TIME	LANGUAGE
A	F	35 Minutes x 2 Days	Marathi/Hindi
B	M	48 Minutes x 2Days	Marathi/Hindi
C	F	40 Minutes x 2 Days	Marathi/Hindi
D	F	32 Minutes x2 Days	Marathi/Hindi
E	M	45 Minutes x2 Days	Marathi/Hindi
F	F	40 Minutes x 2Days	Marathi/Hindi
G	M	30 Minutes x 2 Days	Marathi/Hindi
H	M	28 Minutes x 2 Days	Marathi/Hindi
I	M	37 Minutes x 2 Days	Marathi/Hindi
J	F	42 Minutes x 2 Days	Marathi/Hindi
K	M	15 Minutes	Marathi/Hindi
L	M	10 Minutes	Marathi/Hindi
M	F	10 Minutes	Marathi/Hindi
N	F	12 Minutes	Marathi/Hindi
O	M	15 Minutes	Marathi/Hindi
PARENT	GENDER	INTERVIEW TIME	LANGUAGE
A	M	20 Minutes	Marathi
B	M	15 Minutes	Marathi
C	F	35 Minutes	Marathi
D	M	18 Minutes	Marathi

E	F	25 Minutes	Marathi
F	F	32 Minutes	Marathi
G	M	22 Minutes	Marathi
H	M	17 Minutes	Marathi
I	F	40 Minutes	Marathi
J	F	37 Minutes	Marathi
K	F	20 Minutes	Marathi
L	M	17 Minutes	Marathi
M	F	25 Minutes	Marathi
N	M	12 Minutes	Marathi
O	M	15 Minutes	Marathi

To facilitate discussions by students about the challenges and opportunities the school offers them, a fictitious situation such as is often experienced by first generation learners was presented as a focus for discussion (Wadhwa 2018). This included the use of picture cards depicting scenes of everyday life relevant to their situation as the basis for discussing how education might influence change in their lives (Dreze and Sen 1997). The students were asked to discuss this scenario with the help of related questions.

Parent interviews were also facilitated by first presenting situations often experienced by first generation learners. Literacy levels amongst adults in the community were very low and it was therefore important to adopt interview procedures that drew upon their experiences in a respectful and supportive manner (Malkani and Rose 2018). Discussion of the presented scenario was followed by a series of related questions planned to gain insights into their interpretation of the experiences of their children, and their aspirations for the future. This method was chosen because at times direct questions about issues in their own lives could have been difficult or embarrassing for them to discuss. This is a population that has often

been discriminated against and may feel threatened by the presence of outsiders. The interviews were conducted in an informal and conversational manner in an effort to build a bond of trust, enabling them to be more comfortable when engaged in conversation.

Class teachers were interviewed to gain insights into how students were responding to the education being provided and to understand any adjustments that had been necessary to build student confidence and ensure their progress through the school curriculum.

Observations

Each of the sample students was observed in three contexts these being

1. Where students were free to choose both their activities and their companion (e.g. Playground).
2. Where large groups of students were relatively free to mingle within broad categories (e.g. assembly, lunch settings, communal setting).
3. Where small groups of children were in close proximity (notably in classrooms, art and music lessons).

In addition, observations were conducted in student home settings to collect additional data, which would enable a better understanding of their life outside of school. Observations were managed as unobtrusively as possible, noting verbatim speech where appropriate and recording some key words/phrases that assisted with the analysis and interpretation of data collected.

Contextual data

Documents from the NGO school regarding their policy on inclusion, individual education plans or extra help/tuition records, teaching and learning policies, attendance register, and health records were collected. The village government office and the Gram

Panchayat (a Gram Panchayat is a system of local government with an elected administrator or Sarpanch as its elected head) was also visited to collect information about the social situation of the community with regards to the available government aid for education and health, and the economic condition of students and their families.

The contextual information along with information provided by families and the school enabled a profile for each student to be constructed. These profiles contained information about their family background and previous educational experiences, thereby facilitating a greater understanding of the choices they make regarding their education.

Ethical Issues

All ethical issues received due consideration and approval from a university ethics committee. Informed consent for conducting interviews and securing discussions with the children, parents and other participants was obtained after information regarding the purpose of the research was provided to all parties. For parents who experienced literacy challenges information was read and verbal consent recorded. Anonymity of all participants was assured.

On completion of data collection through interview or observation this was discussed with the participants to avoid any misinterpretations. This gave them an opportunity to delete or change statements they felt that may have been misinterpreted or misunderstood. All interviews were transcribed, segmented and subjected to thematic coding by the researchers, and a process of blind coding of a sample of transcripts was deployed to ensure trustworthiness of the data.

Findings - Experiences, Ambition and Attitudes

Important issues emerged from the interview data and were verified through observations. In particular the students were eager to praise the provision being made for them in the new school, whilst bemoaning the lack of quality in their earlier educational experiences. It was evident that these students perceived their new educational status as affording opportunities that were still denied to their peers attending the state school, and that this had influenced both their ambitions and their attitudes.

Students during interview were keen to discuss their earlier experiences of education at the Zilla-Parishad school. Their views were often negative in respect of the quality of teaching and the general support provided. In some instances, the lack of encouragement to enjoy learning and the expectations of teachers was seen to have discouraged students from participation in education, as was apparent in these comments given in interviews.

'If there is someone who can help you study when you don't understand it makes it easier. At the Zilla Parishad School very often I would feel like shutting the book and not opening it again because it was so tough'

'At times, I felt like closing my book and not looking at it because it was so difficult.'

'Because my sister failed (sic.) she now stays at home to help my mother because my father said it's no use going to school if you can't pass.' (Her sister was 14 when she dropped out of school).

Teacher attitudes were perceived by many students to be a major obstacle to learning and some reported the use of corporal punishment as a means of chastising under performance in class. Corporal punishment is illegal in Indian schools, but there is evidence to suggest that its use remains widespread (Ghosh, and Pasupathi 2016; Tiwari 2019).

'I didn't like school because teacher got upset with me when I could not understand numbers. He even hit me if I did badly in the test'.

'I left the Zilla Parishad school because I could not understand the lessons teacher taught and made mistakes when I had to do school work. If I did something wrong the teacher used to get angry and hit me'.

Teacher absenteeism in government schools has been reported as a particular problem in rural areas of India (Mooij and Narayan 2010; Duflo, Hanna and Ryan. 2012). The students interviewed recognised the impact of this behaviour on their own learning opportunities and also commented on the injustice that they perceived to exist when double standards were applied in schools.

'At the Zilla Parishad School my teacher used to get upset if I stayed absent from school, even though he did not come to school every day. We ended up playing with friends in school two or three times a week.'

'Last week my sister's teacher was not there for three days'.

The students were eager to contrast their experiences in the NGO school with those experienced in the state system, and the impact that their changing situation had upon their lives. They reflected upon the positive attitudes of teachers and the welcome that they felt within a different school environment.

'At this school teachers don't get upset if we don't do work at home. All they want is for us to come to school'

'This is the only place where I can laugh'.

Students felt confident that the teachers in the school would enable them to succeed and provide additional support when it was needed.

'At this school teachers don't get upset if we don't do work at home. All they want is for us to come to school'.

In addition to recognising the support afforded by teachers at their new school, the students sometimes acknowledged a renewed respect for education on the part of parents.

'My dad is pleased that I am so good at doing calculations. That is why I can do accounts for him and no one can deceive him'.

This increased enthusiasm from parents was acknowledged by one mother who in talking about her daughter stated:

'I don't want my daughter to get married early and do housework. I want her to study and be like Madam (the teacher at the school)'.

The children themselves recognised when their parents had positive attitudes towards the new educational opportunities that were being provided:

"My siblings and I have to study hard or my father gets upset. He wants us to be better than him and to be able to read and write. He knows how essential it is to be literate."

Children perceived school to be an important social venue as well as providing academic opportunities.

'I like to play in school because after I get home I have to do work and I never get to play.'

'When we go to school in the morning we are very hungry because most nights we don't have dinner. We really look forward to our breakfast and lunch, they give us as much as we ask for and the food in school is tasty'.

'I can't wait to come back to school after holidays because I love the food they give us'.

Observations of children's lives outside of school confirmed the importance of the social interactions afforded within the school environment. On returning home children were seen to have been allocated specific duties and tasks, such as caring for cattle or fetching water, which needed to be completed before they could contemplate further study or homework. The NGO school recognised the high level of commitment that students had to domestic work and made allowances for this when they struggled to deliver homework on time. While encouraging the students to study hard they acknowledged the need to balance the pressures from school with those associated with family responsibilities. The time for socialisation and play was limited. The activities in which the students observed were engaged were clearly delineated, with boys expected to herd and feed cattle, collect firewood and shopping for food supplies, whereas the girls were mainly involved in preparing and cooking meals, washing utensils and caring for younger siblings.

Parents were reticent in discussing the tasks allocated to their children on return from school and in some instances, it was apparent that parental aspirations in respect of education were limited. The children themselves recognised the dilemma faced by their parents. As one boy stated:

"I can earn up to Rs.50 per day when I go and help my mother to sell fish at the evening market, which is a big help... I am the only son and I have a big responsibility to care for my family."

While acknowledging this situation and clearly understanding that his parent's perspective was based upon the traditional harsh realities of life in this community, he himself could perceive of a different way of supporting his family and suggested that:

“When I become an artist, I want to sell my art at exhibitions for a lot of money. I can use this to help my mother.”

Education had provided this child with insights into a life that was very different from that of his parents and aspirations that were difficult for them to understand.

Many children attending the NGO school were clear about the impact it had upon their future potential for a life different from that experienced by their parents. They recognised that their opportunities had been increased and their horizons broadened by the experiences they were being given. The school regularly discusses the importance of continuing education beyond statutory school leaving age and encourages students to consider applying for places in further or higher education. This process has led to increased ambition on the part of many students as was the case of a boy who when asked about the future stated that he was going to be an astronaut in India’s space programme. When asked if he had an alternative career in mind he said,

“No, I have not, because I know I am going to be an astronaut.”

While it is impossible to know whether this ambition might become a reality, it was apparent that the NGO school had instilled ambition and self-confidence in its students and given them a belief that if they worked hard at their education they could achieve their dreams.

The level of ambition was equally strong in girls who recognised that the priority given to the education of girls in India was often less than that afforded to boys (Jain, Agarwal, Billaiya and Devi. 2017; Nakray 2017). Anxiety about the possibility of having to follow a traditional route of leaving school before completion of education and early marriage was apparent in some. As one girl indicated:

“When I think that I might have to leave school I get upset, because I want to go to a university in the city and learn to be a teacher. That is why I come to school regularly.”

While the students attending the NGO school had developed positive attitudes towards their own learning and their potential for life enhancement, there were aspects of their attitudes that were less positive. In some instances, they had developed attitudes of superiority over those who continued to either attend the Zilla Parishad School, or who had left school early. This at times led to tensions and was evident in the abusive and discriminatory language adopted by some of the NGO school students. For example, when one of the authors of this paper was observed in conversation with a student from the Zilla Parishad School she was told.

“Don’t talk to them, they don’t know how to talk properly. They are like ‘junglies’”
(people who live in the jungle).

There were clear indications that these students felt in many ways superior to their peers, even when these were members of their own family. It is too soon within this educational experiment to gauge how these attitudes might impact on the future development of this community, or to see whether the school’s ability to address prejudicial attitudes will prevail.

Discussion

Quality of education provided

Within the Indian education system there is often a significant disparity between the quality of education provided in government and private sector schools (Mander, 2015; Bedi 2018). This situation has emerged in part through a market driven approach to education in

India, in which the emergence of a burgeoning population of middle class Indians have taken advantage of opportunities to pay for their children to attend what they perceive to be elite schools (Singh Gill 2017; Kingdon 2020). While efforts have been made through recent legislation to increase opportunities for those from discriminated and marginalised groups in India, the successes achieved towards creating a more equitable education system have been limited (Srivastava and Noronha 2016; Kumari 2016).

The data collected in this study from rural Maharashtra indicates that there are several reasons for the difficulties in creating a more inclusive and equitable education system. Not least of these is the long-established policy of dependence upon government schools that are inadequately resourced and often staffed by poorly qualified teachers (Mukherjee, Goe and Middendorf 2016). The prospects of teaching in a poor rural environment with few of the material benefits available in cities or even relatively small urban environments does little to attract many of the best qualified teachers in the country.

The NGO school at the focus of this study was built partly as an act of community benevolence, but also to fulfil the need of a corporate organisation to ensure a welcome in the district and to recruit a complicit workforce. The financial strengths of the corporation were important in enabling this school to provide a high-quality education to a proportion of the population. By ensuring that the school was well resourced it was possible to recruit well qualified and motivated teachers who were committed to improving the educational opportunities available to their students. The data collected clearly demonstrates that having well motivated and professionally qualified teachers impacts the whole community by instilling positive attitudes towards education from students and parents alike.

Aspirations

In many agricultural communities in rural India, such as that discussed in this chapter, employment opportunities have been limited (Nair 2014). Migration from rural communities to find employment in metropolitan cities has become a feature of the recent Indian landscape (Deshingkar 2010; Mander and Sahgal 2010). Increased mechanisation and technology has changed the face of rural employment significantly and in recognition of this change many young people aspire to work in urban environments and in professions that were beyond the possibilities of their parents (Brown, Scrase, and Ganguly-Scrase 2017). The NGO school in this study has succeeded in raising the aspirations of its students, with many believing that their future will see them in well paid professional employment away from their current villages.

Whereas student commitment to attendance at the Zilla Parishad school was inconsistent, in the NGO school it was high. Students recognised that education can be a transformative process in their lives and they made clear their intentions to take advantage of this situation. This change of perception in respect of the possibilities afforded through education was similarly recognised by parents, including those who had limited experience of schooling and low levels of literacy.

It is too early to judge how many of the students interviewed for this research will achieve their stated ambitions. However, aspiration is an important factor in learning motivation, and it was apparent that those young people in this community who attended the NGO school had much higher aspirations than their peers at the Zilla Parishad School.

Relationships

Relationships are important in education. The students who participated in this research were positive about their relationships with their teachers in the NGO school, but often had a negative perception of those in the government school. There was a general belief on the part of students that the teachers in the NGO school respected them and wanted them to do well. Unlike in the Zilla Parishad school where poor academic performance was addressed through punitive measures, the NGO school provided structured support that students recognised as enabling them to improve their academic attainment. Another important factor was the teachers' understanding of family pressures, including those associated with domestic responsibilities, that impacted upon student approaches to their school work. High levels of empathy were in evidence and can be seen to have contributed significantly to the success of this innovation.

The relationship between the NGO school and parents was also important. In some instances, the school had provided parents with employment opportunities. Parents have been encouraged to attend the school to discuss their children's learning and to engage with social activities and school events. Some parents reported difficulties with participation at this level, feeling intimidated by a system of which they had limited personal experience or understanding. However, the school saw this as an important part of their mission and worked hard to build confidence in the parents and enabled them to participate at a level with which they felt most comfortable.

The impact of the NGO school on relationships between youth in the community is more nuanced. Evidence from the data suggests that students who were being given greater opportunities had in some instances developed negative attitudes towards their peers who remained in the Zilla Parishad School. With increased aspiration has come a belief that

receiving a good quality education creates opportunities for social mobility and that this in some ways makes students superior to their peers. The impact of educational opportunity upon aspiration in India has been well documented (Nathan 2005; Morrow 2013; Ross 2019), but less attention has been given to the potentially divisive situation in which some members of a family are provided with increased opportunity while others are not. This would appear to us as an obvious area in need of further research

Sustainability

In any innovative development programme, it is important to consider the potential for sustainability of the measures adopted. The motivations of the funders of this school were partly related to the need to acquire land and to employ local labourers for a private enterprise. The NGO that runs the school has experience of successful management of schools in similar contexts, which provides some confidence regarding the long-term future of the provision. The school is still in its early stages of development and its sustainability may well be influenced by the outcomes achieved for students. Previous research from India suggests that students in privately funded education significantly outperform those in the government run schools, making them a much more attractive proposition for parents (Singh and Sarkar 2015). However, in rural areas such as that discussed in this chapter, parental choice is limited because of the poverty in which most families live, and even those who would desire a better education for their children have little control over the options open to them. In its current situation the school has been able to maintain a team of highly committed teachers and other staff. Teachers are well paid compared to most working in Indian rural communities, though retention in rural schools often presents a challenge in these districts that lack the facilities and opportunities afforded by metropolitan cities and may thus prove less attractive to many professionals (Chauhan 2009).

Conclusion

The provision of a well-resourced school staffed by committed professionals has raised the aspirations and achievements of those students who have been enabled to enrol. Ultimately it seems likely that the life opportunities for these students will be considerably enhanced, especially when compared to the life chances of their peers who attend local Zilla Parishad schools. For a proportion of the children in the study area, inclusion in high quality schooling has become a reality. However, concerns must be expressed for the potential of this project to increase the gap between those who gain the social and economic advantages that come from improved education and those who do not have such opportunities. In the longer term it will also be interesting to see whether those who gain a good education move away from the area thus denuding the community of a young population that would normally make a significant contribution to the local economy.

The model of provision here is one amongst many that are emerging with the intention of developing a more inclusive education system in India. This chapter has reported research which benefited from the presence of a researcher who was familiar with the language and the culture of the environment in which the investigation was conducted. As a small-scale study its findings cannot be generalised but do contribute to an appreciation of how innovation can bring successful transition from a school that offers limited opportunities to an environment in which learners are encouraged and respected and expected to achieve well. The need for further research into the impact of such innovations is clear and should provide greater understanding of the approaches that are proving beneficial to previously disadvantaged learners, their families and communities. Such studies will need to have a longitudinal element to gauge the efficacy of projects that are at an early stage of development.

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